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■
*The Making
of Elsewhere
Catastrophe*

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Earthquake and the Invention of America

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Earthquake and the Invention of America

The Making of Elsewhere Catastrophe

ANNA BRICKHOUSE

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi

PART I. THE SOUTHERNIZATION OF DISASTER: *EARTHQUAKE HISTORY AND THEORY*

1. Elsewhere Catastrophe	27
2. Predatory Optimism	63
3. <i>Pachacuti</i> : Theory from the Torrid Zone	102

PART II. FROM SHAKING GROUND TO “THE STILLNESS”

4. The Fragile Ground of New England, 1638–1755	141
5. The Settler Colonial Sublime	180
6. Earthquake Amnesia	222
7. The Undeceiving Earth	258
8. The Seismic Civil War	295
Epilogue	336

<i>Index</i>	344

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All of these facts, consistent among themselves, and not opposed by any report, seem to me to prove the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe.

Georges Cuvier (1796)

Introduction

Earthquake and Undeception

This book explores the role of earthquakes in shaping the deep timeframes and multi-hemispheric geographies of American literary history. Spanning the ancient world to the futuristic continents of Black speculative fiction, the earthquake stories assembled here reveal the emergence of a broadly Western cultural syndrome that became an acute national fantasy. I call it *elsewhere catastrophe*: an often unspoken but widely prevalent sense that catastrophe is somehow “un-American.” This fundamental sense of elsewhere catastrophe emerged as an imaginative solution to the contradictions posed by settler colonialism, slavery, and the convergence of racial and disaster capitalism.¹ Catastrophe must be elsewhere because it affirms the rightness of “here” where conquest, according to the syndrome’s logic, did not happen and is not happening. Elsewhere, too, because catastrophe makes visible the conditions of possibility for alternative futures, offering a tacit reminder that a national modernity forged out of dispossession might be challenged and forever changed by the dispossessed. This psychic investment in elsewhere catastrophe coalesced slowly, across centuries; varieties of it can be found as far back as Plato and in various European traditions of the modern. Yet in its most striking modes and resonances, examined in the following chapters, elsewhere catastrophe proves fundamental to the invention of US-America itself.

To invoke the “invention of America” is to signal the hemispheric intellectual context of my own work across several decades. I began graduate school in 1992, the year of the Columbus quincentenary and, not coincidentally, an era in which decolonial theories of the Americas were forming a distinct body of thought. The Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel published *1492: El encubrimiento del otro: Hacia el origen del “mito de la Modernidad”* (translated as *The Invention of the Americas*) three years later in a reprise of the earlier Latin American classic, *La invención de América* (1958) by the Mexican historian and philosopher Edmundo O’Gorman.² Where O’Gorman had famously argued that the Americas were not discovered but “invented in the image and likeness of Europe,” Dussel’s *1492* discerned the “myth of modernity” at the heart of a long European and North American conversation about the modern, a conversation that too often overlooked or denied the role of Europe’s encounter with non-European thought-worlds.³ For Dussel, the United States was “modernity’s culmination,” the site in which the myth took hold most tenaciously—and the national vantage point from which it proves hardest to see that the violence of conquest “is essential to the constitution of the modern ego, not only as a subjectivity, but as a subjectivity that takes itself to be the center or end of history.”⁴

Earthquakes shake the foundations of this modern ego by rupturing the modernity myth's denial of conquest and its pretension that conquest's violence lies elsewhere. More than fire, flood, or its sea-born twin the hurricane, earthquake is the exemplary elsewhere catastrophe—the disaster that must always happen far away or be forgotten—because it is an enduring figure both for the world-negating violence of colonialism and, along with its close seismic cousin the volcano, for the potential eruption of a world built on conquest. The rending of earthquake figures conquest itself but also the literal instability of occupied grounds.

When Haiti was ravaged by the 7.0 earthquake that struck Hispaniola in January 2010, the deep history of elsewhere catastrophe came to the surface briefly in the US public sphere. Within a day, news organizations reported that evangelical minister Pat Robertson had characterized the earthquake as a divine punishment for the Haitian Revolution. In a moment of dire catastrophe, news about what contemporary Haitians were experiencing after the earthquake was suddenly interrupted by Robertson's distracting account of how eighteenth-century Haitian revolutionaries had made a bargain with satanic power: “[T]hey got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, ‘We will serve you if you will get us free from the French.’”⁵

What got lost in the coverage of Robertson's appalling assessment was its Caribbean provenance. For Robertson was repeating ideas already popular among Haitian evangelicals and likely carried back to him by a transnational evangelical network that had been in place on Hispaniola for years before the catastrophe of 2010.⁶ In this sense, it was the ideas of Haitian evangelicals themselves—with Robertson, his punitive Euro-Christian deity, and his derivative historical riff as their crude vehicle—that assumed a powerful role in the US media. The nature of that power could be glimpsed in the sudden stress on scientific interpretations of the seismic event. A National Public Radio (NPR) story on Robertson had to remind listeners that “scientific experts will tell you that [the earthquake] was caused by tectonic forces along a seismic fault line that runs through the island of Hispaniola.”⁷ Yet Robertson's “true story” drew an uncanny associative line between a seismic event and a war for freedom that exceeded the choice metaphor for revolution and political upheaval that earthquakes have always offered.⁸ As this example suggests, stories about earthquakes intervene with their own energies, in their own unforeseen ways, into the vast and complex assemblage of human and non-human actors that converge in catastrophe's wake.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the Haitian-American novelist Edwidge Danticat wrote of her sense of the responsibility of the immigrant artist not just to “interpret and possibly remake his or her own world”—the “desire” of all artists—but to speak and create from an ethical obligation to another place, another world: from a sense of recognition that “while we are at work bodies are littering the streets somewhere. People are buried under rubble somewhere. Mass graves are being dug somewhere.”⁹ The Martiniquan philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant named a similar recognition in defining what he called a state of relation,

in which “something somewhere breaks free of someone’s suffering and comes to rest in us.”¹⁰ In Danticat’s telling, this recognition of relation is tied less to geographic than to temporal proximity as a defining quality of existence for those who have survived or whose ancestors have survived catastrophe: for “people who might have had a mother and father killed, either by a government or by nature, even before we were born.” And these categories are so interconnected that distinctions matter little. State violence or natural violence: “a fateful date with an executioner. Or a hurricane. Or an earthquake.” Danticat emplaces human agency within a larger network that includes hurricanes and earthquakes, but also insists that such an assemblage shapes history and experience very differently for “people who risked not existing at all” simply by being born to their forebears.¹¹

Haiti and its earthquake were on my mind when I visited Lisbon, Portugal in 2012. Lisbon and its surroundings were decimated in 1755 by a notorious earthquake that struck at the height of the city’s splendor and Portuguese imperial power. Today, the nave of the Igreja de São Domingos still shows traces of the eighteenth-century catastrophe in the cracks bisecting its great columns. Meanwhile, the Padrão dos Descobrimentos or Monument of the Discoveries, designed in 1939 at the height of European fascism, commemorates early modern Portuguese exploration and trade. The physical embodiment of these histories, of the fifteenth-century Descobrimentos and of the eighteenth-century earthquake, seems to render them simultaneous rather than sequential. Later, as I registered the enduring significance of the Lisbon earthquake from the Enlightenment onward across a range of disciplinary coming-of-age stories and modernity myths—historical, philosophical, political, theological—I grasped this European catastrophe in its largely unacknowledged relationship with the history of conquest. Reading across a Lisbon-derived intellectual tradition of disaster and modernity, I also understood how many foundational questions about suffering, evil, justice, secularity, and so on had been generated precisely by excluding the great human cataclysms Europe had been inflicting on the world for centuries before its own implosion in a massive earthquake.

The German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) implied this very connection between the Lisbon earthquake and the European conquest of other worlds when he compared the staggering force of that seismic event to “the murderous inventions of our race.” Born fifteen years after the Lisbon cataclysm, Humboldt had never himself felt an earthquake until he traveled to the Americas between 1799 and 1804. Half a century later, in *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (*Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*), he described the experience of earthquake as a phenomenological undoing:

What seizes upon us so wonderfully is the disabuse of that innate faith in the fixity of the solid and sure-set foundations of the earth ... All the evidences of our senses have confirmed this belief. But when suddenly the ground begins to

rock beneath us, the feeling of an unknown mysterious power in nature coming into action, and shaking the solid globe, arises in our mind. The illusion of the whole of our earlier life is annihilated in an instant. We are undeceived as to the repose of nature, we feel ourselves transported to the realm, and made subject to the empire of destructive unknown powers.¹²

The crisis of faith, the knowledge of the senses betrayed but paradoxically heightened, the transition from youthful illusions to what is called *deseñgano* in Spanish (associated with what José Antonio Maravall characterized as a general “state of crisis and instability” inherent to the baroque style): all these elements cast Romanticism’s eye back on the turn of the eighteenth century.¹³ Humboldt’s earthquake commentaries are indeed clearly inflected by the French Revolution, which had ended just as he began his American sojourn. But it was the final phase of the Haitian Revolution—an event that led colonists everywhere to reconsider the “repose of nature” as they understood it on their plantations—that overlapped precisely with his trip across the undeceiving earth of the Americas.

The keyword in the original German text is *enttäuscht*, which means disappointed or disenchanted. The 1845 English translation renders the term as *undeceived*, which captures the related process by which the violence of “empire,” added here by the same translator, implodes narratives of the putatively contemporary, advanced, and new. These peculiar translational choices offered what soon became a keyword in my thinking about earthquake: undeception, as I began to define the term, marks the moment when the denial of conquest is ruptured, whether by insurrection or epiphany. Across Western cultural history, earthquake is both catalyst and metaphor for undeception because it so aptly figures both the long, reverberating catastrophe of conquest and the spectacular moment of its perception by those who have willingly refused to apprehend that catastrophe precisely because they are its beneficiaries. For those subjects for whom colonial modernity is not already a disaster, undeception is fleeting. It is the short-lived counterpart of the “slow violence” that attends the long aftermath of catastrophes yet rarely captures the attention of those who are not experiencing it: the quiet calamities that, as Rob Nixon writes, “patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans—and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media.”¹⁴ Both the discrepant temporalities and the asymmetries of catastrophe are bound up in the dialectics of undeception.

For, as Humboldt suggests, undeception does not bring the new certainties of revelation, the ancient and commonplace literary and theological byproduct of catastrophe, nor does it necessarily change those who experience it. The naturalist experienced his first earthquake in 1799 in Cumaná, Venezuela, where he also made extensive observations about prior seismic events and the geological history of the region. In 1766, as he learned, all the houses in the city had been destroyed. Shocks recurred every hour for over a year, the earth intermittently opening to

emit sulfurous waters. But through it all, Humboldt notes, “the Indians, whose frail huts resist the strongest shocks, celebrated from ideas of an old superstition, with feasting and dances, the destruction of the world, and the approaching epocha of its regeneration.”¹⁵

Humboldt’s famed rise as a great empiricist stands in stark opposition here to the Indigenous Venezuelans—in the midst of the earthquake festivities that he marks as non-coeval, jubilating in the ancient time of their beliefs. But in his will to observe and document, Humboldt leaves behind a trace record of an Indigenous earthquake philosophy that bears a close resemblance to a form of Andean political thought centered on the Aymara and Quechua concept of *pachacuti*, the earthquake-renewal of the world. As the Bolivian Aymara theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui puts it, the *pachacuti* or earth-turn or “upside-down world created by colonialism will return to its feet as history only if it can defeat those who are determined to preserve the past, with its burden of ill-gotten privileges.”¹⁶ Such a turning of the earth might bring about the overthrow of conquest just as it marks the long temporal moment since conquest first began.

Today, official scientific culture newly interests itself in what it has ignored for centuries to its own great detriment: the vast Indigenous knowledge about earthquakes—including, as in Humboldt’s commentary, more adaptive dwellings. Over the last decade, several important studies in the history of earthquake science have suggested the extent of these intellectual losses, as well as the imperilment of the contemporary world, in an age of increasing seismic disruption, given all that science still does not understand about earthquakes.¹⁷ Teams of geologists and anthropologists, including a number of Native scholars, are undertaking oral histories in Indigenous communities and combing old archives, trying to recover some of the lost knowledge that might help the world better plan for an earthquake-ridden future. A team of researchers at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, for example, is collaborating with colleagues in the Department of Māori Studies at the University of Auckland on the implications of *mātauranga Māori*—“Māori indigenous knowledge, culture, values, and world view”—for new approaches to geomorphic research.¹⁸ This is true for other kinds of environmental disasters as well; some scholars in disaster management studies are trying to learn what they can from Indigenous groups around the world about how to navigate and survive catastrophic events. A geographer at the University of Dar es Salaam draws on local expertise to argue for an “invisible resilience” among Indigenous communities of northwest Tanzania as a form of environmental disaster planning.¹⁹ Even from the field of philosophy, there is a call for scholars to parse Indigenous knowledge produced in the face of genocide to learn how to encounter the potential coming extinction of the human species.²⁰

Yet these efforts, too, risk enacting their own form of extraction: a last gasp from a centuries-old cannibal that has now almost devoured its own future and wants to learn what it can from Indigenous traditions of science, and survivance,

before it is too late. Extraction can easily permeate almost every settler relation to the Indigenous, and my own research can claim no exemption from such a pattern. This is a simultaneously epistemological and ethical problem that must be acknowledged—and one that has been theorized in the field of Native American and Indigenous studies. As Eva Marie Garrouette (Cherokee) and Kathleen Delores Westcott (Anishinaabe/Cree) have pointed out, for example, in the Anishinaabeg tradition stories are not materials to be acquired and interpreted; they are “living beings” that accompany those who tell and listen, and that act upon the world with agential force.²¹ They are not and were never meant to be extractable resources for scholarly production. The point of foregrounding this problem is not to apologize for a set of procedures that are standard practice in the field. My hope instead is that by thinking through the particular structural conditions of my own practice, I will read with a heightened awareness of what I do and the limits of this kind of work while also learning to become open to the complex agencies of the narratives that, by the nature of scholarly practice, I risk objectifying in these pages.

In July 2020, a piece published in the journal *Science* reported the effects of the worldwide pandemic shutdown on the geological movements of the planet. The earth went quiet during early Covid, researchers found, resulting in a 50 percent reduction in ground vibrations around the world: “the longest and most coherent global seismic noise reduction in recorded history.”²² This relative seismic quietude during a time of global pandemic closures is a reminder that our current ecological era—the so-called Anthropocene—has established humans as geological agents in truly earth-shattering ways. Such human geological agency requires a deep reckoning, but it also requires continued attention to the category of the “human” as itself historically constituted and subject to fierce and ongoing debate.²³

*

Earthquake is both a recurrent eruptive force and a provocation for disparate modes of critical engagement with the long and catastrophic history of the Americas. This earthquake-ridden history has hidden seams that reach as far back as the ancient world, take on new shape in eighteenth-century Europe, and unfold far into the future. Earthquake is a distinguishing feature of life in the Hebrew Bible—for example, in the Book of Exodus when God descends on Mount Sinai and causes it to shake violently—as well as the Christian tradition: the crucifixion of Jesus coincides with a rending that sunders the temple, leaves rocks trembling, and opens graves. Earthquake is also central to the apocalyptic tradition that shaped disparate colonial visions of a New Jerusalem, from Mexico City to Massachusetts Bay Colony; from Lima, Peru to San Diego, California; from Bahia, Brazil to the Huronia region of southern Ontario. In the Book of Revelation, earthquakes strike many times before the true New World—the millennial one—can begin on solid foundations. The millennial era offers stillness, an unshakable state

of peace and prosperity in which the righteous await the day of final judgment. In the apocalyptic framework, earthquake is a harbinger of this Golden Age; but it is also, more immediately, simply a sign of future earthquakes during the long and brutal ending of the world.

Seismicity is also central to life in the sacred *Popul Vuh* (often referred to, not unproblematically, as the “Mayan Bible”). The ground’s movements and changes are living forces with will and motive: Zipacna is a maker of alps and volcanoes, and Cabracan of earthquake. With a tap of the foot, he can tear down the face of a mountain. Both Zipacna and Cabracan once spoke to human-like people—early inhabitants who are destroyed by speaking stones, pots, and pans that teach them a violent lesson about what today some might call the “vibrant matter” of an object-oriented ontology. No one assumes stability in the *Popul Vuh* because, as Edgar Garcia writes, “shakiness is a sign of life.”²⁴ The *Popul Vuh* records ancient Mayan cosmology as well as its own internal dialogue with the sixteenth-century moment of ongoing conquest during which its creation story was transcribed into alphabetic writing in Maya K’iche’. If the text’s earth-moving episodes evince the long earthquake of colonial time, they also represent the possibility of its rupture by the right mode of apprehension. Such time-cycles can be enduring and slow, and they can be sudden and spectacular.

By contrast, much of Western natural science unfolded as a struggle over adherence to one kind of time-cycle or the other—a conflict, as David Sepkoski puts it, “over whether the earth’s history has been characterized by a steady, gradual unfolding of geological processes, or has rather been ‘punctuated’ by episodes of sudden and drastic change.”²⁵ Early in the nineteenth century, these two views of the earth’s development—known respectively as uniformitarianism and catastrophism—diverged and soon became mutually exclusive. Catastrophism, developed most significantly by the French anatomist and paleontologist Georges Cuvier, was derided and eventually pushed out of favor by followers of the English geologist Charles Lyell, a proponent and theorist of uniformitarianism. Both geological theories influenced and drew from broader philosophies of history; catastrophism was romantic and revolutionary, while uniformitarianism was “realist,” in the literary sense, and essentially conservative.²⁶ Uniformitarianism colluded with the modern European novel, Amitav Ghosh has argued, to produce the “great derangement” of the contemporary period: what Ghosh perceived as an absence of climatological catastrophe in serious literary fiction that bespeaks a “broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis.”²⁷

As climate-related threats have increased—including the world’s heightened seismicity—Cuvier has returned to center stage as a somewhat unsung hero among historians of science. His theory of violent cataclysms that once destroyed portions of the earth and rendered species extinct grew from careful studies in anatomy and dissection, which ultimately allowed him to arrive at a new perspective on geology

and extinction: what Elizabeth Kolbert calls an “essentially tragic vision of earth history [that] has come to seem prophetic.”²⁸ Yet Cuvier was not the first to propound a theory of species extinctions, and his vision seems less prophetic than inevitable within the broad contexts of extirpation, or localized and human-made elimination, that preceded his hypotheses about extinction. For before species extinction became accepted scientific theory, as Timothy Sweet observes, early modern local extirpation practices raised questions about the extent to which humans were capable of enacting global extinctions. And these practices defined or at least accompanied colonial projects: from the open scandal of “extirpative wars” to the extirpation of wolves that followed Cromwell’s (re)conquest of Ireland.²⁹ In this light, Cuvier’s theory of cataclysmic species disappearance sounds less like tragic revelation than a grand displacement of the present onto the past: a projection of the unremitting catastrophe of colonialism onto what we might call the “elsewhen” catastrophe of ancient earthquakes and floods.

It is worth noting that Cuvier plays a very different role in environmental studies than he does in postcolonial and Black studies, where he is infamous for using his great skills as a dissector to enact brutal extraction on the dead body of Saartjie (or Sara) Baartman. Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from the Eastern Cape of South Africa who was brought to France in the early nineteenth century, effectively enslaved, and then exhibited. Cuvier, then keeper of the national menagerie and incipient founder of comparative anatomy, pursued Baartman relentlessly, seeking a science-driven access to her flesh that she was not willing to permit while alive.³⁰

The catastrophe of European empire emblemized by Cuvier’s notorious dissection of Baartman cannot be conceptually partitioned off from his geological catastrophism, which represents one side of a broad scientific conversation that was always, on some level, about the fact of conquest. Which is why Cuvier’s uniformitarian opponent Lyell could observe patterns of animal extirpation and bluntly assert, “[I]f we wield the sword of extermination as we advance, we have no reason to repine at the havoc committed.”³¹ For the geophilosopher Kathryn Yusoff, these early disciplinary contexts are straightforwardly imperial: “Geology is a category and praxis of dispossession. It has determined the geographies and genealogies of colonial extraction.”³² At the same time, the immediate historical context of Baartman’s life and death defines the unfixed parameters of the catastrophic: the ever-changing boundaries around what Western culture has deemed to be catastrophic (a massively fatal earthquake) and what it has often not (a few centuries of colonialism).

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The scientific understanding of earthquakes was indelibly shaped over centuries by these shifting boundaries of catastrophe: by the deepest questions about what matters and the unspoken or explicit desires that shape the answers. Aristotle

understood earthquakes as explosions of wind trapped in the bowels of a human-like body from which mineral wealth is also extractable: “vaporous exhalation” is also “the cause of all metals ... such as iron, copper, gold.”³³ If earthquakes served nature’s higher purposes by creating metals, they also figured an unruly body improperly controlled by the reason and intellect of its masterly soul. Such unmastered bodies belonged to foreigners, barbarians, conveniently formed as natural slaves whose extractable labor serves natural lords and masters. Like the tremulous body of the earth, the enslaved are, in Aristotle’s account, inherently troublesome: lenience leads to insolence and brutality leads to hatred and conspiracy.³⁴ We might say, following a great deal of later imaginative writing, that the enslaved are earthquakes waiting to erupt—or perhaps the other way around: for the great seismic event of the classical world notoriously provided an opportunity for helots to resist and revolt. No wonder that Aristotle attempted to use natural philosophy to wrest back control of explanatory narratives of earthquake’s meaning from the unruly tellers of stories about gods.

In classical Rome, Seneca developed a physical science that included categories of earthquake by organizing their different effects and the various ways they were felt in the body; he proposed the idea, still largely true today, that earthquakes cannot be predicted. But the driving question behind this understanding of earthquake was how to master control of the fear they instilled. And stoicism was not just about facing the universal fact of death with equanimity; it was also, in Seneca’s earthquake understanding, about remaining calm in an emergency that left property, including human property, unsecured.³⁵

Early modern chattel slavery and settler colonialism in the Americas, along with the rebirth of classical thought and humanist culture that accompanied them, brought change but not what would now be defined as scientific progress in the understanding of earthquake. As the historian of science Rienk Vermij observes, “In 1500, people had no idea what caused earthquakes and in 1800, this was no different.”³⁶ At the same time, while Europeans took their various theories of earthquake to the Americas, the New World influenced theories of earthquake in the old one. Advances in the technology of gunpowder, including the development of siege mines, as well as developments in extractive mining all informed new beliefs about earthquake and the new theory of subterranean fire, advanced most famously by René Descartes, in both theology and natural philosophy.³⁷ Protestant and Catholic writers interpreted earthquake and subterranean fire in different ways: in the late sixteenth century, José Acosta, a Spanish Jesuit and naturalist who traveled to the Americas, was skeptical that such fire came from hell to serve as a warning, while in the late seventeenth century Cotton Mather, a defender of the new experimental sciences, was sure, though he had read Acosta, that it was the “energy of the Divil in the Earth.”³⁸ But Mather cited Acosta approvingly when it came to their shared idea that Native people were in league with Satan. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra puts it, “Satan laid siege to both Spanish and

Puritan colonies by unleashing ... earthquakes": "the most powerful shamans ... in league with the devil could trigger earthquakes."³⁹

Across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a new scientific thought began rooting itself in more empirical and fact-based ways of knowing as the emergent critical value of objectivity became in effect a new technology—a technology indelibly shaped by the interests and desires of those who were profiting from Europe's commerce with, and colonization of, the non-European world. "It was no accident," as Harold Cook observes, "that the so-called Scientific Revolution occurred at the same time as the first global economy."⁴⁰ Earlier generations of thinkers had been condemned for error and sin when their investigations of the natural world strayed too far from the framework of divine purpose or presumed to know too much about it. But by the seventeenth century, even as these condemnations continued from theologians or philosophers, a new information economy emerged to meet the immediate needs for certain kinds of knowledge and the more general intellectual desires of those growing wealthy from a world in which the global and the colonial were fully entangled. As Cook puts it, the "values of systems of accumulation and, particularly, of exchange, also changed the kind of knowledge produced."⁴¹ Those values—and the new kind of knowledge they shaped—both created and came from the circuits of information that connected Europe to its elsewheres, especially the Americas, from South American silver mines to plantations in the Caribbean and North America.

Natural catastrophes and particularly earthquakes and volcanoes played a significant role in the rise of these new modes of knowledge. Consider an extraordinary example that Vermij offers in his history of earthquake science in early modern Europe.⁴² In an early seventeenth-century letter, Gerard Reynst, a Dutch merchant and second governor-general of the Dutch East Indies, recounts his first-hand observations of the aftermath of a volcanic eruption on the island of Neyra, one of the ten volcanic Banda Islands, which make up the eastern part of the Southeast Asian Indo-Malayan archipelago. The Dutch had raised a military fort there in 1611 as part of their attempt to establish a monopoly on the newly direct spice trade, especially nutmeg. Arriving in Neyra in March 1616, Reynst reported on the effects of the recent eruption. His letter refers to "Gunung Api or Sulphur Mountain," indicating and transmitting his knowledge of the Indigenous name, literally "fire mountain," as well as the Dutch one. Sulfur had yet to be identified as an element, though, so the Dutch name can hardly be called more scientifically modern than the Bandan one, and it is clear from the letter that Reynst is taking advice from the Bandan people, not the other way around, on how to manage the environmental consequences ("the people felt we should have abandoned the castle, as indeed we should if the smoke had continued").

Moreover, much of the scientific information in the ensuing descriptions—"the mountain has bursted with very violent blows, throwing out big glowing stones and much sulphurous dust"—seems to be taken from Bandan observations of the

event. What Reynst can see for himself is that the Dutch fort is in “perfect order” despite the eruption; that “the roofs of the houses had most collapsed”; that “part of the mountain has been turned upside down”; that “the water stood all around the mountain and was boiling and the fish were shoveled by basketsful [and were] mostly dead.” Reynst conveys the magnitude of the event without any sense of theological drama—noting simply that “it was a very strange sight”—and he clearly indicates the material meaning of the event for his own purposes and that of the company on whose behalf he is there: “The trees of Nera have been completely overblown by the smoke, so apparently there will be no nutmeg for the next year or two.”

The explosion of the Bandan volcano, and the predicted delay in the trees’ production of nutmeg, is not a catastrophe, even a minor financial one, for Reynst or his company. If anything, the temporary stoppage of nutmeg growth conveniently confirms his primary purpose for being in the Banda Islands in the first place: to pursue a war of conquest giving the Dutch authority over the entire archipelago. That this might include full extermination of the Bandanese was understood, even pre-calculated as a heavy financial loss to the company that would be offset by the gains of permanent control of the islands and their spices in the future.⁴³ The volcano’s eruption thus seemed perfectly timed to spoil the nutmeg precisely when a genocidal war would have prevented its harvesting anyway. This imminent and planned war of extermination—the governor-general has arrived with 1,000 soldiers—is the human catastrophe that provides what Reynst calls a “strange” and in fact strangely proleptic figure in his account of the explosion of Gunung Api.⁴⁴

What Reynst’s volcano account evinces so clearly is that the same global circuits that carried genocidal tactics across the globe also gave rise to a demand for new kinds of truth: a dynamic that Jennifer Greeson describes as “Plantation Enlightenment.”⁴⁵ For Reynst’s volcanic account provides the Dutch company with what it wants in two senses. These investors, like their counterparts today, want empirical facts about the ground, including the literal ground, on which their financial futures depend. But Reynst is also giving them what they want by offering a fact-based prediction (“apparently there will be no nutmeg for the next year or two”) that creates even as it merely reports on a new economic reality by silently affirming their decision to invest their money in a war of extermination: in a brutal “creative destruction” project that will save time and money down the line and thereby yield greater profits in the long run. To understand the letter in its simultaneously economic and genocidal context is to be reminded that empirical discourse also constructs truth by reporting the apparent facts. Reynst’s account illuminates a powerful relationship between the transmission of knowledge about the exploding volcano so far away from the Dutch company and the genocidal war waged against the Banda people: between the rise of empiricism and the infliction of elsewhere catastrophe.

Such links could never be acknowledged openly, of course. The “Age of Science” required what Ralph Bauer has powerfully called the “alchemy of conquest,” the purification process by which the Western scientific imagination remade itself as an innocent discovery of the natural world untainted by the violence of conquest—a purported byproduct of rather than a foundation for scientific revolution.⁴⁶ The new scientific knowledge derived from the empirical study of earthquakes and volcanoes, fossils and extinctions, thus demanded the suppression of its own violence. Yet the new paradigm of irreproachable scientific discovery could not rid itself so easily of its own catastrophic logic. At the end of the seventeenth century, for example, as the English natural philosopher Robert Hooke sought to prove that the earth’s uneven surface was the result of forgotten earthquakes, he anticipated the objection that his theory lacked textual support: there were no written records of earthquake in England, where alphabetic literacy had existed “since the time that the Romans first conquered this isle.”⁴⁷ How to explain this curious absence in a people so clearly possessed of written history? The answer Hooke formulated was telling: the people “in or near those Parts [struck by earthquake] might have perish’d with it, and those which were at a distance took little notice or regard of what they had little concern for” (DE 418–419). Elsewhere catastrophe, he postulated, equals indifference.

In lieu of prior textual evidence to support his ideas, Hooke turned to earthquake news and geological observations drawn from the Caribbean and Virginia—where, due to “Other earthquakes ... for Many miles in length, the Low-land is nothing but Sea-sand and Shells” (DE 418). But Hooke also found in the Americas a new way to bolster his theory of a world riven by prior earthquakes with a new hypothesis that certain kinds of cataclysm are simply not remembered even by those whose descendants survive them: “Other Catastrophes that have been more quick, have been forgotten by reason that such as escaped them were removed to some other parts, and there the Memory of them was soon lost; at least a longer tract of Time did quite obliterate the remembrance of them” (DE 419).

This theory about displacement and the forgetting of catastrophe—distinct from his earlier idea of English indifference—“is made plain enough,” as Hooke writes, “by the little remembrance . . . found in *America* of their preceding Estate, when they were first visited by the *Spaniards* and other *Europeans*” (DE 419). These purely speculative pronouncements about the nature of memory speak a kind of wish-fulfillment regarding the future. The New World catastrophe of colonialism, to which Hooke owes his vast body of geological facts, will eventually be forgotten if it is not written down, and it will not be written down if it is of “little concern”: the story of power and the archive in miniature.

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But the fact of that human-made catastrophe *will* shadow what is said about the earth itself. Which is why Cuvier’s grand and oft-cited pronouncement at

the end of the eighteenth century sounds as if he were standing on the Ground Zero of the Caribbean and making a self-evident observation: “All of these facts, consistent among themselves, and not opposed by any report, seem to me to prove the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe.”⁴⁸ Cuvier’s catastrophism—his statement of the settler-colonial obvious—would recede with the rise of physico-theology, the idea that nature served the larger if unknown purposes of God, as Lyell’s uniformitarianism won the day in the world of science. The uniformitarian view is not just the optimistic one from the point of view of those who enjoy the world as it is. It has also served the more diffuse purposes of market-based societies that require optimism to keep on speculating—to keep on believing, as a fact of ineluctable nature, that change is infinitesimally gradual, and that catastrophe must always be elsewhere.

If optimism has long been associated with the US popular and historical imagination—positive thinking defines “our reputation as well as our self-image,” as Barbara Ehrenreich once put it—today some scientists suggest that it also has a biocultural effect.⁴⁹ Optimism supposedly adds life and labor years to those who see their personal glass of meaning as at least half full.⁵⁰ Optimists live not only more fulfilling lives, claims the field of positive psychology, but also longer ones. If these longer optimist lives also require economic resources to sustain those extra years by buying the support and labor years of low-paid workers, the happiness industry has little to say about the affective lives of paid caregivers or the role of class and race and gender in the field of longevity studies. Moreover, the cultivation of optimism and its support of longevity in the Global North often necessitates the importation of workers from the Global South, fleeing from disasters often imposed by the very countries in which they seek refuge, to care for the longer-living elderly. Elsewhere catastrophes shape the deep histories and broad geographies of affect, including the self-perpetuating circuit of what I call predatory optimism.

In the history of science and the humanities more broadly, the study of catastrophe has recently developed a more robust and self-reflexive understanding of what counts as a catastrophe while acknowledging catastrophe’s potential role in the shaping of critical thought. My project is indebted to a number of these studies, including Naomi Klein’s influential work on neoliberal disaster capitalism as a rational regime meant to take advantage of and even to produce the irrational terror imposed by events like earthquakes by mimicking what earthquakes do, delivering repeated and violent shocks, economic and military, to leverage market opportunities.⁵¹ I have also been inspired by scholars who have insisted that the ceaseless shocks of contemporary modernity are rooted in earlier and ongoing catastrophes. As per Christina Sharpe’s devastating and moving analysis of what she calls the continuing “wake” of anti-Black violence: “Transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster.”⁵² Or as Jodi Byrd puts it in their work

on the connections between global empire and the continuing dispossession of Indigenous people, “The story of the new world is horror, the story of America a crime.”⁵³ The enduring modernity-as-catastrophe critical narrative has too often forgotten or overlooked what Gerald Horne terms simply the “apocalypse of settler colonialism.”⁵⁴

These and other scholars shaped my understanding that processes of extraction and forgetting are baked into the thought-system of colonial modernity, and they have helped me to see why I find the figure of earthquake so robust for thinking. Earthquakes render apprehensible a relationship between the surface and the subterranean, the apparent and the submerged, the known and the unknown, and in doing so challenge a dismissal of depth in much recent work in the humanities that describes itself as postcritical: that is, as favoring literal over latent meanings, more preoccupied by textual foreground than by hermeneutical sedimentations.⁵⁵ At the same time, the figure of earthquake can also challenge critique, for its notable effects include the kinds of spontaneous perception that postcritique hopes to recover: for example, shock and recognition—an overwhelming sense of awakening to a truth, however provisional, about the history that has brought us to where we are. Not everyone needs such awakening, of course. The event of earthquake embodies a geological reminder that deception and self-deception will form part of the smooth surface of everyday life only when one’s life is lived, precisely, not in a state of disaster. The angel of history may see all the wreckage of the past, as Walter Benjamin suggested, but it is not revelatory for everyone in the same way across time.⁵⁶ Centuries of enslavement and dispossession require no flash of undeception when spectacular cataclysms only intensify the slow violence and persistence of disaster for those who live it as a quotidian reality. But the very non-experience of catastrophe in a world made by catastrophe is perhaps, by definition, a state of self-deception. Earthquake offers a vital figure for those fleeting moments of undeception that are the aspiration of all critical practice—or at least those modes that acknowledge their own fundamentally distorted vision and their responsibility to try to see better.

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The history of modernity that Dussel lays out in *The Invention of the Americas* is shaped by a philosophy of liberation that he helped to found. It offers readers who are not trained in the disciplines of Western philosophy an invitation to ask questions that they might not otherwise feel entitled or authorized to ask. It invites such readers to consider other resources, for example literature, for developing concepts that help to answer questions involving metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Above all, liberation philosophy asks such readers to make and to believe in connections between right here and now and the “somewhere,” to borrow again from Danticat, where someone is in a state of extreme suffering.⁵⁷

Perhaps most important for readers located in the US academy and the Global North, liberation philosophy insists that these connections are not merely personal and emotional but also geographical and historical—as is the analytical method that the meta-philosophy of liberation, itself a product of the Americas, depends upon. A corollary method in literary studies is also by necessity geographically broad and historically deep, guided by a belief in truth-bearing connections across space and time.

This book completes an unintended trilogy that I have been writing over the course of my career. Only now, in the late stages of revising this project, do I see that it is a series of meditations on rupture, inevitably romantic, on the same essential question about why the US-American present can often *feel*, despite all literary and historical evidence to the contrary, intractable and solid as the earth itself. My first book, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere*, unfolded from the intuition that nineteenth-century American literature had helped to forge a national US identity in marked opposition not only to Europe, as commentators from Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur to Henry James would argue, but also to the hemispheric Americas.⁵⁸ The Cold War formation known as the American Renaissance, I argued, was in effect a forgotten transamerican renaissance, a multilingual literary debate among authors in Spanish, French, and English about race and revolution across the hemisphere. In *The Unsettling of America*, I homed in more closely on the relationship between nationalism and forgetting, following a single emblematic story about an Algonquian-speaking Native interpreter, Paquiquineo aka Don Luis, who after decades of life among Europeans led a revolt that destroyed a sixteenth-century Spanish settlement in what is now Virginia.⁵⁹ As I explored Spanish and English colonial history more closely, I realized that such stories of unsettlement were actually quite common—but also profoundly overwritten and thus later overlooked.

The foundational story of unsettlement came from the history of La Navidad, the first European colony in the New World, established by Columbus at the end of his first voyage and destroyed by supposedly “timorous” Native islanders—unwilling to countenance the Europeans raping and enslaving Taino women—by the time he returned. The unsettlement of La Navidad marked the beginning of the end for Columbus: a moment of undeception so profound that he never fully recovered. The New World paradise he had discovered turned out to bring a series of personal catastrophes that left him bleeding from his eyes and finally returning to Castile as a captive, naked and in chains. This is at any rate how Columbus described his own state at the end of the third voyage. But if he was exaggerating, he was also describing the form of capture that he had instantiated in the Americas on his first voyage with the enslavement of the first Amerindians. *Earthquake and the Invention of America* continues to meditate on the literary history of the New World as a long and repeating engagement with and simultaneous

denial of narratives of colonial overturning such as the story of La Navidad. The figure of earthquake, I suggest, comes to stand for the disavowed but essential elements of nearly all such stories: conquest, dispossession, enslavement, and finally unsettlement.⁶⁰

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The book is organized into two parts. Part I, “The Southernization of Disaster: Earthquake History and Theory,” follows a series of historical earthquakes and theories about their meaning and thereby also offers an account of the global and translingual origins of American literary history that builds upon my earlier studies. The three chapters in this part outline the deep cultural ancestries of elsewhere catastrophe, long pre-dating the formation of the US state itself, that also shaped enduring and world-ravaging ideas about geography. [Chapter 1](#), “Elsewhere Catastrophe,” outlines the theoretical basis for elsewhere catastrophe by moving backwards from the nineteenth-century US South and the context of the Civil War to Plato and the earthquake philosophy of the *Republic*, a set of ideas upended by the very different role of earthquakes in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias* and the seismic story of an empire that was swallowed by the sea. With his incisive sketch of North–South relations—of Hellenistic Europe versus Africa and the “Asiatics”—Plato offers a fascinating and influential meditation on the role of geography in stories that seek to justify domination: stories about who owns history, who is chosen for greatness, who is doomed to catastrophe. Although they reflect the distinctive power relations and cultural geographies of the ancient world, Plato’s earthquakes—which are also quite literally occasions for slave revolts—offer an ancient and clarifying lens on the seismic imaginings of modern transatlantic thought.

The ancient southerly plantations of the Mediterranean empire would much later be recast as the classical West, a formation that early modern European thinkers of the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries purported to rediscover, infamously eliding the role of non-Europe in creating the great traditions of knowledge lost and found as they did so. This orientalist renaissance of the West as the non-East was also its rebirth as the non-South; it coincided with the voyages to the South that a dissembling Columbus was sailing even while he pronounced himself to be heading west. The discovery of the Americas, which the admiral hailed as the Indies, was also a search for a tropical South and for peoples who could be enslaved by Spaniards just as the Portuguese were already enslaving Africans as of 1441.⁶¹ Over the next centuries, as northern, western, and Protestant Europeans entered the race for overseas empire, they also constructed an Iberian South, and a concurrent historiographical Black Legend of Spanish colonial rapacity, as an alibi for the predations of their own colonial projects, for the violence of their own practices of enslavement, dispossession, and extraction. The deep past of these various Souths re-emerges with special force after the most famous earthquake about which

the West told stories during the rise of modern empire: the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

As the seismic hallmark of this imperial modernity, the Lisbon earthquake became a catalyst for thinking about catastrophe and its implications for the modern West. [Chapter 2](#), “Predatory Optimism,” draws on eighteenth-century writings about the Lisbon earthquake to explore how imperial modernity in non-Iberian Europe virtually required the southernizing of catastrophe: an apprehension and justification of catastrophe as an outcome of geography that is itself divinely ordained, moral, or otherwise inevitable. Examining the writings of Alexander Pope, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Gottfried Leibniz, and, at more length, Voltaire, I argue that this new southernizing of catastrophe helped to hide in plain sight the catastrophic nature of western Europe’s own imperial violence while also giving rise to the philosophical and emotional sensibility of predatory optimism. Unlike its neoliberal descendant, cruel optimism—a structure of desire that impedes the flourishing of its partaking subjects—the predatory optimism explored here emerges fundamentally out of geopolitical relation, an emergent metaphysical mapping of the world that conceptually and materially sustains what Voltaire called simply “the North” upon the catastrophes at its margins: a philosophical world-system of sorts premised upon a perpetually disastrous and suffering South. The corollary of predatory optimism is theodicy, a defense of divine omnipotence and benevolence despite the existence of unjust suffering. This eighteenth-century neologism, meaning “vindication of God,” describes Leibniz’s systematic philosophical approach to the ancient problem of evil: a new and necessary term, called into being to confront the cruel circumstances of a new imperial modernity. In this light, I read *Candide*—Voltaire’s famous satire of Leibniz—as a novella emplotting the origins of what Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein have called “Americanness.” For *Candide*’s philosophical response to the Lisbon earthquake insists on linking that European catastrophe indelibly to colonial South America, particularly to the Guaraní War in Paraguay with which the Lisbon disaster coincided. Following the lead of Voltaire’s Pangloss, the chapter turns finally to the earliest writings about the great Lima–Callao earthquake of 1746, the predecessor to and forgotten twin of Lisbon’s implosion, to explore the convergence of racial capitalism and disaster capitalism in the aftermath of colonial Peru’s seismic catastrophe.

[Chapter 3](#), “*Pachacuti*,” turns from the Lisbon-descended narrative of philosophical modernity, with its southernizing of catastrophe, toward theory from the torrid zone. Here I read two Andean-born writers—the Quechua historian Guaman Poma de Ayala and the contemporaneous historian and son of a royal Inca woman and Spanish conquistador, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega—who figure colonial reality as a swallowing up by the earth. In their writings earthquake becomes a mode of interpretation that continually pushes against colonial knowledge. Garcilaso’s considerable influence on eighteenth-century European writers

suggests how other cosmologies and modes of knowledge production impinged on the trajectory of catastrophic rationality, skewing the directionality and implications of Enlightenment. The earthquake history assembled in this chapter unfolds across languages, continents, and genres, including the new formation of the eighteenth-century English novel, and it suggests a deep connection, material as much as it is imaginative, between the rending of the earth and the conditions of possibility for decolonial unsettlement.

The potential eruption of *pachacuti* organizes the literary history in Part II of this book, “From Shaking Ground to ‘The Stillness,’” which begins in early New England and ultimately tells the story of how elsewhere catastrophe shaped the nineteenth-century US imagination: how earthquake became unthinkable and was displaced onto a seismic South, whether regional, hemispheric, or global. [Chapter 4](#), “The Fragile Ground of New England, 1638–1755,” begins with the arrival of the *Mayflower* on what seemed at first to William Bradford to be firm and stable earth. The ensuing earthquakes in colonial New England—as well as the 1692 Port Royal, Jamaica earthquake, the Lisbon of its day—would prove him wrong. Puritan elites interpreted the seismic events of their moment by writing global earthquake histories that could accommodate an emerging culture of mastery and slavery sanctified by the idea of just war. But early New England earthquakes also reminded Puritans that those who had already inhabited the land long before their arrival understood earthquake in the New World in ways that they could not. Earthquake struck at the tenuously settled ground of colonial occupation and land enclosure; it emblemized the continual problem of settler security and the specific threat of Native agency, spiritual and otherwise. As the Indian slave trade intersected with the African one, the flow of enslaved people along with their knowledge, from New England to the Caribbean and back again, introduced new and entangled forms of earthquake imagination and disparate cosmological orientations to the earth. The Black and Indigenous specters who appeared during the Salem witch trials often had earthquake at their fingertips; and, like specters, earthquake required interpretive vigilance on the part of those with most power, lest other meanings take hold. This earthquake vigilance introduced in New England during the first half of the eighteenth century what we might call a settler colonial Enlightenment: a culture of frantic knowledge production that had no confidence in the stability of the earth or in the security of settler polities and psyches.

By the end of December 1755, the news had reached New England of the earthquake in Lisbon. If that catastrophe ruptured the European Enlightenment, dramatically changing the course of Western philosophy, its effect upon the North American settler colonial Enlightenment shifted the meaning of earthquakes. It would oversimplify things to say that the Lisbon earthquake marked the birth of a uniquely Anglo-American form of predatory optimism. But it did help usher in, I suggest, what Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur would call “a new sort of happiness,” premised upon an insistence that catastrophe must be elsewhere. The

aesthetic mode best suited to exploring the emotional and philosophical sensibility of elsewhere catastrophe and its predatory optimism was the sublime. In this spirit, [Chapter 5](#), “The Settler Colonial Sublime,” turns to Crèvecoeur as early American literature’s preeminent theorist and enactor of the sublime’s intricate geographic displacements: what Edmund Burke called a “sort of substitution” that continually referenced the colonial Americas. The chapter begins with Crèvecoeur’s little-discussed “Rock of Lisbon” essay, which contemplates a panoramic view of Lisbon in the aftermath of its great earthquake that is key to the later emergence of the author’s new national figure and concomitant affect. Crèvecoeur delineates this new mode of happiness by recourse to a catastrophic elsewhere in his early writings, which elaborate a predatory optimism upheld by temperate opposition to the supposed torrid zones of the globe: from the US South to colonial South America to the imagined reaches of the African wilderness. The settler sublime and the new happiness that it produces derive from a doubled experience of place, from the distance between a geography where catastrophe is destined to occur and the presumed American safety from earthquake and all it portends: revolution of the enslaved, Indigenous repossession of the land, and their combined and ontologically shattering figuration as “the bursting of the globe or the general explosion of some great part of its superficial shell.”

In the decade following Crèvecoeur’s elaboration of a new national type and a new happiness rooted in immunity to earthquake, Olaudah Equiano published the first self-authored slave narrative of the Atlantic world. The ground remains stable throughout the first edition of 1789, but by the next year and the *Interesting Narrative*’s third edition, Equiano had added a new account of two earthquakes experienced during the time of his enslavement, both occurring at midnight in the West Indies. Equiano’s memory of these West Indian earthquakes throws into relief the coming nineteenth-century national literary history explored across the final three chapters of the book. [Chapter 6](#), “Earthquake Amnesia,” finds in this literary history a profound sense of seismic amnesia, the literal forgetting of historical earthquakes after their occurrence. The exemplary instance of this forgetting occurs after the massive Missouri earthquakes that struck early in the nineteenth century (1811–1812), shook people as far away as the White House in Washington, DC, and signaled—for the multi-tribal confederacy led by Tecumseh—a spatio-temporal revolution, a kind of *pachacuti*, in which the earth’s rebalancing would require the end of settler culture. The era’s novels of catastrophe stage the contradictions of earthquake amnesia and its relation to the seismic possibilities of unsettlement: of a world overturned by the enslaved, colonized, and dispossessed. Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* offers a meditation on the southernization of catastrophe across US, hemispheric, and global registers and on the doubled experience of place that constitutes the settler sublime. Meanwhile, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Crater*, the great, forgotten seismic novel of US literary history, entertains a history of the New World itself consumed by an earthquake. Cooper’s novel of North American Providence determining history

on a South Seas island, I suggest, overlays a deeper logic of history embedded in El Inca Garcilaso's account of South American *guano* as a chastening, a warning about the perpetual settler colonial misunderstanding of Indigenous language, knowledge, and finally science.

Chapter 7, "The Undeceiving Earth," takes up Herman Melville as the nineteenth century's most significant inheritor of Voltaire and El Inca Garcilaso, and thus as the writer most self-consciously engaged in the broad and complex project of understanding the "temperate" world from the perspective of *la zona tórrida*. Melville's entire oeuvre grapples with the southernizing geographies of Western theology and philosophy and the overlap of these with the US psychology of bourgeois "geniality," to use his preferred term for Crèvecoeur's northern "new sort of happiness" or predatory optimism. Exploring a broad selection of Melville's writing, the chapter reads his first philosophical novel, *Mardi*, as an allegory of "global-colonial" modernity—a worldwide condition of geographical relations that is rooted in ongoing forms of colonialism—in which the text continually re-enacts the foundational Columbian narrative of La Navidad. Turning next to "The Town-Ho's Story" in *Moby-Dick*, I examine its self-consciously located diegesis set in Peru, the staging ground for an earthquake-whale's assault on the colonial foundations of modern Western philosophy. Melville returned to this violent foundation in *The Piazza Tales*, especially in "The Encantadas," set in the Torrid Zone, and "The Bell-Tower," set in the south of Europe in the days preceding a great earthquake of the Lisbon variety. In Melville's later writings, from *The Confidence Man* to *Timoleon*, the rending of the earth foregrounds the predatory basis of optimism and the racial and geographic underpinnings of theodicy in a global-colonial world. Like Humboldt, Melville takes earthquake as a quintessential figure for undeception.

As the nation's preeminent metaphor for the violence of conquest and the inescapable possibility of conquest's overturn, the rhetoric of earthquake was inevitable for the US Civil War: a "Sign of State-quakes," as Increase Mather had termed seismic activity, that a later national syndrome of elsewhere catastrophe perpetually displaced. Chapter 8, "The Seismic Civil War," examines disparate visions of this rupture across the writings of Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, and José Martí—a cluster of authors in whose work the US South is defined by the distant southerly locations of catastrophe, from Lima to Lisbon, that came before it. Douglass is perhaps this book's preeminent theorist of seismicity: a writer drawn to earthquake as a figure for visualizing the subterranean connections between geological and historical thinking, and between slavery and theodicy, in the years surrounding the war. If Douglass's writing elaborated a seismic South that would have been easy for contemporary readers to pinpoint on a map, Emily Dickinson explored the southernization of catastrophe in these years as a poet and a New Englander by birth and settler ancestry, and did so with keen attention to the war's occluded settler dimensions. While Dickinson and Douglass were in their

disparate northern locations meditating on the earthquake of the Civil War, Mark Twain was running from it—headed away as fast as a horse-drawn coach could carry him. The story of his five-year sojourn in the West, published in 1872 as *Roughing It*, also narrates Twain's experience of a geological earthquake—a magnitude 6.3 event occurring in San Francisco in 1865—that punctuated the end of the Civil War. Finally, the chapter turns to José Martí, a boy in Cuba during the US Civil War. By 1886, he was in exile from two southern polities, Venezuela as well as Cuba, when he wrote that the city of Charleston, South Carolina, a heart of the former Confederacy, had been struck by an earthquake. Martí portrayed the event not only as the decimation of a US southern city but also as an oblique lens on multiple, overlapping southern spaces, and the linked histories of Black and Indigenous slavery and ongoing systems of dispossession, across the always shifting grounds of the hemisphere.

*

Martí's Charleston essay glances prophetically at the seismic future of the Americas, including the major earthquake that struck San Francisco in 1906. The state legislature legally renamed the event as the "San Francisco Fire" to ensure—this was willful and explicit—that the earthquake itself would be more quickly forgotten, swallowed up by the story of a city putting out its supposedly more manageable urban flames and rebuilding for the future. To call the disaster an earthquake was to risk southernizing northern California at a time when southern California had just been successfully rebranded as "our Mediterranean"—a new climatological identity that allowed it to escape its former designation, by eastern US travelers, as dangerously "subtropical."⁶² These early renaming strategies allowed developers and speculators in both northern and southern California to reap the financial benefits of forgetting earlier disasters. The urban historian Mike Davis has analyzed the enduring consequences of this strange oblivion. By the time he wrote his sweeping cultural history of twentieth-century Los Angeles in 1993, Davis could observe that "disaster amnesia is a federally subsidized luxury."⁶³

This book offers a kind of *longue durée* prehistory of twentieth-century disaster amnesia, with a particular focus on earthquake as a figure for the conquest, and the potential overturning of conquest, that a state built on slaveholding and settler dispossession has invested in forgetting precisely so that the profits from racial and disaster capitalism can continue to build wealth for the beneficiaries of past predation. My hope is that bringing this prehistory to light may contribute in some way to the ongoing work of disclosing what Glissant called the "trembling world" to those of us who have been most socialized not to see or to feel or remember it. Perhaps a philosophy of the trembling world, a world shaped by ongoing coloniality, might offer an alternative to the US continental presumption

of the national ground's immunity to earthquake—and to those who believe, or cannot stop feeling, that they live on unshakable ground.

Notes

- 1 On racial capitalism, see the first chapter of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of a Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 2–24; on disaster capitalism, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 12–14. The recent formulation of “colonial racial capitalism” is also useful for recognizing the overlaps of racial capitalism and settler colonialism; see Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Bryan Jordan Jefferson, eds., *Colonial Racial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).
2. On O’Gorman’s insights in relation to contemporary hemispheric American studies, see Rodrigo Lazo, “The Invention of America Again: On the Impossibility of an Archive,” *American Literary History* 25, no. 4 (Special Issue: History, Historicism, and Historiography) (Winter 2013): 751–771.
3. Edmundo O’Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and Its Meaning* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1961), 140; Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of “the Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995).
4. Dussel, *Invention*, 25. On the specificity of Latin Americanist philosophical critiques of colonialism and coloniality, see also the landmark volume *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, edited by Mabel Moraña, Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
5. Frank James, “Pat Robertson Blames Haitian Devil Pact for Earthquake,” NPR, January 13, 2010, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2010/01/pat_robertson_blames_haitian_d.html.
6. See Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 92; and Bertin M. Louis, Jr., *My Soul Is in Haiti* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 5–6. The “long history of Euro-American denigration of African and African diasporic spiritual and healing practices” is also a context for Robertson’s comments; see Kate Ramsey, *The Spirit and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 21.
7. James, “Pat Robertson Blames Haitian Devil Pact for Earthquake.”
8. Ibid.
9. Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (New York: Vintage, 2010), 18.
10. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, CARAF Books (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 2.
11. Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 18–19.
12. I cite here, purposely, from the first English translation, published in the same year as the original German, in 1845 in London and New York, by the British doctor Augustin Prichard. It has been derided for its poor style in its own day and ours. I have also consulted the still authoritative E. C. Otté translation of vol. 1, originally from 1848 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
13. José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 213.
14. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.
15. Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions* (1815, trans. Helen Maria Williams), 377.
16. Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonisation*, trans. Molly Geidel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020 [2010]), 48–49.
17. See especially Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 311–313, 409–410.
18. C. Wilkinson, D. C. H. Hikuroa, A. H. Macfarlane, and M. W. Hughes, “Mātauranga Māori in Geomorphology: Existing Frameworks, Case Studies, and Recommendations for Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge in Earth Science,” *Earth Surface Dynamics* 8 (2020): 595–618.

19. H. Hambati, "Invisible Resilience: Indigenous Knowledge Systems of Earthquake Disaster Management in Kagera Region, Tanzania," *Utafiti* 16 (2021): 247–270.
20. See, e.g., Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
21. Eva Marie Garrouette and Kathleen Delores Westcott, "The Story Is a Living Being: Companionship with Stories in Anishinaabeg Studies," in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 61–80.
22. Thomas Lecocq et al., "Global Quieting of High-Frequency Seismic Noise Due to COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown Measures," *Science* 369 (2020): 1338–1343. DOI: 10.1126/science.abd2438.
23. See especially Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in Sylvia Wynter: *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9–89; and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).
24. Edgar Garcia, *Emergency: Reading the Popol Vuh in a Time of Crisis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 24.
25. David Sepkoski, *Catastrophic Thinking: Extinction and the Value of Diversity from Darwin to the Anthropocene* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 21.
26. Jonathan Smith, *Fact and Feeling: Baconian Science and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 92–120.
27. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 8; see also his discussion of the realist novel, 19–24.
28. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Macmillan, 2014), 25.
29. Timothy Sweet, *Extinction and the Human* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 13.
30. On Saartjie (Sara) Baartman's life and death, see Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) and Rachel Holmes, *The Life and Death of Sara Baartman* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). On contemporary artistic responses to Baartman's story and legacy, see Deborah Willis, ed., *Black Venus 2010* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010) and N. Gordon-Chipembere, *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sara Baartman* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).
31. Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology, Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface, by Reference to Causes Now in Operation*, vol. 2 of 3 (London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1833), 162. See also Sweet, *Extinction and the Human*, 14.
32. Kathryn Yussof, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 67.
33. Aristotle, *Meteorology*, 378a, trans. E. W. Webster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), n.p.
34. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.5–6 and 2.9, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Colonial Press, 189), 6–7 and 41–42.
35. See [Chapter 4](#).
36. Rienk Vermij, *Thinking on Earthquakes in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 2.
37. Vermij, *Thinking on Earthquakes*, 55–59.
38. Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (London: John Russell Smith, 1862), 60. José de Acosta discusses earthquakes in *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, book 3, ch. 26, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006); see further discussion of Acosta in [Chapter 3](#). On Mather and earthquakes, see [Chapter 4](#).
39. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550–1700* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 33, 141.
40. Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 411.
41. Cook, *Matters of Exchange*, 411.
42. All citations from the Gerard Reynst letter, discussed in the paragraphs that follow, are taken from the extended passage in Vermij, *Thinking on Earthquakes*, 159–160.
43. See especially Vincent C. Loth, who notes that "[b]y 1614, the Company's directors in the Netherlands, *Heeren XVII*, were willing to realize the long contemplated conquest of the islands, even if that meant destroying the people and suffering great financial outlay": "Pioneers and Perkeniers: The Banda Islands in the Seventeenth Century," *Cakalele* 6 (1995): 17.

44. For Amitav Ghosh, the Dutch war of extermination in the Bandan archipelago is closely linked to the genocidal war of the English against the Pequot in New England two decades later; both events reflect the specific military practice of burning down Indigenous dwellings as it had been practiced upon European peasants. See Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 21–25.
45. Jennifer Greeson, “Plantation and Enlightenment,” in *A History of the Literature of the U.S. South*, ed. Harilaos Stecopolous (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 54–69.
46. Ralph Bauer, *The Alchemy of Conquest: Science, Religion, and the Secrets of the New World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019).
47. Robert Hooke, “A Discourse of Earthquakes,” in *The Posthumous Works of Dr. Robert Hooke* (London: Sam. Smith and Benj. Wolford, 1705), 418. Hereafter in text as DE.
48. Cited, e.g., in Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes: New Translations and Interpretations of the Primary Texts* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24. The original French refracts the context of conquest even more closely, referring to “beings destroyed by a few revolutions of this globe; beings of whom those who exist today have taken the place, so that [the current inhabitants] can see themselves perhaps one day equally destroyed and replaced by others,” from Cuvier, “Mémoire sur les espèces d’éléphants vivantes et fossils” (Paris: Baudoin, 1798), 21.
49. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Macmillan, 2009), 1.
50. Two 2022 studies in particular were widely reported in the news; see H. K. Koga et al., “Optimism, Lifestyle, and Longevity in a Racially Diverse Cohort of Women,” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 70, no. 10 (2022): 2793–2804; and L. O. Lee et al., “Optimism, Daily Stressors, and Emotional Well-Being over Two Decades in a Cohort of Aging Men,” *Journals of Gerontology*, series B, *Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 77, no. 8 (2022): 1373–1383.
51. Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2007), 3–25.
52. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 5.
53. Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xii.
54. Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018). Tiffany Lethabo King argues that even the academic field named for and devoted to a critique of “settler colonialism” has built itself up by appropriating and then displacing the insights of Black and Indigenous critical thought. Conquest, King argues, offers a better term for this centuries-long and ongoing mass catastrophe. See *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 12.
55. On post-critique, see especially Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and Elizabeth S. Anker and Felski, eds., *Critique and Post-Critique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). See also Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1–21.
56. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 253–264.
57. See Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Markovsky (New York: Orbis, 1985). I am also influenced here by the idea of liberation theology, in its intersection with the philosophy of liberation, as a “theology of connections”; see Paul Farmer, “On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below,” *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996): 261–283.
58. Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
59. Anna Brickhouse, *The Unsettling of America: Translation, Interpretation, and the Story of Don Luis de Velasco, 1560–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
60. See Brickhouse, *The Unsettling of America*, 20–25.
61. On Columbus’s secret designs on “the South,” see Nicolás Wey Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
62. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 11. On the concept of mediterraneanism in American cultures more broadly, see Susan Gillman’s *American Mediterraneans: A Study in Geography, Race, and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021).
63. Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 47.

PART I

THE SOUTHERNIZATION
OF DISASTER

Earthquake History and Theory

Elsewhere Catastrophe

That the invention of America required a sense of elsewhere catastrophe was clear to Edgar Allan Poe, who offered a miniature sketch of the syndrome in one of his later and rarely discussed writings, the 1844 short story “The Premature Burial.” As the story opens, a seemingly distanced third-person narrator ponders the relationship between literature and catastrophe and argues that *only* historical events are acceptable for representation in “legitimate fiction” if the writer “do[es] not wish to offend or to disgust.” The narrator insists that literary representations of catastrophe—lest they elicit “simple abhorrence” in the reader—require “the severity and majesty of Truth [to] sanctify and sustain them ... [I]t is the fact—it is the reality—it is the history which excites,” and to which “[w]e thrill ... with the most intense of ‘pleasurable pain.’”¹

Poe offers here a theory of the sublime rooted not in visual apprehension but in historical facticity—a theory that he clarifies by next listing “some few of the more prominent and august calamities on record” as of the mid-nineteenth century:

the Passage of the Beresina ... the Earthquake at Lisbon ... the Plague at London ... the Massacre of St. Bartholomew ... [and] the stifling of the hundred and twenty-three prisoners in the Black Hole at Calcutta. (P 666)

This odd progression of historical events includes both natural and human-made catastrophes: earthquake and plague as well as war and torture. But Poe also embeds a deeper point here about the assumed geography of catastrophe. His delineation of disaster transpires across eastern, southern, and western Europe before concluding in a British colonial dungeon in eighteenth-century India. Not a single instance of history’s important “calamities” occurs in the US. Catastrophe is from the outset understood to have happened elsewhere.

The narrator never addresses this curious American omission from the “vast generalities of disaster.” His primary focus on the “long and weird catalogue of human miseries” occurring at large scale instead shifts abruptly to “individual instances,” which he distinguishes from catastrophes that terrorize the many: the kind that sweep untold and unnamed numbers along in their wake. The individual kind—according to the strange insistence of the narrator—are “more replete with essential suffering.” Poe does far more here than register the aesthetic-psychological truism that accounts of individual suffering—as opposed to mass suffering—may evoke a deeper sense of identification in the reader: a textured

apprehension of pain that is “particular, not diffuse.” Indeed, the narrator has no sooner suggested this apprehension than he bursts out of his persona of impersonal commentator to make, with a punctuating spasm of religiosity, a related but quite different claim: “That the ghastly extremes of agony are endured by man the unit, and never by man the mass—for this let us thank a merciful God!” Catastrophic suffering on the scale of “ghastly extremes” is not only elsewhere, *not* occurring in America, but is also—by divine ordination—simply not felt or experienced by vast populations. The logic of elsewhere catastrophe insists that the “agony” of “man the mass” is historically, aesthetically, philosophically, and theologically impossible right here and now (P 666).

Yet as Poe’s story unfolds into its purported subject of premature burial, the individual and the vast collective begin to blur. The narrator is obsessed with the possibility of his own live entombment, but this individual horror is revealed in both his research and his dreams to be an unspeakable fate of the many and not the rare few. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of premature burial itself begins to Americanize quite distinctly as the obsessive narrator emerges as a historically situated character: an apparently wealthy Virginian, his stately ancestors buried in a “family vault” (P 676). By the end, the story’s true catastrophic horror turns out to be the living interment of an unnamed population of “many millions” encountered in the narrator’s feverish nightmares (P 675). The “vast number” horrifies—the “hideousness is insufferable,” the “great agonies” unbearable—because the undead are a ghostly embodiment of the very historical catastrophe that the narrator fails to name on his list of “prominent and august calamities.” In other words, the narrator’s hysterical insistence that “the ghastly extremes of agony are endured ... never by man the mass” marks both his overwhelming apprehension of the catastrophe of slavery and his simultaneous need to metabolize that emotion into the metaphoric logic of an elsewhere catastrophe that is not and is *never* happening here.²

Catastrophe must indeed be elsewhere for the narrator to come of age. At the conclusion of “The Premature Burial,” the young Virginian learns to look away from the catastrophe of the “many millions” in live entombment all around him by developing a particular way of unseeing the world. First comes his sense of theodicy, his belief that “out of Evil proceeded Good.” Philosophical resilience in turn yields aesthetic sensibility: his “soul acquire[s] tone—acquire[s] temper.” Soon he is able to perform (almost to satisfaction) the rituals of white, wealthy masculinity in a nation built on slavery: “I went abroad. I took vigorous exercise. I breathed the free air of Heaven.” Only now can he offer readers an abbreviated version of what was once called “classic American literature”: “In short, I became a new man, and lived a man’s life.” Poe’s narrator thus learns to transform and then dismiss his “charnel apprehensions” (P 679): his sensory understanding of the violent transatlantic catastrophe in which his ancestral wealth, represented by the dreaded family vault, has always been invested. The resurrection of this “new

man" requires thought work that is intermittently theological, aesthetic, literary, and philosophical—a process that Poe sketches only at the end of his tale but that clearly structures his opening account of elsewhere catastrophe. Such cataclysms may transpire in Europe or the Black Hole at Calcutta, but surely not in the US.

At the same time, the conclusion of Poe's tale suggests that catastrophe must also be elsewhere for another, no less powerfully emotional reason. For all catastrophe represents a deeper and abiding possibility: that a world built on conquest, slavery, and dispossession might also be overturned by the dispossessed. The catastrophe of slavery as live entombment that haunts the narrator is in fact *also* the very different catastrophe of the earth bursting open to release the "many millions" buried alive therein: "They must sleep, or they will devour us—they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish" (P 679). The story's closing gesture, with its uncanny but distinct evocation of slave insurrection, holds no hint of the longing for revolution that so often defines the "mere romanticist"—a figure from whom the narrator is at pains to distinguish himself. What Poe's cataleptic protagonist instead glimpses here is a zombie apocalypse: a vision that also illuminates the wider nineteenth-century cultural obsession with live entombment and the living dead that his story both intensifies and mocks as "bugaboo" material for popular entertainment (P 679).

This cultural obsession, as Poe's story powerfully suggests, expresses a suppressed knowledge of its own necropolitics within the enslaving class, which sees but must unsee slavery's violent enclosure. The deep philosophical effects of this continually suppressed knowledge shape the story's arc from medical science to the psychological experience of the Virginian. The story begins by highlighting the extent to which nineteenth-century medical science values not the living body with its surface symptoms and sufferings but the opened and often stolen corpse and the knowledge that can be extracted from its depths. By the end of the story, the ostensible necessity, horror, and latent crime of the autopsy—carried out on a corpse seized via excavation—are reprised in the narrator's own subterranean experience. To be subterranean is to be extractable from the earth, to experience embodiment *as* extractability, as enslavement itself. This is why the narrator's family has a vault that renders even death an elsewhere catastrophe: something that befalls a less-than-human "dog—nailed up in some common coffin—and thrust deep, deep, and for ever, into some ordinary and nameless grave" (P 672). Catastrophe must be elsewhere—in the story's geographic logic, in Belarus, Lisbon, London, Paris, and Calcutta—because recognizing its ongoing occurrence in the form of slavery in the narrator's Virginia would mean contending with the possible rupture of the surface hiding the subterranean. Should the subterranean sleepers awaken, "they will devour us."

The figure of elsewhere catastrophe thus helps to occlude both the outsized structural and historical violence shaping the present and the possibility of a violent rupture of the here and now. For elsewhere catastrophe is the product of

a historiographical tradition that overwrites such ruptures as past events receding from the smoothly unfolding surface of chronological time. But the ruptures recur, redouble, uncannily repeat: from the gothic account of Columbus's *Villa de la Navidad*—which ends with the mysterious destruction of the first European colony in the New World and the deaths of all the colonists who had tried to rape Taino women—to a slave revolution of “many millions” to which Poe's Virginian narrator gives imaginative form as a night of the living dead. What his narrator knows, and works hard not to know, is that the zombie apocalypse of colonial modernity is already happening now—which is also to insist that the futures of the past are never foreclosed. Elsewhere catastrophe, on the other hand, is a mode of denying both the live entombment of coloniality, as Poe figures it, and the corresponding possibility of a violent, devouring eruption from below. Earthquake is the exemplary elsewhere catastrophe—the disaster that must always happen far away or be forgotten—because it is an enduring figure for both the world-negating violence of colonialism that buries the living alive and for the potential eruption of a world built on conquest. The rending of earthquake figures both conquest itself and the literal instability of occupied grounds: the nightmare of unsettlement in the settler colonial imagination.

As the remainder of this chapter suggests, Poe's catastrophic imaginings hold up an oblique mirror to our own historical moment. We live in an era in which disaster and its idioms pervade social commentary and critical thought alike to such an extent that catastrophe seems an all-encompassing ubiquity. And yet the national logic of elsewhere catastrophe is inescapably built into the contemporary inheritance of centuries of catastrophic thinking in a broadly Western tradition going back to Plato.

Catastrophic Thinking

Catastrophe—along with its biblical twin, apocalypse—lies at the ancient heart of Western thought; likewise, Western modernity has always understood itself, at least intermittently, to be slouching toward Bethlehem. Disaster was a primary driver of “post-Enlightenment thought,” as Marie-Hélène Huet puts it, and this is also the case in the current moment: “Our culture thinks *through* disasters ... disasters mediate philosophical inquiry and shape our creative imagination.”³ Catastrophism provided a geological theory of the earth's development in the early nineteenth century, and literary writers have been reading ruins and glimpsing disastrous futures ever since. Historians of many stripes have long dubbed the first half of the twentieth century the “Age of Catastrophe”; and critical theory since Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt has illuminated the barbarism at the heart of Western progress and argued that the history of modernity itself is a history of catastrophe.⁴ Scholarship on the twenty-first century has only upped the ante, pronouncing an inaugural “Decade of Disaster”—reprising a phrase once used for the

nuclear 1980s—and from there a new “Age of Catastrophe” with a corresponding “Culture of Disaster.”⁵

Yet twenty-first-century catastrophism has also been derided by Slavoj Žižek and others as “the comfortable subjective position of radical intellectuals, best rendered by one of their favored mental exercises throughout the twentieth century: the urge to ‘catastrophize’ the situation.”⁶ Academic catastrophe discourse, in this view, is itself “an indication of prosperity.”⁷ What “intellectuals cannot bear is that they live a life that is basically happy, safe, and comfortable,” Žižek opines: “In order to justify their higher calling, they are obliged to construct a scenario of radical catastrophe.”⁸ This generalization surely fails to describe accurately the experiences of all academics; catastrophe is as unevenly experienced within the academy as it is outside of it. Žižek’s deeper point, though, is not that catastrophism is wrong or misplaced but that those who occupy the most privileged sites in the academy do not always “immediately experience the effects” of what we reflect upon; despite our intellectual catastrophism, “we do not *believe* it will really happen.”⁹ Thus the turn to what has been called “enlightened catastrophism,” in which—in an almost comical series of intellectual maneuvers—“we confront the disaster ... perceive it as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities ... upon which we then act today.”¹⁰ From this vantage, the contemporary moment is hardly different from the 1980s when Baudrillard described discourse of catastrophe as itself “*the catastrophe* [that] has already happened”—a foreclosure of other possibilities, a “destiny of signs.”¹¹ The current century—according to the late theorist of catastrophe Paul Virilio—calls for nothing less than an entire “University of Disaster” whose sole function would be to offer “MEA CULPA” for the “suicidal” drive of its knowledge projects.¹²

Suicidal in the long term, perhaps, but self-serving in the short: our neoliberal age marks the rise of what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism,” under which corporations increase their power by profiting from the very catastrophes in which they are often implicated, increasing the “slow violence” of inequality as they swoop in during and after spectacular, highly televised events.¹³ Moreover, the increasing spectacularity of climate change has made the discourse of catastrophe inevitable and perhaps indispensable in the last half-decade. As per a 2020 study on catastrophe and international order—written before the outbreak of the ecologically driven Covid pandemic—“Humanity appears to be rapidly approaching an age of disasters that may well rival or even surpass the periods of disruptions of previous periods of calamity.”¹⁴ The catastrophe paradigm is today everywhere all at once, but without it, argues Gillen Wood, “all climate politics are deluded.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, Dipesh Chakrabarty, warning that too narrow a focus on the political occludes our view of geological time, cites scientists who refer to this moment as a drift into “unparalleled catastrophes” that amount to “planeticide.”¹⁶ What

to call this era—Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chtulucene, Plantationocene, or Americocene—is up for debate, and the problems of naming signal disagreement not about the catastrophic nature of the moment, an unmistakable “period of concentrated epic crises,” but about how best to describe it, understand it, imagine it, take responsibility for it, and address it.¹⁷ Whether the frame of crisis is political or planetary, an increasing consensus has emerged across many disciplines and fields that contemporary academics are living in both dark times and end times, and that we have generated powerful, sometimes competing discourses of catastrophe to account for this.

Given both the urgency and the oversaturation of the moment, it may seem counterintuitive, even parochial, to draw attention to US literary catastrophism. Yet the deep timeframes and broad geographies of US-American literary catastrophism can help us to better understand phenomena such as “climate delusion” (as distinct from denialism) and “derangement,” and how they are linked both to the catastrophes that US military intervention has inflicted abroad and to the catastrophes of gun violence and chronic disease and avoidable suffering that set the US apart with grotesque irony from other high-income countries. For the dominant US imagination has always had a special and distinct purchase on catastrophe, as Poe’s ending to “The Premature Burial” slyly suggests by both proposing—and undermining—the idea that catastrophe has made his narrator a “new man.” In the US, modernity itself cannot be a catastrophe—Poe nearly winks while suggesting it—because catastrophe yields to resilience and indomitability for *someone*. This is the essential structure of biblical apocalypse: a fresh start, a new world, for the chosen. Even in the direst jeremiads, apocalypse is in this sense a form of elsewhere catastrophe. And so too American romance, the enduring US narrative genre: while nineteenth-century European realism invented a world in which disasters did not happen, American romance usually positioned its catastrophes elsewhere—on the frontier or upon the high seas—and then rescued its special orphans, its national Adams, to begin again.

This canonical storyline is distinct from but grew out of the colonial-Anglo-American literature of relentless affliction. Kathleen Donegan thus calls for an early Americanist understanding of catastrophe “not only as a descriptor of historical events but also as a critical concept through which to frame the ubiquity and intensity of writings” by English settlers beset by an “unremitting crisis of mass mortality” in early America.¹⁸ Early Anglo-American catastrophe is the discourse of “becoming colonial,” Donegan argues: the language of an emergent Creoleness stripped of its European moorings. The discourse of catastrophe registers the “miasma of suffering, violence, and abjection that belonged to coloniality itself” and that allowed English settlers to “evacuate a sense of agency” and a “sense of the real” from their terrifying and terrorizing occupation of Native lands.¹⁹ As Donegan puts it, “If we do not incorporate settlers’ suffering into a critical analysis of early colonialism, it remains untouched as a vehicle for national ideology.”²⁰

That national ideology began evolving even before the nation proper. As Sacvan Bercovitch once observed, the Puritans successfully transformed the Judeo-Christian interpretation of catastrophe—and Job-like responses of despair and questioning—into a form of “unshakable optimism” regarding God’s love for a chosen people: God’s punishments were “corrective, not destructive,” his catastrophic vengeance “a sign of love.”²¹ The US “culture of calamity,” as Kevin Rozario argues, figures disaster as blessing.²² Indeed, praising God *for* catastrophe seems on some level entirely American—or at least “American” construed narrowly as that part of the national sensibility distantly shaped by a Puritan legacy. After 9/11, the minister Jerry Falwell opined that terrorism was but an indirect cause for the events; the primary cause was divine correction of the US. As a society, “we make God mad,” he said, just before homing in on the bad actors: “[T]he pagans, the abortionists, the feminists, the gays and the lesbians, the ACLU ... I point the finger in their face and say, ‘you helped this happen.’”²³

This is not to suggest an unbroken line from the Puritans to Falwell, of course; it is the increasing “demoralization” of catastrophe from the eighteenth century on that makes such rhetorical opportunities possible, whether for a minister or a president.²⁴ But there *is* a distinctively US-American optimism at work in such interpretations of catastrophe as meaningful, content-laden, and overseen by a God who wants the nation to be better, however defined. This is why, as John Hay observes, “For those studying the history of American literature, apocalypse is simply unavoidable.”²⁵ And whether in its millennialist or millenarian strains, apocalyptic American literature tends to insist on the significance, particularly the national significance, of its various imagined endings.

How different this is from the French idea of *anéantissement* (annihilation, subjection into nothingness), which Huet describes as “a form of negativity” resulting from “a complex and intimate negotiation with the concept of disaster itself.”²⁶ No surprise that while Europe understood itself as psychologically devastated by World War I—“the great seminal catastrophe of [the twentieth] century,” as the former diplomat and Cold War historian George F. Kennan dubbed it—the US came to see itself as morally and mentally unscathed (all too easy after a later entry into the war and a smaller-scale loss of life and resources).²⁷ As David Reynolds has observed, US “moral superiority is misplaced, or at least a little blinkered,” given the catastrophic rupture of the American Civil War a half-century earlier.²⁸ But when the national mythology centers on regeneration through violence, to use Richard Slotkin’s powerful phrase, certain exceptionally outsized catastrophes are re-narrated and then endlessly remembered until they do generate moral superiority.²⁹ Moral superiority is the point in such cases, the justification for the event itself. Out of national apocalypse, “we” grow stronger. Meanwhile, other catastrophes continue to be felt and understood as happening elsewhere: either outside the nation, or figuratively outside, as when commentators during Hurricane Katrina kept saying that New Orleans looked like a “third-world country” and calling its

displaced citizens “refugees,” as if they had crossed national borders in fleeing the city. The short-lived media attention to the Gulf Coast after the hurricane reinforced this unshakable psychic investment in the impossibility of catastrophe in the here and now.

The narrator of Tommy Orange’s 2018 novel *There There* describes the enduring syndrome of elsewhere catastrophe in its current adaptation to a digital age:

As many times as it happens, as we see it happen on our screens, we still walk around in our lives thinking: No, not us, that happens to them, the people on the other side of the screen, the victims, their families, we don’t know those people, we’re once and twice removed from most of what we see on the other side of the screen, especially the awful man, always a man, we watch and feel the horror, the unbelievable act, for a day, for two whole days, we post and click links and like and don’t like and repost and then, then it’s like it didn’t happen, we move on, the next thing comes. We get used to everything to the point that we even get used to getting used to everything.³⁰

The collective voice narrating this passage details the particular twenty-first-century affective response to what is now the routine but still historically very new American scenario of catastrophe, the mass shooting: the repeated viewing on screens, the social media circulation and brutally abbreviated commentary (by which we are emotionally reduced to liking and not liking mass murder), the inability even of horror to hold our attention for more than a day or two of thumbing our phones.

Catastrophe may be very much here and now in popular discourse, as the rise of the term “doomscrolling” over the last half-decade suggests. But doomscrolling is itself, Orange suggests here, a symptom of the elsewhere catastrophe delusion. Even the ubiquitous phenomenon of the mass shooting is, by definition, an elsewhere catastrophe happening to “No, not us” but someone else in a distant virtual world: the people “on the other side of the screen.” This dynamic of disavowal envelops Orange’s wide public readership into the collective “we” of his mesmerizing narrator. But the collective, twenty-first-century voice narrating both the novel and its culminating catastrophe is also Indigenous, which puts the recognizably “American” response of the narrator in this passage at odds with another, simultaneous, and no less significant response: “We’ve expected the shooter to appear in our lives in the same way we know death is and always has been coming for us ... Something about it will make sense. The bullets have been coming for miles. Years” (141). This “we” marks a violence-born limit on the “we” of the novel’s broad readership—a reminder that, as Susan Sontag memorably put it, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.”³¹ Thus, the instability and mutability of Orange’s collective Indigenous narrator in reading

past, present, and future as an ongoing catastrophe born of “massacre as prologue” (8)—a continuous settler massacre that is a prologue to the US-American world.

In this “massacre as prologue” section of his novel, Orange presents the Sand Creek murder of 500 Cheyenne and Arapaho people, mostly women and children, by the US army in 1864—a catastrophe rendered perpetually elsewhere to a geography of remembrance at the center of which remains the Civil War. But Orange’s “massacre as prologue” also encompasses the English colonial atrocities with which he opens his novel and the postmodern symbols of Indigenous elimination he explores in sequences about television and the internet. In this sense, *There There* reads the dreamwork of US settler colonialism, revealing the peculiar national catastrophe of mass shooting through its origins in colonial desire and violence. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz puts it, “[k]illing, looting, burning, raping, and terrorizing Indians were traditions in each of the colonies long before the Constitutional Convention” pronounced the ownership of firearms as an individual right and the foundation of a now catastrophic national “gun culture” that is also a culture of elsewhere catastrophe.³²

But “massacre as prologue” tells a national story that is also insistently global—as suggests Orange’s epigraph, taken from Bertolt Brecht’s later Svendborg poems, written during his exile from Nazi Germany: “In the dark times / Will there be singing? / Yes, there will also be singing / About the dark times.”³³ *There There* is a novel about US Indigenous survivance in the twenty-first century that attests to the human capacity to sing in the face of, and about, catastrophe: to witness through art the colonial history of settler violence against Native people that shapes the contemporary US. Yet taking the fragment from Brecht as epigraph allows Orange to connect the genocidal aim of settler expansion to genocide within Europe itself, evoking a deep and entangled history of Western colonialism and race-making across the centuries before and after the Svendborg poems.³⁴ Nazism was invented by colonialism, a powerful strand of anticolonial thought has suggested, and then sustained by centuries of Western thought. As Aimé Césaire put it in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, the West not only “tolerated” Nazism but also “absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until [the Holocaust], it had been applied only to non-European peoples.”³⁵ To put this another way: Césaire argues that the colonizing of the non-European world was the foundational elsewhere catastrophe to shape modern thought in the West. In calling for recognition of a fundamental relation between the Holocaust and these earlier “dark times,” Césaire and Orange both ask us to examine the parameters around what has been deemed catastrophic and what has not.

In this sense, elsewhere catastrophe may be a form of what Christina Sharpe has called “Memory for Forgetting”: memory of the Holocaust, for example, when it enables forgetting that, as Sharpe puts it, “Transatlantic slavery was and is the disaster.”³⁶ Or memory of slavery when it enables forgetting the catastrophic genocide and dispossession of Indigenous people. Or memory of an essentially

Columbian story, beginning in 1492, rather than a half-century earlier, in western Africa of 1441, when Portuguese traders first seized and enslaved Indigenous Africans from what is today Mauritania. “Conquest begins before Columbus,” as Tiffany Lethabo King observes in a powerful return to the late twentieth-century scholarship of Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers. But King’s point is not to decenter Indigenous slavery and genocide in the Americas by invoking priority. Rather, it is to “shoal the linear and normative treatment of conquest in the Americas,” and to resist approaching catastrophe within a framework of firstness (*which world-ending came earlier?*) by recognizing the deep entanglement of history’s multiple nightmares. *Conquest* is thus a term that King prefers to the now ubiquitous framework of settler colonialism, which she argues persuasively has become dominant precisely by displacing Black as well as Native American and Indigenous forms of critique—and by “disavow[ing] the violent ways that settler human self-actualization depends on the most violent forms of Black and Indigenous death.”³⁷

If Slotkin’s descriptor for this process of self-actualization—regeneration through violence—attended to the myth-making dimensions of settler culture, the concept of elsewhere catastrophe can help illuminate how and why that violence confirms the rightness and the essential non-disastrousness of the here and how. Elsewhere catastrophe emerges from a dense convergence of historical, theological, philosophical, and ultimately ecological ideas that can be named—without being dislodged or *unfelt*—by the “we” who occupy varying degrees of privilege and mere safety. Perhaps even the extent to which we are currently saturated by the discourse of catastrophe is itself a manifestation of elsewhere catastrophe as “we” try to feel and react to information calling into question centuries of teaching that disaster may be happening, but not right here today to me or mine.

To take one all too obvious example, Faulkner could tell the world in his Nobel speech that the atomic age had introduced “a general and universal physical fear” that left “only the question: When will I be blown up?” But he could not fathom what there was to learn from those who lived and endured with a sense of unsafety that long preceded the atom bomb. So he informed young writers in his Nobel speech that “the basest of all things is to be afraid” and urged them to “forget ... forever” the fear of implosion. He invited the next generation to “refuse to accept” any vision of a future in which “the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening.” For, as he famously put it, “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.”³⁸

In the face of atomic catastrophe, Faulkner’s full-throated universalism nevertheless expressed something profoundly US-American, or at least it did to one devoted Latin American reader, Gabriel García Márquez, who named himself a literary descendant. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reworked the Faulknerian premise that “the past is ... not even passed” while also offering an account of how the US inflicts catastrophe elsewhere.³⁹ It can also be read as an extended rebuke of

the maestro's refusal of catastrophism in his Nobel speech. If Faulker "decline[d] to agree with end of man" in that speech, García Márquez wrote a whole novel of catastrophes leading up to that very revelation: not humans but the ants prevail in a long catastrophe of the here and now.⁴⁰ Because no one will admit the violence committed by the founders of the country and then perpetuated across the centuries by their descendants—violence against the Indigenous, the Black, the poor, and above all against the women in of all these groups—there is no regeneration possible, no "second opportunity on earth."⁴¹ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* ends with the world of Macondo blown into oblivion by devouring winds.

The winds blow powerfully in Latin American and Caribbean literature.⁴² But the figure that most disturbs the national US fantasy of elsewhere catastrophe is geological rather than atmospheric. That the earth can never be still or stable is a fact of science but also an enduring source of cognitive dissonance in the settler psyche. This is why earthquake in the US must be forgotten, absorbed into disaster amnesia, and then refigured as elsewhere—especially, when it strikes there, as inherently Latin American.

"Ours Is Not One of the Lands of Earthquake"

In 1869, a quarter-century after Poe's "Premature Burial," a now obscure historian and magazine contributor named Eugene Lawrence wrote a long article for *Harper's* that exemplifies both the style and the phenomenological effects of elsewhere catastrophe as national delusion. Titled "The Lands of the Earthquake," Lawrence's essay represents but one of many such earthquake pieces offered to northeastern US readers by literary establishment periodicals in the half-century following the end of the Civil War.⁴³ US readers shared this earthquake obsession with their Victorian counterparts across the Atlantic, as Deborah Coen has shown, and earthquake literature was itself a subset of a wider modern interest in "dead cities" shaping the Western imagination from the mid-eighteenth century on.⁴⁴ But in the post-bellum US, following the implosion of the vast system of live entombment in Poe's story, the literature of disaster continued to have its own character, soon developing what Sheila Hones has called a "Gilded-Age fascination with catastrophes" centered on "sensational but distant natural disasters" for the consumption of an elite northeastern reading community.⁴⁵ The US penchant was for elsewhere catastrophes, in other words: spectacular and frightening but far away. Storms, fires, lightning strikes, and floods were popular topics, but the rending of the earth by volcanoes and earthquakes was by far the elsewhere disaster of choice.

In Lawrence's essay, earthquake is a strange, paradoxical figure both for a grand global history out of which the US emerges as a culmination and for a geological impossibility in the future nation. From the outset, Lawrence defines earthquake

as “the most terrible of destroyers”: worse than “the fierce hurricane that sweeps land and sea, the pestilence that walks by night, [and] the famine with all its dread attendants” (L 466). Setting earthquake apart from all other catastrophes, Lawrence seems on at least some level also to want to claim it, especially in its distinction from the sea-borne hurricane. While the “hurricane is slow, [and] the conflagration dull,” the rending of the ground, with “the wonderful speed of its universal ruin,” has a distinct capacity for spectacle and art, for “the very height of sublimity and horror” (L 466–467). In fact, “the poetry of the earthquake”—“more wild and fearful than Dante ever ventured upon or Milton ever dreamed”—seems to promise special distinction for the literary tradition that learns to claim it (L 467).

Yet literature must also compensate, in Lawrence’s view, for the failures of science, and implicitly political science, to control such ruptures. As he sees it, the logical investigations undertaken throughout history have only increased the fearsomeness of earthquake: “Neither science nor observation, not the wise philosopher nor the presuming empiric, has succeeded in laying down any laws by which the dread destroyer consents to be bound” (L 467). Meanwhile, nineteenth-century ideas about earthquake—“the theory adopted by modern philosophers” such as Humboldt—make matters even worse: “It is asserted that the round globe which we inhabit is merely a thin crust of solid matter enclosing a sphere of molten fire; that we live on the outside of an inflamed ball, which has a constant tendency to explode.” Earthquake thus expresses a state of existential terror, opening a yawning conceptual gap between what is felt and what is known: between the seeming solidity and certainty of the ground and the unseen forces that threaten to break through a thin and always uncertain crust: “the restless fires [that] now and then succeed in making rifts in the outer crusts ... [and] when checked in their subterranean courses, shake the solid earth in their rage and overwhelm the pride of nations” (L 467).

Lawrence’s description captures some of the ambiguities of earthquake science in the nineteenth century before the wide availability of seismographs dramatically changed the field of inquiry in the early twentieth. In nineteenth-century Europe, scientists began to understand earthquakes as geologic events that could be studied through attention to human emotions and feelings in the body during seismic upheaval.⁴⁶ Such a development required scientists not only to observe themselves experiencing earthquake but also to encourage other kinds of people to become what Coen calls “earthquake observers,” or citizen scientists, issuing reports from around the world. These earthquake observers yielded truths about the vibrating ground that later twentieth-century scientists, bent on creating “a quantitative, objective [discipline] modeled on physics,” ignored to the detriment of earth science. The result, as Coen argues, was a serious setback in “working knowledge of the geography of seismic hazard” and the continued mystery of “intraplate earthquakes,” still largely incomprehensible even to experts.⁴⁷

As Lawrence's essay suggests, moreover, earthquakes abounded in the nineteenth century as both newly interpreted geological events and as choice metaphors for upheavals in thought or politics that could strike "prideful nations." The discursive interweave of the metaphorical and the more than metaphorical could thus be dense and self-perpetuating. As Coen puts it, "the world became shakier in the nineteenth century" both because of "precipitous, dizzying change" and because "the earth was caught trembling more than before."⁴⁸ The context of Victorian Britain provides its own telling example of the metaphorical-literal relay in meaning: as English writers argued over whether their island had immunity from what Charles Dickens in 1860 called "the most sudden, the most irresistible, the most destructive of nature's powers"—a dispute that would seem to have been settled by the powerful earthquake that struck in 1863—the instability of British imperialism inflected discussions of geology.⁴⁹ Or perhaps it was vice versa: as Coen observes, "It was a remarkably quick leap from recognizing that England was not immune to earthquakes to sensing the fragility of the British empire."⁵⁰

In Lawrence's post-bellum essay, in which earthquake has a "raging" affect and strikes according to a Westphalian logic, there is not so much a relay of meaning between the Civil War and the rending of national ground as there is an outright denial, as his discussion unfolds, that the US can ever be, no matter how many seismic events to the contrary, one of the so-called lands of the earthquake. Lawrence limns the "moral effects of earthquake" by summarizing some of the common tenets of environmental determinism in the nineteenth century: that the "children of the lands of the earthquake" lack "national vigor," "make their life a dream," bear the "instincts of crime," and suffer from "deadened" intellect (L 472). As Lawrence lists confirming examples drawn from Peru, Portugal, and Italy, he grows more unqualified in his assertions: "Virtue can flourish only on the rugged mountains of the north; philosophy is the offspring of a composed and easy mind; literature flies from the torrid heats of the tropics to flourish only in the temperate zone" (L 473).

Such premises regarding the relationship between environment and human capacities go back as far as classical Greece but emerge under the sign of the tropics during the sixteenth-century European race for empire. As Lawrence's account suggests, earthquake becomes a central component of this lasting environmental discourse—which justifies a morally and intellectually superior North in its centuries-long project of extraction from a broadly constituted tropical South. Yet the essay's unnamed but most proximate South is of course the former Confederacy, the plantation South in which the extraction of labor and life from Black bodies constituted a live entombment followed, as "The Premature Burial" predicted, by what Morrison once called "a cataclysmic race war," a rending of the civil ground. This cataclysmic US South—inhumanly extractive, also extracted from—must be by definition one of the "lands of the earthquake," but Lawrence

dares not speak its name. Instead, he backs away from his own climatological clichés—"History refutes them: nature defies the limitation of genius; intellect flourishes in every clime" (L 473)—to remake the category of the South itself.

His new examples—now supporting a supposed counterargument to environmental determinism—go back to the classical West as a paradoxical, original South. Lawrence now insists that "Homer was a tropical production" and therefore that "it is to the children of the earthquake lands ... that we owe all our mental progress": the very "foundations of European and American progress" (L 473). From Homer, Lawrence skims quickly over the Renaissance ("Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Michel Angelo, Raffaele") to arrive at the Portuguese "circumnavigation of Africa" and the "Spanish queen" and "Genoese sailor" who "opened America to the world ... and decided the destiny of man" (L 473). Within this triumphant historical narrative—in which the South that matters becomes the West—Lawrence can affirm that "Earthquakes, indeed, are the common heritage of man" (L 473). Earthquake no longer enacts the chastening of "prideful nations"—or the sundering of the US state—but instead emblazons the dawning European empire that invents the figure of the human as European man.⁵¹

Indeed, earthquakes are so indelibly tied to the modern emergence of empire in Lawrence's account that it is only after "the discovery of the East and the West that the earth began to unfold its terrible mysteries" of seismicity (L 471). According to this trajectory, the classical earthquake history of the Greek and Roman empires yields to the sublime earthquake history of the Americas—"the long line of blazing peaks that adorn the Cordilleras of the Andes, and the fierce shocks that in the New World made whole continents tremble" (L 471). Lawrence so closely associates earthquakes with the European conquest of the American hemisphere that he arrives at an entire "chronology of earthquakes from the discovery of America"—occurring not just in the New World but in China, the Middle East, and even in Europe, which "seems never to have suffered from them in ancient times with any unusual severity" (L 471). The history of European empire is a global and quite literal history of earthquakes.

This latent imperial context is part and parcel of Lawrence's strange narrative of the major earthquake to occur in the nineteenth-century US: "the great convulsion [that] passed over the American continent and seas" in 1811 and 1812 (L 473). Now known as the New Madrid earthquakes—named for the major fault system, the seismic zone, and the Missouri city at the epicenter of the most powerful earthquakes in US history—these nineteenth-century rendings have largely disappeared from popular national and historical memory, despite the fact that they were felt across the continent—"terrifying the citizens of Washington or New York," as Lawrence puts it elliptically—as they remade the entire physical landscape of the southern mid-West (L 473). The historian Conevery Bolton Valencius has observed that most people in the US and even those living in the middle Mississippi Valley today are for the most part unaware of the history of these

earthquakes and have been for about two centuries: as she puts it, “We walk along the deceptively smooth surfaces of the New Madrid seismic zone in ignorance and unconcern.”⁵² Coen asks, “How is it possible for a natural disaster to remake an entire region, physically and socially—and yet to be erased from history within two generations?”⁵³ But this “lost history” of the New Madrid earthquakes was not at all unknown to Lawrence in 1867—and his account of these ruptures tells us much about how such forgetting was not only possible but also entirely willful.

In 1811, Lawrence begins, “almost every part of the United States was shaken by an earthquake.” It was a broadly “ominous year” and indeed “a year of terror,” during which comets and hurricanes and great snows portended imminent disaster (L 480). Yet the rending of the earth was by far, he concludes, the most dreaded phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, when the “chief alarm that brooded over men’s minds was the consciousness that the earth beneath them was in commotion” (L 480). The geological bespeaks the geopolitical in this account, which is why it begins not in the earthquake’s epicenter but in the nation’s capital, where “houses were shaken, and doors and windows rattled, men grew sick and giddy, and furniture trembled in the rooms.” From there, Lawrence travels, as if he could track the earthquake distinctly southward, to Richmond, where “the bells rang in the houses, and the people rose in terror,” and then to Columbia, South Carolina, and on to Charleston, Savannah, and Louisville (L 480). Lawrence sketches the earthquake’s felt presence, that is, across the unstable geography of slavery. Then he turns westward, to Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois, to gesture at the earthquake terrors of Native-held lands—“the Indians told how they had seen the lakes boiling and foaming amidst the prairies”—before circling back to note ominously that “the fresh springs of Kentucky were tainted with sulphur” (L 480). On the Mississippi River, boats are “tossed about as if on the ocean,” the watery route of the national slave trade collapsing into that of the Middle Passage. The alluvial plain around New Madrid is “shaken, cracked, distorted,” leaving its settlers to spend “all winter encamped upon the high ground,” as the land on which the town lies “[sinks] twelve feet,” swallowed back into the earth (L 481).

Lawrence’s earthquake narrative thus traverses both the territories formerly vulnerable to slave revolution and those in an ongoing state of settler colonial fragility. And yet as the essay reaches its culmination, he insists against all evidence to the contrary that earthquake is virtually un-American, in the nationalist US sense of the term. Indeed, the purported un-Americanness of earthquake seems inversely related to the essential Latin Americanness of catastrophe. Which is perhaps why Lawrence’s detailed account of the massive New Madrid rendings transforms into a story of non-earthquake when he compares these events to the Caracas earthquake that struck Venezuela in 1812. Imbuing geological rupture with latent spiritual and political intention, Lawrence describes a traveling earthquake that “sport[ed] ... gently with the cities of our dawning republic”—held

in check by “a guardian Providence still[ing] the fiery waves of the restless earth”—before turning punitively toward the despotic “lands of the south” to “expend ... its fiercest rage” (L 481). The chastening earthquake is back, but it is neither the geological New Madrid rupture nor the political event of the Civil War.

“Will the earthquake in all its terrors ever visit us?” asks Lawrence in conclusion, as if no earthquake ever had. The question opens a series of further and ostensibly counterfactual questions: “Will our cities ever be shorn of their prosperity, reduced to heaps of crumbling ruins ...? Is New York ever to be humbled as was commercial Lisbon in the last century ...? Must San Francisco become a new Callao [Peru], and sink into a mound of sand beneath the raging waves of the treacherous Pacific?” (L 482). The answer is unequivocally negative. San Francisco is secure against earthquake, promises Lawrence, and the North Pacific “as [safe as] the coast of England.” More broadly, the US nation transcends the category of earthquake altogether: for “[h]istory ... assures us that ours is not one of the lands of the earthquake; that our exemption from its terrors is as certain as that the seasons will not vary or the summer fail to come” (L 482).

Lawrence is not the first to sound such a note of earthquake oblivion—of the forgetting of earthquake in the US and the outright denial of its possible occurrence. Instead, his essay provides a striking example of a larger phenomenon explored in the second half of this book: the long arc of earthquake forgetting by which the shaking ground of colonial existence became the purported geological stillness of nationally bounded territory. Earthquake oblivion is both a geological register of national amnesia—of the forgetting of slavery and colonialism, of past and ongoing imperial forms of violence—and a denial of the inherent fragility of the settler state. If the Civil War is the unspoken political earthquake looming in the background of Lawrence’s essay, the discourse of elsewhere catastrophe allows him to silently refigure that cataclysm—like settler colonialism and slavery themselves—as an exceptional catastrophic event cordoned off in the past. That past is colonial and earthquake-ridden—and it belongs to the Latin American present: to what Lawrence calls “the Peruvian consciousness that his dread destroyer is always near” (L 481–482). Meanwhile, the national US present and future will remain perpetually unmoved: for “He who holds the earthquake in check has ordained that we may do His work unimpeded by the perpetual horror that broods over other lands” (L 482). We might also call it the work of elsewhere catastrophe, the discourse embedded so clearly here in the US nation’s relation to a broad hemispheric South.

Peru was hit with an earthquake in 1868, the year before Lawrence’s essay appeared. US companies donated relief money to its victims and circulated publicity about “American” beneficence toward an earthquake-ridden land. But these shows of humanitarianism were also self-interested, for Peru was by then a leading importer of US industrial steel and was also providing the labor to create

modernizing railroads that would profit US businesses. These companies did not want their transportation project stalled or their exportation income slowed in the wake of the disaster. Even as they publicized their relief projects, these *yanqui* investors were busy bribing Peruvian government leaders into accepting a staggering burden for their country: taking on massive foreign debt to continue building the railroad. US humanitarianism in the face of Latin American catastrophe was in fact a form of economic imperialism, and eventually imploded Peru's economy and laid the groundwork for the devastating War of the Pacific in 1879.⁵⁴ The "lands of the earthquake," in other words, held not only symbolic but also literal value for investment and profit by the US. These disaster-prone lands were made so in part by powerful figuration—including the corresponding register of US earthquake oblivion and the imaginative work of elsewhere catastrophe.

The Trembling World

Édouard Glissant once wrote that in the Caribbean, "We do not dare admit we like hurricanes. They bring us so much. The periodic shudder originating out there in the sea, the announcement that follows that we're an official 'disaster area.'"⁵⁵ The hurricane is thus a primordial reminder of something universal—the shudder of natural change—and, also, a recurring signpost for the "official," state-sponsored US discourse of Caribbean disaster: prime evidence that catastrophe is elsewhere. What hurricanes bring to the Caribbean, Glissant suggests, is both awe in the face of the natural world and an enduring historical irony. The discourse of Caribbean disaster, that is, occludes the related and far greater catastrophe of an ongoing coloniality that shapes even the effects of the "natural" disaster caused by the hurricane.

If hurricanes carry irony, Glissant avows that earthquakes—their catastrophic twin—bring instead fear and incomprehension: "Earthquakes terrify us," he writes, because they are "neither annual nor decennial," come with "no warning," and are "too brief to be understood." He adds as if in an afterthought that earthquakes "sometimes cause ... too much damage" (C 244). Of course, the latter is also true of hurricanes, just as it is also the case that the damage caused by earthquake is often made more catastrophic by the historical effects of colonialism. No wonder, then, that both hurricane and earthquake have long figured the violence of hemispheric history, the "fukú—the Curse and Doom of the New World," as Junot Díaz would call it, that stands in stark opposition to the discourse of special exemption from calamity and terror (see [chapter 2](#)). And, indeed, it is earthquake that prompts Glissant's aesthetic and philosophical considerations regarding the true state of the world—a state that is vehemently denied and displaced by not only the logic but also the essential literary form of elsewhere catastrophe. "All mimesis

presumes that what is represented is the only ‘true reality,’” Glissant pronounces: “Mimesis operates like an earthquake. There is something in it that we struggle against” (C 244).

If Glissant’s entire oeuvre struggles with the limits of mimesis—with an insistence on one reality—the philosopher-poet suggests here that there is something inherently Caribbean in the resistance to this broadly realist aesthetic mode: “we remain bewildered by it” (C 244). Yet, for Glissant, mimesis is also itself catastrophic, operating *like* an earthquake, because it constructs an ordered world that has no correspondence to, and denies the existence of, the experience of what he calls “peoples who have been to the abyss.” The abyss holds an ancient place in Western theology and philosophy as both the dark domain of Satan and the infinite chasm of the insensible: the vertiginous pit of unknowability toward which the philosophizing mind will wander only to draw back in fear and horror.⁵⁶ Yet as the modern world-system began to emerge, avoidance of the abyss struck some as cowardice and missed opportunity. As Thomas Hobbes wrote in his “Letter to the Reader” of *De Corpore*, “If you want to be a serious philosopher, your reason must conquer the abyss of your muddled thoughts and experiments. Disordered things must be shattered, parsed, and organized by proper names.” Confrontation with the abyss brought about a new and God-like power: “that is, a method is required suitable to the creation of these things themselves.”⁵⁷

Nodding at the broad philosophical tradition of the abyss, Glissant’s reference also grounds the concept in deep historical experience: for “peoples who have been to the abyss” are those Caribbean subjects who have lived the exigencies of colonialism and slavery and their afterlives, people for whom the abyss of nothingness and unknowability is not abstract. For these people, Glissant contends, mimesis means “living in a permanent state of the unreal.” On the other hand, the very existence of this all-too-historical “abyss” in turn challenges the fantasy of a smooth surface, an unbroken and settled earth, that defines a dominant US register of elsewhere catastrophe. For the abyss throws into sharp relief a certain US continental presumption: “Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force ... [They] do not live on exception.”⁵⁸ Earthquakes therefore also invite a particular relationship to depth—to the reality of the abyss—that is at once historical and philosophical. Earthquake embodies Glissant’s maxim that Caribbean “history is spread out beneath [the] surface” of landscape, “from the mountains to the sea, from north to south, from the forest to the beaches” (C 11). Only by exploring the “underside” of the landscape can its true meaning be understood, for in the depths beneath the earth’s surface “is all history” (C 11).

Earthquake is a reminder and a deep amplification of what Glissant calls “the trembling world”—by which he means not merely the earth’s state of seismic activity but the state of peoples subjected to extreme suffering, the state of the abyss.

To think from the Caribbean, Glissant suggests, is to be inherently “linked to the trembling world”: to be in a state of consciousness such that “something somewhere breaks free of someone’s suffering and comes to rest in us” (C 2). The Caribbean apprehension of the “trembling world”—the apprehension of “[t]he salt of death on exhausted men” and “[t]he devastation of entire peoples”—is in this sense the trembling ground of relation itself: the consciousness of relation (and the “poetics of relation” that Glissant would elaborate in his book of that title) (C 2). Consciousness of relation, a method rather than a mystical state of being, is in turn part of the basis for what Glissant calls his “philosophy of trembling”: the “archipelagic thought ... that itself trembles as a result of [the world’s] trembling.”⁵⁹

As a philosophy of the trembling world, archipelagic thought offers a profound rejoinder to US continental thinking and its presumption of exception rather than relation—and of the earth’s solidity rather than its rending. US continental thinking derives more broadly from the assumptions of European thought, from a Western historical consciousness that, Glissant argues, is “deposited gradually and continuously, like sediment.” Warning that this consciousness “frequently produced a totalitarian view of history,” Glissant invites readers to consider an ancient Western preference for surfaces over depth (C 62): “We remember that Plato ... distrusted the fathomless word,” the “abyssal word” (P 21). Plato distrusted the language of the depths, in Glissant’s view, because he “understood the power of Myth, [and] had hoped to banish the poets, those who force obscurity, far from the Republic” (P 21).

As a philosophical figure abstracted from a geographical event, the rending of the earth also “force[s] obscurity” into view, both creating and revealing the abyss that, according to Glissant, Plato distrusts. Glissant therefore defines Plato’s story of Atlantis—a story about earthquake and the sinking of a people into the literal depths—as “the oldest dream of Western culture” (C 224). Or perhaps we should call it the oldest nightmare, a nightmare of the fate that had to be avoided at all costs even as the dreamer began in waking life to create such ruptures elsewhere. Indeed, for Glissant, who limns the subterranean connections linking Plato and plantation modernity, the story of Atlantis is inextricably linked to the peoples putatively without rupture who inherited his philosophy, then transformed it into a philosophical world-system for extracting the wealth of the earth while denying the abyss they created, thereby naturalizing their own violence and domination. The plantation may have been the birthplace of modernity—“This is the only sort of universality there is: when, from a specific enclosure, the deepest voice cries out”—but Glissant repeatedly urged readers to return to the oldest Western sources in search of the “abyssal word” and the “fathomless word” that were repressed in order to create history itself as “a highly functional fantasy of the West” (P 74, 21; C 64). Plato’s earthquakes have a venerable place in shaping that fantasy.

Plato's Earthquakes

To associate Plato's thought with earthquakes may seem at first counterintuitive. His student Aristotle had more to say about the phenomenon as a matter of natural history, devoting a long discussion in the *Meteorologica* to his influential theory of their origins and causes.⁶⁰ And yet in Plato's most renowned work, the *Republic*, the serious philosophical consideration of justice begins and ends with earthquake—connecting the Ring of Gyges to the concluding Myth of Er in an arc of breaking earth.⁶¹ Readers encounter an opened earth three times in the *Republic*, the first in Book II, soon after Plato's older brother, Glaucon, tells Socrates the story of Gyges the shepherd as a way to investigate the nature of just behavior when unobserved (*Republic* II, 359d). Will any man live justly, Glaucon famously asks, in the absence of viewers to praise or condemn his actions? Readers may be less likely to remember, though, that earthquake sets in motion the story and its questions. Gyges is in a field with his flock when the rending occurs, creating an opening in the earth that provokes his curiosity, and ultimately his moral lapse. We might call it a literal and psychological chasm, for when Gyges descends within it, he finds the totemic ring of invisibility, the call to dark desire (*Republic* II, 359b–360e). The earthquake thus inaugurates the test of Gyges's propensity—and also that of Socrates and his interlocutors—for just behavior. For as the shepherd goes down the chasm, readers too must plumb the depths of temptation: the will to steal, rape, murder, and seize power over others.

Indeed, these are Gyges's first actions after the earthquake, and they lead directly to his own good fortune, and thereby to Glaucon's premise that the life of the unjust is happier and better than the life of the just. Socrates of course rejects this proposition—but the earthquake's revelation of a chasm in this inaugural story of injustice cannot be altogether bridged. Socrates must work so hard to tether just actions to happiness and human flourishing that he later returns his interlocutors to the scene of a similar opening in the earth: the allegory of the cave (*Republic* VII, 514b–520d). There will be no ring of invisibility this second time; this story is not about a free agent with a will to power. Instead, it concerns men who are in chains and always have been; their cave of enslavement is all they know, until one of them happens to get free. The chasm now has a chastening role, teaching Socrates's listeners that they are no better than slaves—that all existence is bondage and blighted vision without proper philosophy. The earthly happiness secured by Glaucon's plunderers recedes quietly from view. Relative to the singular truth of the cosmos, Socrates claims, we all live beneath and not upon the earth: our mortal knowledge of justice can only be imperfect. Without careful discipline of the body and mind, people remain, as they deserve to be, in chains, unenlightened, and worthy only of suffering.

The *Republic* concludes with a final rending of the earth, this time bringing with it an abiding optimism for those who dedicate themselves to philosophy. All souls,

Socrates explains in recounting the Myth of Er, are born of an earthquake, which drives them upward toward their new lives on the surface of the earth (*Republic* X, 621b). Before they are born, these souls have chosen their own forms of being and thereby their own destinies—and only the truly philosophical among them have chosen wisely. These philosophical beneficiaries have pursued justice in past lives and will continue to pursue it in future ones, and they live lives of well-being and great favor—beloved by the gods and their fortunate peers—while they wait like conquerors, like the winners of epic games, for an afterlife of even greater reward. The catastrophic event of the earthquake thus marks a new beginning—and it brings great happiness and fortune for some and terrible, unspeakable suffering for others. But we have all ourselves pre-selected our own fates, Socrates says, and we have no right to blame anyone but ourselves, least of all the gods. There is no need to commit crimes, as Gyges does, because those who live like conquerors are born destined to do so and deserving of all they enjoy (*Republic* X, 613d–621c).

One of the *Republic's* legacies to the Western tradition, then, is a theodicy of earthquake: an attempt to explain how suffering, injustice, misfortune, and catastrophe can exist in the world despite the existence of “gods who are just” (*Republic* I, 352b). This earthquake theodicy justifies stark inequality; it is of course rooted in slavery and a highly stratified ancient world—and as such it offers a justification for the uneven distribution of freedom and unfreedom, wealth and poverty, happiness and pain, dignity and indignity, good fortune and calamity. Plato recounts this philosophical defense of inequality, this elaboration of the “forms of theology” that will uphold slavery, from an ambiguous distance, allowing us to see the sidestepping and double-gesturing in which Socrates must engage to arrive philosophically where he finally does (*Republic* II, 379a). Nevertheless, the intricate religious cosmology with which the *Republic* explains the universe, its origins, and the apportionment of flourishing and catastrophe across humanity—the unfolding of stable life or of shattering earthquake—remains at its heart a discursive system for managing unfree labor.

The *Republic* begins with the touch of a nameless slave and ends with a pronouncement of the imperishable soul. The two moments are silently but profoundly connected—and so too are the institution of slavery and the immaterialist philosophy inextricably linked in Socrates's account. The imperishable soul depends on the unifying metaphor of slavery, on the soul's mastery over the slavish body, for its very existence. And yet literal slavery, the institution of slavery, holds a quiet threat for the master class whom philosophy would serve, as Plato reminds us by beginning the *Republic* the way he does. Polemarchus sends his young slave to stop Socrates and his group from leaving the port city of Piraeus, and the boy takes hold of the philosopher's coat, detaining him on behalf of his master. During the conversation that ensues, the act of the nameless slave's touch emerges more clearly as a form of detention: Polemarchus notes that he owns more men and can

use force to keep Socrates and his interlocutors from leaving. The politeness of the enslaved boy notwithstanding, the threat of potential violence embodied in his initial touch lingers as the scene unfolds (*Republic* I, 327a ff.). For if the enslaved can enact violence on behalf of their masters, they can also enact it against them—a problem that Socrates will address directly later in the text when he describes slave revolution as an agony of terror, in which the wealthy owner of slaves finds himself robbed of his laborers and facing punishment and death at their hands (*Republic* VIII, 551d ff.).

If the violent revolt of the enslaved in the *Republic* is a metaphor for exploring the actions of a hypothetical tyrant, the possibility of slave revolution was also a reality of life in this moment. When the Socrates-like Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws* describes slave revolts in Sparta, he is referring to a historical event, not an abstraction. Moreover, according to the earliest historical accounts, this notorious uprising of the Helots was sparked by a seismic event, the Sparta earthquake of 464 BCE, later described by Plutarch as “the greatest earthquake that was known in the memory of man” and by the first-century historian Diodorus Seculus as a moment when “some god ... was wreaking his anger” upon the city.⁶² In the recent memory of Athens, then, earthquake does not figure merely the submerged and the merely apparent; it constitutes both a geological and a political reality—a moment when “the earth opened into chasms” and the Helots “took [it] as the opportunity to revolt” for the next ten years.⁶³ In classical Sparta as in the early modern and contemporary Americas explored throughout this book, earthquake and subaltern revolution go hand in hand. These are the ancient Western origins of earthquake's disavowed meaning: it both metaphorically figures, and historically catalyzes, a political possibility that must be made unthinkable to preserve the status quo upon which slave-owning classes depend.

In Plato's moment, the disavowal or unthinking of earthquake's potential meaning culminates in the original “noble lie” of classical politics, the myth of the metals, recounted in Book III (415a–b). As Plato explains, it is Socrates who devises the myth, and who claims to feel reluctant and even ashamed when he explains it to Glaucon and Adeimantus. Nevertheless, what he presents them with through his “audacious fiction” is a bare-faced plan for the sustenance of political power. The citizens of the ideal republic, he explains, will be tricked into believing that their true origin—as in the allegory of the cave—is within the earth rather than above it. But this origination in the earth is not a state of mental bondage to be strained against with all the force idealism can muster; it is rather the very source of all kinship that matters.

The citizens will thus be told “that their youth was a dream”—that they came not from human birth or the parents and teachers who raised them but have lived unconsciously below the earth, “in the womb of the earth,” nourished and formed there by their true but unknown mother. The citizens will learn of their true birth only that “when they were completed, the earth, their mother, sent them up”—up and through the surface, above the subterranean world. Implicit in the myth's

account, that is, is a breaking open or rending of the earth—a rending that allows for every citizen's birth and that is the near opposite of the kind of earthquake that catalyzes slave revolution. One might even suppose that the “noble lie” itself is a response to such revolution-bearing earthquakes and tries to manage their interpretation. For the point of Socrates's myth is to stabilize the shifting grounds of political reality by revealing a subterranean truth—a newly realized kinship—that calls for endless stasis. To achieve this, the myth first naturalizes feelings of loyalty to a country—as the earth is their mother, “so their country [is] their mother”—and to those people who are regarded as its citizens. As the country is their mother, citizens must see in their fellow citizens a similar form of kinship, regarding them as children of the earth and indeed their own brothers, a family to be defended at all costs against outsiders.

In Plato's telling, Socrates's listeners regard the proposed myth with a touch of horror, and they are right to do so. For what it suggests is the literal grounding of the ideal republic not in respect for shared laws and pursuit of the common good but in the violent demarcation of territory. At the same time, the myth of the metals is a founding myth of slavery, and an instruction manual for how unfree labor is to be managed and maintained. Citizens will be taught from birth that they are made up of the earth's differing ores—gold, silver, iron, and bronze—and thereby destined to different kinds of labor and hierarchical ranks of value and honor. The ruling class is to be recognized by its golden essence; the military class that enforces rule is made up of silver. Hierarchical stasis will be passed down generationally—perpetuated in the children (for “you will breed after your kinds,” the myth enjoins [*Republic* III, 415a])—and will be preserved vigilantly by a warrior class of guardians, trained to suppress slave insurrection, fight against enemies, and secure above all the so-called purity of the race. Plato thus reveals through Socrates how the twinned ideals of citizenship and enslavement might be authorized by an appeal to the earth—naturalized by the myth of the metals, just as are the exclusions upon which citizenship's conceptual inclusiveness depends. Slavery itself is built upon this noble lie, which metaphorically grounds the citizen's difference—as children of the earth—from those who have been captured in foreign countries and enslaved.⁶⁴

Socrates attributes his myth of the metals to an old Phoenician tale: an imaginative creation in effect subordinated to the authority of Plato's prose to make a set of arguments. This subordination is itself crucial to upholding the ideal republic, which will be predicated on the dominant rule of philosophy, which famously requires that poets be banished and fictional narrators subject to manipulation and careful control lest they propound unsuitable ideas. Indeed, the arts more broadly spell trouble. Based as they are in the representation or imitation of life, they threaten the larger prevailing order of society's ideas: “the imitative art is an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring” (*Republic* III, 407d). The eugenic metaphor bespeaks the interlinked problems of literary interpretation and the reproduction of slavery. Like the democracy Socrates reviles, literary meaning

is also open to broad election. If not properly controlled by the logic of argument, it too can produce the “strong wine of freedom,” intoxicating its partakers, and inviting citizens and foreigners and enslaved populations into new and confusing mixtures (*Republic* VIII, 562d). Philosophy must prevail over literature in any republic founded on the labor of the unfree. And it must also do so to uphold the theodicy of slavery—the earthquake by which we are born to the fates we deserve—with which the *Republic* ends.

Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias* begin where the *Republic* leaves off, apparently the very next day.⁶⁵ Yet earthquake plays a very different role in this text, calling into question the theodicy adumbrated in the *Republic*. At the outset, Socrates is still outlining the project of distinguishing rank in an ideal state, which must be supported, in his view, by a program promoting eugenic reproduction. Designed with the aim of securing the “best breed” and organized by the chief magistrates, the program would ensure that “the bad of either sex and the good of either sex might pair with their like”—but without the governed knowing or understanding the policy that determines their childbearing. The program is “contrive[d] secretly” so that citizens “would imagine that [their] union [is] a mere accident.” People are thus deceived into thinking that their “lot” in marriage is a matter of chance; designed to avoid “quarreling,” the system encourages people to believe they are opting freely into assortative mating practices that are in fact not random but predetermined (*Timaeus* 18d).

This mode of assortative mating must be supplemented by specific educational practices if it is to achieve the very highest levels of inequality. As Socrates describes the ideal educational practice to his listeners, “the children of the good parents [are] to be educated, and the children of the bad secretly dispersed among the inferior citizens” (*Timaeus* 19a). Like the predetermined assortative mating project, this system too depends on subterfuge, and though Socrates does not say why, it seems likely that the “secrecy” is similarly meant to avoid “quarreling,” to preempt the dissent of the “inferior citizens,” whose children will be “dispersed,” lost, sent off to fade from view in the lower orders. But how, precisely, is the secrecy to be achieved? Again, Socrates does not say, but he points to a corrective escape valve in the system’s machinery. The ruling classes are to be always “on the look-out” for those from the inferior class who show signs as they are growing up of being “worthy” so that they may be brought up from below to their natural place among the superiors—a place that will in turn be cleared by the displacement of any “unworthy” citizens who are somehow born into the wrong order (*Timaeus* 19a).

This practice raises further questions that Socrates is apparently not prepared to answer. For if the overall system is based on a natural and beneficent hierarchy dividing “good parents” from “bad parents” and treating their children accordingly and unequally—educating some and “dispersing” the others—then why does it need correction at all? Why must there be a plan for bringing up from below those

who are worthy and for displacing the unworthy from above? The existence of the corrective system—an upheaval of the hierarchies putatively grounded in the earth itself—seems to admit the possibility that the natural division is flawed to begin with. If a sound education draws its students ever closer to truth and thereby perfection, then would not those “worthy” children misplaced in the inferior ranks become “unworthy” through the very (non)educational system to which they are doomed? Or, to put it differently, how will these worthy but misplaced and therefore uneducated children be recognized by those who see through the lens of their superior education? Is it possible that the corrective practice Socrates describes is in fact related to the secrecy with which the original dispersing of some children is carried out? For the meritocracy elaborated here is also deceptively rigged by assortative mating and unequal education—a secret system whose *raison d'être* is to have it both ways: to appear based on natural, even geological distinctions that are in fact manufactured.

It is Critias who steps forward to show Socrates the limits of his thinking by offering an earthquake-ridden history of catastrophe that calls into question the entire political theory, built on a theodicy of inequality, articulated in the *Republic*. In doing so, Critias tells a story that will survive the ages: the legend of Atlantis (*Critias* 25d ff.). His tale is ultimately about why catastrophes happen—why earthquake, in particular, destroys not only individuals but also whole cities, whole generations. Earthquake is not, in Critias's account, the event by which we are birthed to the fates we deserve. It is instead a source of endless ambiguity that causes—and also emblemizes—human oblivion and forgetting, particularly that of Socrates himself.

Since Socrates demands the authority of actual facts rather than a mere legend, Critias first lays out the genealogy of his story: he heard it from an earlier Critias, his grandfather, who heard it from his father, Dropides, who heard it from his relative and dear friend, the Athenian poet turned statesman, Solon. Solon's life mirrors the well-known divide Socrates posits between poetry and politics, and Critias pauses to praise Solon's poetic talents: he could have been a Homer or a Hesiod had he not dedicated his life to statesmanship. Solon's heretofore unwritten account, Critias promises, is an “old-world” story about the “great and marvelous” Athenian city to which these philosophers are heirs—a story that will appropriately respond to Socrates and the ideas laid out in the *Republic* (*Critias* 21a). But all this fanfare distracts from the real point of the narrative genealogy that Critias lays out: the story he proposes to tell comes not from Athens but from Africa, from Egyptian priests who explain to Solon the origins of his own Hellenism. Indeed, the framing of the story presents a trenchant account of North–South relations, of two remarkably similar cultures—one belonging to the continent of Europe, the other to Africa (and, as Critias puts it later, “Asiatics” [*Critias* 24b])—locked in a cycle of endless competition over who owns history, who is chosen for greatness, who is doomed to catastrophe.

As Critias tells it, Solon arrives in Egypt with an essentially ethnological project in mind; he is hoping to compare Egyptian and Athenian ideas, the names and natures of their respective gods, and especially their disparate accounts of antiquity. But the Egyptian priests he meets quickly subvert his project, informing him that neither he nor any other Hellene knows anything worthwhile about the past. When Solon offers them a Greek account of beginnings—a story with a first man, a great deluge, and a surviving few who produce descendants—the Egyptians respond with pointed condescension, insisting upon their own unique modernity as the proper temporal frame for recording and understanding the past: “you Hellenes ... are destitute of letters and education ... you know nothing of what happened in ancient times ... those genealogies of yours ... are no better than the tales of children” (*Critias* 23b). The Egyptian priests register what Johannes Fabian famously called the denial of coevalness—a denial leveled in this case, however, not by but *at* the so-called West: a pronouncement that Hellenistic cultures, trapped in their continual primitivity, will forever occupy an earlier historical epoch than the Egyptians: the time of children rather than adults.

Critias’s story of Solon confers upon the Egyptians a privileged place at the table of adult civilizations and declares an Afro-Asiatic ownership of history in its truest form.⁶⁶ At the same time, the tale elaborates a theory of catastrophe to account for Hellenistic primitivism, and to explain a broadly unequal access to coevality. “And I will tell you why,” explains an Egyptian priest: “There have been, and will be again, many destructions of mankind arising out of many causes; the greatest have been brought about by the agencies of fire and water, and other lesser ones by innumerable other causes” (*Critias* 22c). Interweaving myth with elemental theory, the story describes great cosmic cycles of conflagration and deluge that intermittently destroy the geographically distinct portions of the earth, whether mountainous or low, dry or watery. And yet such cycles of destruction always leave one exceptional civilization untouched: the people of the Nile, the river that is also a never-failing savior who delivers and preserves from calamity. The most ancient traditions of learning are thus forever preserved by the African river—while the West in its entirety is doomed to disaster and therefore perpetual ignorance. Each time the Hellenes are beginning civilized life, the Egyptians explain, the deluge comes again: “and leaves only those of you who are destitute of letters and education; and so you have to begin all over again like children” (*Critias* 23b).

But as Critias continues his account of the story that Solon learns from the Egyptian priests, the narrative of enduring African scholarly preeminence quickly gives way to a new and contradictory narrative of Athenian exceptionalism. What their historical ignorance has concealed from the people of Athens, avow the Egyptian priests, is their own superior origins story. You and your whole city, the priests tell Solon, descend from “the fairest and noblest race of men which ever lived” (*Critias* 23b). This lost history of ancient Athenians reveals a set of ancestors unsurpassed

in their traditions of war and governance and in the nobility of their deeds. Moreover, if the goddess Athena is the shared patron and founder of both Athens and Egypt, she nevertheless bequeathed historical priority to Athens, as the Egyptian priests explain, founding “your city a thousand years before ours” (*Critias* 23d). Finally, say the priests, Athena sought to ensure the ongoing superiority of her chosen people by determining for their emergence a particular site, selecting and settling the precise spot “most likely to produce men likest herself,” indeed the very “children and disciples of the gods” (*Critias* 24e).

No wonder that Solon supposedly found the story of Egyptian historical preeminence so acceptable, and worth carrying back to Athens to pass on. How could he resist such a claim to authority when it gave back a fraction of what it first took away—assuring him that, if the Greeks were primitive children without history, they were at least descended from the children of gods? And so Solon apparently accepted this narrative payoff from his Egyptian informants: in order to have ancestors who were once the first and chosen people, he agreed, essentially, to be doomed along with all future Athenians to endless historical belatedness. More importantly, Socrates agrees to this payoff when he accepts the tale Critias proffers—accepts it without hesitation, and precisely by virtue of its ostensible historicity, so eager is he to embrace this account of a heroic Athenian past.

Plato’s lead-up to this moment of acceptance seems to underscore the tale’s fictionality. By thinking carefully, Critias says, he has recovered from his memories precisely the kind of story that Socrates has asked for—a narrative that Socrates quickly stamps with his approval as “a fact and not a fiction” (*Critias* 26e). These sleights of hand smoothly convert Socrates’s philosophical speculation about the nature of the ideal republic into the form of a lost history. The entire scene is a demonstration of, and an inquiry into, how cultures invent their own tradition of origins, and with what consequences. Narration thus becomes a form of naturalization, with Socrates’s philosophical-fictional denizens of the ideal republic “transferred” to a world of reality that purportedly avoids the suspicious migrancy of rhetoric: as Critias puts it, “then, in accordance with the tale of Solon, and equally with his law, we will bring [the story’s characters] into court and make them citizens” (*Critias* 27b).

Yet when Critias begins to speak, he appears quite deliberately to confound the rationalist theodicy laid out in the *Republic* and summarized by Timaeus: the premise that “God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad, so far as this was attainable” (*Timaeus* 30a). Critias begins his attack on theodicy by returning to his earlier emphasis on catastrophe and exploring its relation to environmental determinism. In Critias’s telling, the Egyptian ownership of history and attendant wisdom is shaped by proximity to the Nile and exemption from the climatological catastrophes that cyclically destroy other civilizations. Yet Critias also says that Athena located the site for her chosen people in Greece by acting in accordance with a climatological theory of human development: “She chose

the spot of earth in which you were born, because she saw that the happy temperament of the seasons in that land would produce the wisest of men," indeed "men likest herself" (*Critias* 24d). True to her intention, the Athenians became a superior people, excelling "all mankind in all virtue"—great liberators who faced down a terrible foe: the "great and wonderful" empire of Atlantis (*Critias* 24e). This "mighty power"—"larger than Libya and Asia put together"—introduced an unprecedented geopolitical threat that also brought North and South, East and West, together in common cause: for Atlantis, unprovoked, "made an expedition against the whole of Europe and Asia," conquering islands and spreading her rule "over parts of the continent" (*Critias* 112e). Only the Athenians, with their climate-shaped and unparalleled courage and military skill, could defeat and triumph over the invaders.

But this victory of the climatologically superior Athenians is short-lived. *Critias*, still narrating the Egyptian priests telling the story to Solon, annihilates Socrates's newly naturalized citizens in the next breath: "But afterwards there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; and in a single day and night ... all your warlike men in a body sank into the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea" (*Critias* 25c). The tale of Atlantis thus reinstates the geopolitical theme of Hellenic primitivism, of a people destined to superiority by virtue of their climate, but also to a perpetual loss of historical knowledge by natural catastrophe. Their land, "naturally adapted for wisdom and virtue," paradoxically also guaranteed "the destruction of those who received the tradition" of the past: "For when there were any survivors" of earthquakes and floods, "they were men who dwelt in the mountains; and they were ignorant of the art of writing" (*Critias* 109d). Geographical environment is thus the unstable source of both essential differences and uneven human development: the determining factor in an ancient theory of modernization positing the "sacred Egyptian record" as a bulwark against the oblivion shaping Greek primitivism.

In *Critias*'s account, then, the role of catastrophe is uncertain and mysterious. Unlike Socrates, who narrates earthquake as a form of revelation and new beginning—exposing the chasm between human perception and true understanding, while also yielding men to the unequal fates they supposedly deserve—*Critias* offers up an earthquake history of Hellenistic superiority that is also a prediction of endless Athenian degeneration and forgetting. It is easy to lose sight of this point given the tale's subsequent dramatic focus on Atlantis, an island whose destiny is sealed, as it turns out, by a divinely ordained earthquake. The mythological history of Atlantis begins with the fact that the island belongs to Poseidon, allotted in an unequal but uncontested apportioning of the earth's terrain amongst the various gods. But when Poseidon falls in love with and impregnates a mortal woman, he breaks the ground open on the part of the island where she resides, directing his earthquake to reshape the land and its surrounding waters to enclose her, keeping her and their demigod children beyond the approach of any man. The remade

landscape now draws warm and cold springs from the earth and has abundant food of every kind—an earthly paradise for its original couple and their offspring. Poseidon names the ocean and the island both “Atlantic,” after their eldest child, whose lineal descendants gain untold wealth as they build an empire marked by technological advances and military aggression. One of Poseidon’s less important children, part of the original brood but never one of the empire’s beneficiaries, gets the name “Autochthon”—after whom the world’s Indigenous peoples will be known in the future. But Critias’s story is not about Autochthon’s descendants. It concerns only the beneficiaries of empire: the Athenians and their catastrophic twin, the people of Atlantis.

The ancient Athenians have all the attributes of Socrates’s ideal citizens, who in turn have been, in Critias’s neat circular feat, themselves naturalized as Athenian ancestors. Like the people of Atlantis, the ancient Athenians have an earthly paradise: their soil is the best in the world; they have abundant water, a climate of perfect temperance, a beautiful fountain standing where the Acropolis would later be constructed. Unlike the people of Atlantis, the ancient Athenians are simple husbandmen, tillers of the soil. They are also, as Critias explains again, plagued by earthquakes and floods; their fountain, like everything else, is eventually destroyed, “choked by the earthquake,” and dried up into “a few small streams” (*Critias* 112c). The people of Atlantis, on the other hand, take up engineering and commerce. They have temples, palaces, docks, bridges, aqueducts, canals, roads, gardens, and cisterns, as well as metropolitans and wealthy villagers, charioteers and racing courses, naval stores and luxury materials, gold and ivory. Their harbors are the largest in the world, with vessels carrying merchants from all parts, and their streets are filled with the sounds of urban life, “din and clatter of all sorts night and day” (*Critias* 117e). Out of this cacophony emerges an imperial people, one that takes up arms against all of Asia and Europe, including the simple but powerful warrior Athenians.

But as Critias narrates the great technological progress of Atlantis and its encroachment on Athens, he does not return to the theme of Athenian victory in forestalling Atlantean conquest and achievement of heroism, with which he initially whetted Socrates’s appetite for a “feast of discourse” (*Critias* 20b). Instead, his narrative now foregrounds declension and divine chastening. Atlantis had great and god-given power, Critias observes, and it was directed by “the god,” presumably Poseidon, against “our land, for the following reasons, as tradition tells” (*Critias* 120d). The reasons that follow concern the moral degeneration of Atlantis. As Poseidon’s Atlantic descendants grow more human and less divine, their rise to commercial, technological, and imperial wealth begets a corresponding fall. Their wealth debases them, leaving them full of avarice and unrighteous power. Critias’s fable of declension is ultimately self-referential, for it seems to describe the modernized Athens of his own moment, even as it also posits an ancient Athens that is virtuously opposed to imperial Atlantis. Perhaps this is why Zeus, the “god of

gods,” decides to destroy both Atlantis *and* ancient Athens in an earthquake followed by a flood: “to inflict punishment on them, that they might be chastened and improve” (*Critias* 121b–c). For if Atlantis disappears forever, as do all the ancient Athenians, who after all would be left to chasten and improve but the Athenians of Critias’s own moment, the people of “our land” (*Critias* 120d)—as if Zeus were warning the people of the future by punishing those in the past?

This earthquake history of the Atlantis–Athens relation breaks off abruptly—leaving the entire dialogue unfinished—before Zeus can deliver the speech explaining his destruction of the two states. Indeed, readers cannot know what Plato was going to write next, what Critias was going to say next, and what words he would put into the mouth of Zeus. What is clear, however, is that Critias introduces competing narratives of earthquake that respond to Socrates. These narratives also frame different ideas about the relation of humans to their environment, and about the role of geography, climate, and so-called natural disasters in the unfolding of human history. The history of Athens is environmentally determined, Critias suggests, by its proneness to earthquake and flooding. He also avows that this environmental determinism is Athena’s doing, divinely if in part inadvertently made: her climate creates a superior people that is doomed to destruction, and then to perpetual forgetting. Likewise, the origin of Atlantis is divine; Poseidon breaks open the earth to create a home for his descendants and chosen people, and to keep them isolated from the world. When the people of Atlantis wrest control over their divinely given environment by using technology, they become the world’s center and its imperial foe. Zeus in turn sends earthquake to punish Atlantis for its moral degeneration—but innocent Athens goes into the ocean too, perhaps punished on behalf of future Athenians, who have yet to exist.

These future Athenians, like the ancient people of Atlantis, have acted indelibly upon the non-human world, cutting down what was once “an abundance of wood in the mountains” and leaving behind land now eroded by water flowing off the bare earth into the sea (*Critias* 114e). Critias notes that he can hardly describe ancient Athens, so dissimilar is it to the landscape of its future (and his own present): “How shall I establish my words? and what part of it can be truly called a remnant of the land that then was?” (*Critias* 111a). The destruction of ancient Athens is thus perpetually ambiguous; it is caused by earthquakes; Athena; Poseidon; Zeus, who was punishing not Athens but Atlantis; and, finally, perhaps also the human agency of the ancient Athenians themselves who cut down too many trees. Critias’s tale brings environmental and theological determinism together but also undermines both, using the whims of the gods to poke holes in any theory of climatically based superiority, and introducing chaos, random possibilities, the intersecting effects of human and non-human actors, of deforestation and the divine floods that have eroded the coast where Socrates heads down to the port in the *Republic*. The *Timaeus* and *Critias* thus offer a narrative of declension on all fronts—environmental, historical, political—but notably without the philosophical closure provided by Socrates.

Despite the conjoined history of these dialogues, Plato scholars have long marked a tension between the expository, first-person, authoritative Socratic narration of the *Republic*, which clearly demarcates its myths and tales as the subordinate tools of philosophy, and the fragmented idiom of the *Timaeus* and *Critias*, with their far more ambiguously fictional history of Atlantis, told by Critias. While the *Republic* has long been among the most read and taught of Plato's works, the *Timaeus* and *Critias* have proved far less central, certainly in US political thought. The early United States was, after all, created and governed by men who had read and discussed the *Republic*, even if they did not agree with what they took Plato to be saying within and through the dialogue. And whether contemporary scholars agree on any meaningful linkage between classical and American forms of governance, or on the term "republic" as an appropriate translation from the ancient Greek, Plato's *Republic* nevertheless shares an enduring moniker with the first modern nation to adopt that title for itself. By the mid-nineteenth century, enthusiastic, self-proclaimed Platonists were a significant part of US intellectual life.⁶⁷

Yet it is Critias's tale of Atlantis—a story of origins and priority and divinely chosen people, a story about the question of who is possessed of history and to what end—that later readers have consistently brought to bear on the political contests of the Americas. From Thomas More and Francis Bacon to nineteenth-century Mayanists, from the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos to Nazi archeologists studying the Andes and contemporary white supremacists, there is a long and vexed tradition of locating Atlantis in the American hemisphere.⁶⁸ Given this strange and often frightening intellectual history, perhaps Plato cannot help but generate an oddly proleptic account, a dark glance toward a future American hemisphere. Although Socrates's central focus in offering the myth of the metals and the corresponding discussion of children's disparate educations is the practice of distinction and separation necessary to maintaining an *ideal* rather than a real state, what he proposes for this hypothetical realm might be understood as an ancient Western *fantasy* of political policy that in fact—viewed in the harsh and deliberate light of presentism—describes and uncannily anticipates the ideological work of social reproduction in modern Western societies.

What Socrates describes conforms quite closely, in fact, to the working of meritocracy under neoliberalism. To hear the ideal society sounded out in his words—to hear him elaborate the ways in which meritocracy is pre-arranged secretly to produce stratification while promising mobility for the truly "worthy"—is to see a long-cherished national US relation to the classical tradition at a heightened remove. It is to glimpse not merely the potentially false promise of the American Dream—born, at the inception of the early US republic, as a child of *translatio imperii*. It is also to sense bad faith: to see that "Western civilization"—as a self-perpetuating invention organizing historical narrative strategies "from Plato to NATO," as it were—hinges in part on an old but still powerful and prevalent political ruse, one that Plato himself was perhaps laying

bare and not (as it is so often assumed he was) endorsing.⁶⁹ As I suggest in this book's Epilogue, moreover, Socrates's myth of the metals has—across a geological *longue durée* of extractivist practice—become both the reality and the central noble lie of a colonial and earthquake-ridden future world, the dystopian “broken earth” of N. K. Jemisin's magisterial speculative fiction trilogy of the same name.

In this sense, Plato's earthquakes give us a glimpse of an alternative history of rupture, one that enlists the classical past not for its political virtues or for modern liberal democracy's ancient roots but instead for its commentary, however oblique, on the modes of thought that helped produce a broken world—and on those critical responses and questions that might help us to imagine a less broken future. Critias offers one of these early responses—a rejoinder to Socrates—by shattering the earthquake philosophy he outlines in the *Republic*. Socrates conceptualizes philosophy as emerging from a chasm that is both his setting and the central symbolic figure for philosophical absence; he likewise narrates philosophy through multiple rendings of the earth. In his account, a beneficent god wants only what is good, and philosophy, revealing to men their own ignorance, can save their very souls. But philosophy can also provide men with slaves in the form of those who fail to philosophize well and who are thereby born—of earthquake in the Myth of Er—into misery. Philosophy reveals that everything is, finally, as it should be. Unlike Socrates, Critias explains history by proposing a narrative that dooms the master-philosopher and his fellow Athenians of that class to a childlike lack of history—all because of their location in a place where cyclical catastrophes once destroyed the earth. His story warns against the optimism of theodicy—suggesting that a theodical worldview, more than any natural catastrophe, dooms its adherents to a kind of perpetual childishness. The swarm of self-contradicting stories introduced in the *Timaeus* and *Critias* rebukes the neatly contained theodicy of slavery outlined in the *Republic* precisely by recognizing the interpretation of earthquake that Socrates has offered as one representation among others. What Critias accomplishes—and what Plato's earthquakes allow us to see—is that the stories told about earthquakes can play just as important a role in the unfolding of history as do the earthquakes themselves.

If the implosion of Atlantis was “the oldest dream of Western culture,” to borrow again from Glissant, in [Chapter 2](#) I turn to the most famous earthquake about which the West told stories after the rise of modern empire, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 (C 224). This cataclysm quickly entered the national imagination of the new republic that emerged later in the century, and it did so as a foundational elsewhere catastrophe. Indeed, the very subject of the Lisbon earthquake still embeds a Poe-like sleight of hand, even in contemporary thought, always drawing the eye away from the slow and simultaneous disasters that were also happening long before and after.

Notes

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Norton, 2004), 666 (hereafter cited as P).
2. For a richly contextualized reading of this story in relation to slavery, see Erin E. Forbes, who shows both that premature burial stories were ubiquitous in the early nineteenth-century US and that the trope of live entombment later characterized writing by formerly enslaved. "From Prison Cell to Slave Ship: Social Death in 'The Premature Burial,'" *Poe Studies* 46 (2013): 32–58.
3. Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 2.
4. George F. Kennan dubbed World War I as the foundational catastrophe of the twentieth century in 1981, and Eric J. Hobsbawm termed the period between World War I and 1950 as the "Age of Catastrophe" in *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Vintage, 1996). On catastrophe as a mode of critical theory, see Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
5. See Timothy Recuber, *Consuming Catastrophe: Mass Culture in America's Decade of Disaster* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2016); Ann Larabee's *Decade of Disaster* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000) explores the 1980s. John David Ebert announces a current "age of catastrophe" (*The Age of Catastrophe: Disaster and Humanity in Modern Times* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012]); see also Thomas Stubblefield, *9/11 and the Visual Culture of Disaster* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014). Like many scholars in the humanities, I use the words *catastrophe* and *disaster* interchangeably and broadly, with an eye to the entanglement rather than the separation and categorization of different kinds of events, whether environmental, social, or political. If scholars across fields now recognize the distorting qualities of the phrase "natural disaster," disaster nevertheless has different meanings for many scholars and writers individually and across disciplines. Historian of early America Cynthia Kierner, for example, argues that "scholarly definitions of disaster do not embrace catastrophic events that are intentional or foreseeable" (*Inventing Disaster* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019], 2), such as mass shootings or war. On the other hand, the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot meditates on what is excluded from such definitions: a modernity defined by concentration camps and nuclear bombing: "The calm, the burn of the holocaust, the annihilation of noon—the calm of the disaster" (*The Writing of Disaster* [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1980], 6). My own orientation is indebted to those scholars who have argued that catastrophes and disasters of the sudden, single-event, and spectacular kind are often only apparently so, and must be examined in relation to the "slow" and the "ordinary"; and to those who show how the apparent "novelty" of contemporary ecological catastrophe is in fact a form of "continuity" with histories of dispossession, extraction, and enslavement (Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019]). I am also inspired here by Rebecca Solnit, who observes that "[w]hat you believe shapes how you act" when disaster falls ("How you act results in life or death, for yourself or others, as in everyday life, only more so" [*A Paradise Built in Hell* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 2]); by Jennifer Travis, who suggests a method residing in the "disciplinary vulnerabilities," as well as the undoing of "notions of mastery," that emerge in the face of catastrophe (*Danger and Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century America* [Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2018], 15); and by Sonya Posmentier, who explores Black poetic "theories of environmental relation" that offer philosophical modes of "survival, repair, and generation" in *Cultivation of Catastrophe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 3–4. Finally, I am interested in how race, for centuries, "has been at the root of catastrophe" in ways that literature helps to clarify; see, for example, Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 2.
6. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2009), 403.
7. Fredrik LeRoy et al., eds., *Tickle Your Catastrophe: Imagining Catastrophe in Art, Architecture and Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Academia Press, 2011), 6.
8. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 404.
9. Le Roy et al., *Tickle Your Catastrophe*, 6; Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 328.
10. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 151.
11. Jean Baudrillard, *The Disappearance of Culture*, ed. Richard D. Smith and David B. Clark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 59.
12. Paul Virilio, *The University of Disaster* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 119.

13. See Naomi Klein on “disaster capitalism” in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2008); and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
14. Scott D. Watson, *International Order and the Politics of Disaster* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.
15. Gillen D’Arcy Wood, “Climate Delusion: Hurricane Sandy, Sea Level Rise, and 1840s Catastrophism,” *Humanities* 8, no. 3 (2019).
16. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 175.
17. The term Anthropocene, widely used in scientific and other kinds of literature to refer to a broad geologic era shaped profoundly and negatively by human activity, has been debated on various grounds, including the neologism’s implied assignation of blame to all humanity rather than those populations most responsible for climate change. Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Chthulucene are other proposed terms; see Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* for a discussion of all three (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 30–57. Jared Hickman has suggested “Americocene” in a powerful essay on the “apocalypse of settler colonialism” as articulated in Indigenous speculative fiction and theory; see chapter 1 of *Apocalypse in American Literature and Culture*, ed. John Hay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 17–29.
18. Kathleen Donegan, “Keyword: Catastrophe,” *Early American Literature* 46, no. 3 (2011): 603.
19. Kathleen Donegan, *Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 604, 606.
20. Donegan, *Seasons of Misery*, 204.
21. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 7, 8.
22. Kevin Rosario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 78.
23. See the ACT UP historical archive: <https://actupny.org/YELL/falwell.html>.
24. Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Columbus, OH: University of Ohio Press, 2000), xxiv. Kierner locates the true consolidation of the US disaster-as-blessing narrative in the second half of the nineteenth century and links it to access to insurance (*Inventing Disaster*, 8).
25. John Hay, introduction to *Apocalypse in American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 5. See also his *Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
26. Huet, *The Culture of Disaster*, 10.
27. George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 3.
28. David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Norton, 2014), xix.
29. Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman, OH: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973).
30. Tommy Orange, *There There* (New York: Knopf, 2018), 140.
31. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 6.
32. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2018), 18.
33. Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge, 1998), 320.
34. Orange cites Brecht’s motto from the later Svendborg poems (320) as his epigraph at the opening of the prologue (3) and evokes singing again in the novel’s closing lines as Tony Loneman dies (290).
35. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, introduced by Robin D. G. Kelley (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 36.
36. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 5. On the relation of the Holocaust and transatlantic slavery as modern catastrophes, see Eric Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
37. Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 19.
38. William Faulkner, *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 119–120.
39. Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 73.

40. Faulkner, *Essays*, 120. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).
41. García Márquez, *One Hundred Years*, 417.
42. From José María Heredia's "The Hurricane" (1825) to Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Strong Wind* (1950) to Eduardo Galeano's *Century of Wind* (1986), hurricanes and winds of change, destruction, and revolution feature prominently in the Latin American literary and critical tradition.
43. Eugene Lawrence, "The Lands of the Earthquake," *Harper's* (1869) (hereafter cited as L).
44. See Deborah R. Coen, *The Earthquake Observers: Disaster Science from Lisbon to Richter* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), especially [chapter 5](#), "The Geographies of Hazard"; and Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 282.
45. Sheila Hones, "Distant Disasters, Local Fears," in *American Disasters*, ed. Steven Biel (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 170.
46. Coen's *Earthquake Observers* offers a brilliant account of this shift toward emotions and embodied experience in nineteenth-century earthquake science.
47. Coen, *Earthquake Observers*, 21, 5.
48. *Ibid.*, 2.
49. Charles Dickens, *All the Year Round*, vols. 3–4 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1860), 199 (cited in Coen, *Earthquake Observers*, 32).
50. Coen, *Earthquake Observers*, 34.
51. On the invention of the human as "Man," see especially Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2003): 257–337.
52. Valenčius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes*, 7.
53. See Coen's blurb for Valenčius's *The Lost History*.
54. See, e.g., Lawrence A. Clayton, "Peru: Dominance of Private Businessmen," in *United States-Latin American Relations, 1850–1903*, ed. Thomas Leonard et al. (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 129; and Gregory T. Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 68.
55. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville, VA: Caraf Books, 1989), 244 (hereafter cited as C).
56. On the abyss in early modern thought, see Gerard Passannante, *Catastrophizing: Materialism and the Making of Disaster* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2019), 10–18.
57. Thomas Hobbes, *Elementorum philosophiæ sectio prima de corpore. authore thoma hobbes malmesburiensi* (London: Andreae Crook, 1655), 5.
58. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Press of Michigan, 1990), 8 (hereafter cited as P).
59. Glissant, *La cohée du lamentin*: "une pensée du tremblement"; "La pensée archipélifique tremble de ce tremblement" (75–76, quoted in Coombes, *Édouard Glissant: A Poetics of Resistance* [London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018]). Glissant's role in the development of archipelagic thought has been explored by Brian Russell Roberts in *Borderwaters: Amid the Archipelagic States of America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 17–18, 69–71; and Lanny Thompson, "The Chronotopes of Archipelagic Thinking: Glissant and the Narrative of Philosophy," in *Contemporary Archipelagic Thinking: Toward New Comparative Methodologies and Disciplinary Formations*, ed. Michelle Stephens and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 109–130.
60. Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, trans. E. W. Webster (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923).
61. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, in *The Dialogues of Plato, in five volumes*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892) (hereafter cited by title, book, and Stephanus page number and section).
62. Quoted in Jelle Zeilenga de Boer, *Earthquakes in Human History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 56–57.
63. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 49.
64. See Joanne Harriet's incisive reading of the myth of the metals in *Origin Stories in Political Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 4–7.
65. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, in *The Dialogues of Plato, in five volumes*, trans. Jowett (hereafter cited by title and Stephanus page number and section).

66. See Martin Bernal's classic reading of the Solon story in *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 107–108, and of the myth of Atlantis in vol. 2 (1991), 295–304.
67. Cathy Guttierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7–9 and Paul Anderson, *Platonism in the Midwest* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1963).
68. Thomas More's *Utopia* and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* both locate their meditations on Plato and politics on island-civilizations in the Americas. The nineteenth-century archaeologist and Mayanist Augustus Le Plongeon speculated that ancient Mayan ruins were built by people of an unknown race who had a curious amount in common with “the English today,” and that their American civilization influenced the lost people of Atlantis as well as those of Egypt (see Augustus Le Plongeon, *Maya/Atlantis: Queen Moo and the Egyptian Sphinx* [Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 1892], xi). Similarly, in his 1882 *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, Ignatius L. Donnelly drew on the Atlantis myth to locate an originary Aryan population in the Americas, especially the US, that supposedly preceded the Indigenous peoples of the hemisphere. See also Jason Covalito's discussion of Le Plongeon and Donnelly in *The Mound Builder Myth* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020), 270–290. The Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos also believed that Atlantis was once a part of the Americas and was “the cradle of a civilization that flourished millions of years ago”—but Donnelly and Le Plongeon took the Atlanteans to be the ancestors of the hemisphere's Indigenous peoples; see *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cosmica*, trans. Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1925]). On Nazi obsession with Atlantis as part of a larger “supernatural imaginary,” see Eric Kurlander, *Hitler's Monsters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). On the prevalence of contemporary white supremacist myths, including that of Aryan Atlantis, see Alexander Zaitchik, “Close Encounters of the Racist Kind,” Southern Poverty Law Center, January 2, 2018: www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/01/02/close-encounters-racist-kind.
69. The phrase “from Plato to NATO” comes from David Gress's 2004 book of the same title; Gress argues for salvaging what he calls the “idea of the West” from the “radical” academics who were supposedly the first to critique Western thought starting in the 1960s (*From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West* [New York: The Free Press, 1998]). On the idea that Plato is teaching readers not necessarily to accept the authoritative pronouncements of Socrates but rather “how to read” more attentively, see especially the prologue to Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 1–18.

Predatory Optimism

On Saturday November 1, 1755, a massive earthquake shook Portugal and demolished the global port and capital city of Lisbon. The shocks were followed by a giant wave that flooded the coast and then a series of fires that completed the devastation of the city. The physical aftershocks of the earthquake could be felt as far north as Finland, as far south as the Maghreb, and as far west as the Caribbean, where tsunamis also struck in Martinique and Barbados.¹ According to one historian, the earthquake was “the most powerful to strike the continent of Europe in recorded human history”—and it did so with the energy equivalent of “475 megatons of TNT or 32,000 Hiroshima bombs.” Lisbon felt roughly 500 aftershocks over the next nine months.² But the imaginative and cognitive aftershocks lasted longer, striking into the heart of Enlightenment Europe.³

It is thus something of a truism among intellectual historians, political theorists, and philosophers that the great earthquake of 1755 was, like the sinking of Atlantis, a foundational catastrophe in the shaping of Western thought. As Deborah Coen puts it, “In an age fond of likening human history to a progression from infancy to maturity, Lisbon figured as the coming of age of the European mind.”⁴ The Lisbon catastrophe—according to this grand narrative begun in the eighteenth century—irrevocably changed the course of philosophy, theology, and political theory, ushering in a new intellectual modernity with its horror-filled and sundering events. For T. D. Kendrick, writing in the mid-twentieth century, the earthquake marked the “end of optimism” in the realms of philosophy and theology.⁵ For Gilles Deleuze, it challenged philosophy’s “belief in reason” in a way that has “no equivalent except in the Nazi concentration camps.”⁶ For Judith Shklar, it marked the last “general public debate” about “the ways of god to man,” and the first modern separation of misfortune from injustice.⁷ For Charles Taylor, it played a pivotal role in the emergence of the secular age.⁸ And for Susan Neiman, the Lisbon earthquake introduced the separation of moral wrongdoing from natural evil—from pestilence, fire, and flood—and thereby provided the basis for modern consciousness itself.⁹ Neiman’s history of “evil in modern thought” runs from Lisbon to Auschwitz with a short excursus on 9/11—a trajectory that clarifies the parameters of what is considered catastrophic in Western philosophy with respect to change over time.¹⁰ As the categories “moral,” “political,” and “human” begin to collapse with the natural (“there’s no such thing as a natural disaster,” as critical geography studies avows), it is surprisingly common to see an event such as 9/11, or the atomic bombing of Japan, or the genocide undertaken at Auschwitz

compared to the Lisbon earthquake.¹¹ All such accounts proceed from the general assumption that the Lisbon earthquake was “the first big global catastrophe of the modern era.”¹²

The stories told about the Lisbon earthquake continue to matter because they have played their own role in the unfolding of history, shaping even contemporary approaches to disaster preparedness. Yet this grand Lisboan narrative has too often overlooked a parallel history of catastrophe that has inexorably shaped many of its own terms—an omission that drastically limits this narrative’s capacity to grasp eighteenth-century philosophy’s role in shaping the relationship between emotion and exploitation, on the one hand, and the normative, expected, and yet startlingly invisible geography of catastrophe, on the other. For with few exceptions, the great story of the Lisbon earthquake and modernity grants little or no conceptual space to the immense catastrophes wrought by European empire, by the many centuries of Indigenous dispossession and enslavement inflicted upon Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Moreover, modern critical thought has silently inherited a good deal from this Lisbon-descended tradition of modern Western intellectual history, which framed many of its original questions about meaning, suffering, responsibility, secularity, justice, evil, and so on precisely by excluding the catastrophes Europe inflicted on the world beyond its own eighteenth-century implosion. To recall Glissant again, “peoples who have *been* to the abyss”—the lived terror of coloniality as opposed to the age-old Western philosophical abyss—“do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force” (P 8). Moreover, the scope of knowledge afforded by any given theoretical framework will inevitably be limited if it excludes empire, colonialism, and slavery from its understanding of what constitutes modernity.¹³ For these frameworks are not merely incomplete; they are also on a deep level implicated in producing the occluded catastrophes themselves.

This chapter shows how the philosophical conversation surrounding the Lisbon earthquake was in fact mired in a strange recognition of the atrocities comprising a new imperial modernity even as most of these same Enlightenment interlocutors imagined that the implications of their discussion were transhistorical, immutable, and always to the universal good. The conversation was informed by the logic and the emergent geography of elsewhere catastrophe—by a refusal of any connection between the temperance and security of “here” and a catastrophic and southernized “there”—and what it yielded was a form of predatory optimism, a simultaneously emotional and economic investment in both elsewhere catastrophe and the idea of a catastrophic South. Touching on a range of writers but centered on Voltaire, the chapter explores the latent predation of optimism and its corollary theodicy, an eighteenth-century neologism for the modern project of explaining the ancient problem of evil. *Candide*—Voltaire’s famous satire of Leibniz—offers a philosophical response to the Lisbon earthquake that connects the European catastrophe with colonial South America and the Guaraní War in

Paraguay while also tying the Lisbon implosion to the great Lima–Callao earthquake of 1746. The chapter concludes with a consideration of early writings about the Lima–Callao catastrophe, including their translated afterlives, to chart the convergence of racial and disaster capitalism in the aftermath.

“Le Nord va s’enrichir”: Philosophy’s Other Worlds and the Extractive Enlightenment

Before the Lisbon catastrophe, in March 1755, a young Immanuel Kant assumed a lectureship at the University of Königsberg and published his *Universal Natural History*, a “purely speculative” work of natural philosophy typical of his pre-critical early career.¹⁴ Dedicated to King Frederick of Prussia and presented as the work of a “timid” author “ceaselessly striving to make himself useful to his fatherland,” Kant’s early tract offers a synthesis of contemporary scientific ideas laid out to prove God’s oversight of the world as evidenced in “the mechanical origin of the whole universe, according to Newtonian principles.”¹⁵ All scientific investigation of the natural world reveals “splendid artworks of nature and proofs of divine omnipotence” in addition to good news for the cultivation of the soul. Only “despicable beings” and “miserable creatures” could fail to see that “under the most acceptable of conditions a way has been opened ... to attain bliss and sublimity that is exalted infinitely far above the benefits that the most advantageous arrangement of nature can attain in all celestial bodies!”¹⁶ Human beings need not remain enslaved in a cave of unreality, as per Plato, unless they choose to be ungrateful for the world they are given.

Eight months later, the Lisbon earthquake struck and Kant, so the story goes, was never the same. Over the course of the following year, he published three essays responding directly to the Lisbon tragedy and thereby began to set himself apart from his peers; indeed, according to Martin Schönfeld, “[a] superior methodological approach distinguished Kant’s assertions from the guesses of his contemporaries. Instead of appealing to theological fantasies, or indulging in astrological superstitions, Kant searched for the facts and advanced empirically testable claims.”¹⁷ The Lisbon earthquake brought about the “scientific turn” in Kant’s thinking, Svend Erik Larsen argues, enabling “the single most influential philosophical contribution to the modernization of Europe in science, philosophy, religion, politics, ethics, aesthetics and social sciences.”¹⁸ The sheer scale of the Lisbon catastrophe, it seems, turned Kant’s attention away from divine omnipotence so that problems of human responsibility for knowledge, truth, and ethics could become the focus of his mature thought. The earthquake brought Kant to understand that the true nature of human freedom lies in confronting and acting upon the limited knowledge we have about the natural forces to which we are subject from birth until death. As for Kant, so for the rest of his continent: as Larsen puts

it, “the massive, provocative . . . overwhelmingly powerful materiality of the earthquake is an essential moment, if not *the* essential moment, in the transformation of European thought that made it finally modern.”¹⁹

These details comprise the celebrational story of what we might call earthquake modernity: a Lisbon-derived narrative that hinges on the idea that outsized disasters disrupt and transform human modes of perception, prompt questioning of the most fundamental ideas about the world, and thereby produce new ways of feeling and knowing. But the essential structure of this story derives from pre-Enlightenment ideas that the new Western thought has supposedly left to its own devices in the modern bracketing-off of the theological from the rigorously philosophical. The Lisbon catastrophe, that is to say, becomes the topos of earthquake modernity’s *felix culpa*, its fortunate fall into truer and higher forms of knowledge—the new and unforbidden fruit of unspeakable calamity and suffering. Larsen, noting that Kant never again wrote about earthquake after the flurry of essays in early 1756, wonders if the philosopher in fact “repress[ed] the memory as too traumatic.”²⁰

Yet Kant seems hardly traumatized in his Lisbon earthquake writings. As Gerard Passannante points out, moreover, he had a “catastrophic style of knowing” not only after but also before the earthquake, often presenting images of destruction and world-ending to generate philosophical traction.²¹ For example, Kant had asserted in *Universal Natural History* that the “inevitable tendency of every perfected world structure [moves] gradually toward its destruction.” This abstract idea of catastrophe need not trouble his readers, Kant suggested, given the corresponding tendency of the universe to compensate: to “be productive of *other worlds in other regions* in order to replace the deficiency it has suffered in one place.”²² Catastrophe brings—and retroactively justifies—the creation of new worlds. Kant made essentially the same point after the Lisbon earthquake, urging his Prussian readers to see the large scheme of destruction and compensation: “The joy of one group and the misery of another often have a common cause.” Even such a devastation as that of Lisbon therefore had its “uses”: “Whatever damage earthquakes may, on the one hand, ever have caused for man, they can, on the other hand, easily replace with interest.”²³ The causes of earthquakes, though they may devastate some places, are the same sources of wealth and abundance (the kind drawn from “other worlds”) that bring other people pleasure: for the physical causes of earthquakes are also linked to nature’s healthful “warm baths” as well as the “veins of ore” to be found in mines and the replenishment of soil that agricultural practices deplete over time.²⁴ Natural philosophy thus helps its students to accept that prosperity here is fundamentally tied to catastrophe elsewhere.

A few years after Kant wrote his earthquake essays, Adam Smith was revising his foundational theory of moral sentiments from Scotland. In the realm of moral philosophy, too, the Lisbon earthquake proved philosophically generative, allowing Smith to arrive at his own conclusions about the distance or proximity

of catastrophe.²⁵ When one hears of a “dreadful calamity” in a part of the world where one has “no sort of connexion,” or personal tie, Smith argues, several potentially conflicting reactions will arise (*MS* 163). First, he postulates, one “expresses sorrow for the misfortune of [an] unhappy people,” and then, as a natural outcome, one recognizes with “melancholy” that all human life is precarious (*MS* 163). The profound suffering of others spurs the thought that such suffering might also befall the distant beholder of the catastrophe. But here Smith introduces a new response, which he defines as rational rather than emotional, and which he casts as inherent in a particular kind of subject: the “man of speculation” (*MS* 163). For this figure, the news of a distant calamity will incite “many reasonings concerning the effect which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe and the trade and business of the world in general” (*MS* 163). Smith presents these three reactions—sorrow, melancholy, and economic speculation—as part of the “fine philosophy,” or the expression of “humane sentiments,” in which people engage before going about their lives as before: thus, a man hearing about a faraway hypothetical catastrophe will “pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion with the same ease and tranquility as if no such accident had happened” (*MS* 136). On the other hand, Smith notes, “the most trivial disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance” (*MS* 136).

As Smith considers the effects of distance, and as he interweaves the emotional and the speculative or economic, he is thus also working with the scale of disaster, from the “dreadful” to the “frivolous” (*MS* 136). The trivial example he next introduces has become a famous one: “If [a man] was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep tonight; but provided he never saw them, he would snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren” (*MS* 136). This simultaneously self-evident and somehow shocking point allows Smith to draw out, from the heart of moral sentiment regarding distant catastrophe, a murderous hypothetical scenario: “To prevent, therefore, this paultry misfortune to himself would a man of humanity be willing to sacrifice the lives of a hundred millions of his brethren, provided he had never seen them?” (*MS* 137). Would a man allow millions to die to save his own finger? Smith answers the question unhesitatingly with a resounding no—“the world, in its greatest depravity and corruption, never produced such a villain as could be capable of entertaining it”—and then defends that ostensible certainty by invoking his great philosophical concept of the “impartial spectator,” the internal rational and moral guide whose imagined approbation or disapproval controls human selfishness and governs ethical understanding and behavior (*MS* 137). Happily, for the millions living elsewhere, the impartial spectator would prevent our hypothetical man from choosing to save his little finger by acquiescing to the deaths of distant others.

But if the Lisbon earthquake elicited what we might call Smith’s benevolent theory of elsewhere catastrophe—yes, we sleep well enough after hearing of the news, but we are not after all the indirect murderers of the victims—it is also

clear that this seismic disaster pulls associatively on another string in the theory of moral sentiments. For in his stutter step from the economic “man of speculation” concerned with “commerce ... trade and business” to the man who is concerned about his little finger, Smith passes lightly over the twin catastrophes of commerce, trade, and business in which the Portuguese capital, and indeed all of western Europe, were by then of course deeply implicated: colonialism and slavery (MS 136). The hypothetical (European) man will lose his own finger rather than trigger an earthquake, Smith suggests, yet the same putative “man of speculation” must also countenance the earthquakes of conquest to which his fortunes are at least indirectly tied. By his own side-stepping logic, economic disadvantage or non-advantage from the “dreadful calamity” befalling others elsewhere—others whom one has, as Smith says, never seen—would be akin to a minor form of bodily dismemberment.

Unlike Plato’s earthquake-motivated Gyges, raping and pillaging at will because he is protected from consequences by an invisibility ring, Smith’s hypothetical Enlightenment man surveils himself through the eyes of his own internalized impartial spectator to know his responsibility to those who might die by the “hundred millions” if he refuses to sacrifice his little finger. But the difference in moral sentiments between Gyges and this hypothetical eighteenth-century European man also figures Smith’s profound insight into a new relation between moral sentiments and geographic distance, which provides the latter with a kind of invisibility ring as well as a necessary set of blinders for his internal spectator. For the same impartial spectator—formed as he is by the social world of the man’s intellectual peers and other men of speculation—suggests no responsibility on the part of the hypothetical man toward those he does not have to see with his own eyes as they are violently captured and enslaved or dispossessed for the enrichment of his world at home. The entire earthquake rumination—which Smith added in the years after the Lisbon catastrophe—introduces the contradiction that the great Scottish philosopher will try to solve economically rather than morally in years to come by arguing in his 1776 *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* that slavery was an inefficient form of labor extraction in the long run.

If Kant and Smith suggest the role of colonial extraction in the conceptual advances of the Enlightenment, they are also outliers to the usual account of the Lisbon earthquake’s pivotal role in Western intellectual history. Voltaire, who was in his early sixties and living in exile from France in Geneva, his once illustrious career on the wane, positioned himself from the outset as the preeminent spokesperson for philosophical modernity. He responded to the news—or rather to the reactions of others—with palpable fury, and began writing a series of outraged verses that eventually became his famous “Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne” published the following year.²⁶ Voltaire cast the poem as a rigorous philosophical exercise—its subtitle is “examination of the axiom All is Well”—complete with footnotes and references to classical figures (Homer, Plato,

Epicurus, Lucretius, Cicero, and Augustine of Hippo) as well as later “savants” (Erasmus, Pascal, Alexander Pope, Lord Bolingbroke, Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, William Warburton, Étienne de Silhouette, Samuel Clarke, Pierre Bayle, and Pierre-Joseph Thoulier d’Olivet).²⁷ From this platform of erudition—a somewhat flimsy one, his detractors would say—Voltaire raged against the pernicious cruelty he perceived in various responses to the catastrophe.

To theologians who presumed the earthquake was a punishment delivered by God, he demanded to know, “Will you, seeing this mass of victims, say: ‘God is avenged, Their death is the price of their crimes?’” More bitter questions follow:

What crime, what fault, had these children committed
Who now lie crushed and bleeding at their mother’s breast?
Lisbon, which exists no longer: was it more full of vice
Than London, than Paris, immersed in pleasures?
Lisbon has sunk, and in Paris they dance. (*DL* 19)

Voltaire was not making an original point here; even the Bible’s writers observed that divine punishment was often opaque, and that places left untouched by God’s anger were often just as sinful as those that were destroyed. But Voltaire touched his finger here to something he found abhorrent in the pulse of his moment: an emergent sense of cruel pleasure in places like London and Paris provoked by the knowledge of Lisbon’s suffering. He did not go so far as to say that people in London and Paris *delighted* in the Lisbon news, or that they danced *because* Lisbon had entered the abyss. Instead he conjured a scenario of international Pietà, an iconic image of innocent suffering at the “sein maternel,” the maternal breast, that evoked the fundamental Christian sense of compassion that he understood to be absent in the initial theological response to the earthquake as a divine punishment for a sinful city. To see the Lisbon catastrophe in such a light, Voltaire suggested, was to be guilty of an affective response that the Germans had developed a term for two centuries earlier: *Schadenfreude*, a sense of pleasure incited by the misfortune of others.

Psychologists, cultural historians, and linguists seem to agree that *schadenfreude*, or some concept of this emotion, exists in most languages and cultures and always has.²⁸ As Leo Spitzer once put it in his classic 1942 essay on the term, “People who experience *schadenfreude* are unfortunately everywhere.” There is nothing inherently German about this emotional experience, Spitzer claimed, and he followed up with the related observation that critics of those who display *schadenfreude* are “also everywhere among civilized peoples.”²⁹ Spitzer’s distinction between the universality of *schadenfreude* and the more limited purview of its “civilized” critics may be nothing more than a product of his moment. Yet *schadenfreude*’s “civilized” critics began defining and exploring the nature of this cruel

emotion during a particular historical moment in the rise of European empires—precisely when the suffering of others, suddenly on display in writings about the New World, began to take shape within a newly geographic and racialized framework. A definition for the now obsolete concept of “maligne joye” (“malicious joy”), for example, appears in Antoine Furetière’s 1690 *Dictionnaire* and fits almost perfectly with the meaning of German *schadenfreude*: “On appelle *maligne joye*, une *joye* secrete qu’on a du mal qui arrive à autrui, & qu’on n’ose tesmoigner au dehors” (“One calls *maligne joye* that secret joy one takes in the evil that befalls someone else, and that one dare not show externally”).³⁰ Voltaire himself discusses the phrase in his 1761 commentary on Corneille, correcting the great tragedian’s misuse of the adjective when he meant merely “secret” but not malign.³¹ The English still had no word for the concept of cruel joy in 1650 when Thomas Hobbes wondered, “From what passion proceedeth it, that men take pleasure to behold from the shore the danger of them that are at sea in a tempest, or in a fight, or from a safe castle to behold two armies charge one another in the field?”³² But soon after the Lisbon earthquake, Edmund Burke redefined the term *sublime* to create an aesthetic category that explained his lurking sense that “we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others.”³³ The unnamed emotion that informed the sublime hinged upon “a sort of substitution” that, as Chapter 5 will suggest, continually referenced the colonial Americas.

Voltaire did not need Burke’s aesthetic category to understand that what enraged him about Europe’s response to the Lisbon earthquake was its fascination with horrific imagery. His poem rehearses this problem self-reflexively, naming the “appalling spectacle” that it conjures, while also condemning the “calm spectators—intrepid souls,” as he calls them sarcastically, who enjoy looking on at the catastrophe from their position of safety and speculating about its causes (*DL* 19). If Voltaire saw cruelty in theologians’ commentaries on the earthquake, he also took aim at natural scientists. “In peace, you research the cause of thunderstorms,” he railed, as if science undertaken in safety were itself an exercise in cowardice and cruelty (*DL* 19). Yet Voltaire’s poem was prescient in drawing attention to the linked philosophical structures that drove theology and naturalism to arrive at a worldview that accepted and even celebrated the destruction of Lisbon as “the effect of eternal laws” in nature as much as religion: inevitable and necessary, the result of a choice made by “a good and free God” (*DL* 19).

The poem’s greatest fury was thus directed at “philosophes trompés,” those “mistaken philosophers” who deluded themselves and each other while relentlessly promoting the idea of an orderly world in which every event is part of a larger beneficent plan (*DL* 19). The opening lines address them without citing any by name: “All is well, you say, and all is necessary.” These philosophers observe the “fatal chaos” and vast human pain throughout the world, Voltaire accuses, and then assemble it themselves within a scheme of “general happiness” supposedly made by God (*DL* 24). “Tout test bien” thereby reprises in translation Alexander

Pope's famous dictum that "Whatever is, is right," from his 1734 *Essay on Man*. This was a poem Voltaire had once praised for its virtuosic vindication of "the ways of God to man," including those instances "When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep / Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep."³⁴

After the Lisbon catastrophe occurred two decades later, Voltaire found it necessary to repudiate Pope quite specifically (his first footnote cites the English poet by name lest anyone miss the point) and to denounce his poetic defense of a beneficent universe organized by God into what the *Essay* famously defined as a "vast chain of being."³⁵ Once dazzled by Pope's "worlds on worlds," Voltaire now railed against the cruelty of his language and proclaimed his already troubled heart further pained by "these immutable laws of necessity, this chain of bodies, souls, and worlds." To Voltaire, Pope's framework of "bonheur général" was not only ludicrous given the world's evidence to the contrary but also arguably self-interested, depending on abstractions and hypotheticals that create distance between the knower and the sufferer. It was not pride, as Pope's poem might have suggested, to feel sorrow and horror after hearing of the Lisbon catastrophe; it was a form of pride, to the contrary, to be so certain philosophically and theologically that sorrow and horror were misplaced because "tout est bien." Such complex defenses of a general goodness are, Voltaire charges, not simply "scholars' dreams" but "profound chimeras": both illusory and monstrous in what they aim to accomplish by drawing all human suffering into a broad justification for the general happiness of the world. As the poem draws toward its conclusion, the Pope-echoing philosophers are no longer saying but shouting that "all is well" in a single "lamentable voice" (DL 24).

Voltaire published his poem on the Lisbon earthquake in Geneva in the spring of 1756, and by that summer his fellow philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had read it and found it distressing. Rousseau, younger than Voltaire, had earlier sent the celebrated writer his *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) and received a politely dismissive response.³⁶ Voltaire found all Rousseau's lamenting over the backwardness of "civilization" in the *Discourse* disingenuous. In the preface, Rousseau had claimed that if he had been capable of choosing the land of his own birth, he would not have chosen "a republic newly founded" in modern Europe: instead, "I would have wanted to choose as my country one delivered by a lucky incapacity from the fierce love of conquest, and protected by an even more fortunate location from fear of becoming itself the object of conquest by any other state."³⁷ Yet Rousseau had looked to places hardly free from fear of conquest and indeed already subject to Europe's "fierce love" of it as a model for political freedom from contemporary European horrors. Throughout the *Discourse*, this model was provided by the varied peoples he termed "negroes and savages"; the "Caraihs of Venezuela"; the "Orinoco," and especially "the Caribs, who of all peoples existing today have least departed from the state of nature" (D 83, 88, 103). Moreover, as Voltaire pointed out, running off to learn true freedom by "discover[ing] the aborigines of

Canada”—or any of Rousseau’s other idealized “brutes”—was hardly convenient given the ongoing wars of conquest being fought against them.³⁸ No solution to the world’s evils was going to be simply “lucky” or “fortunate” (*D* 58–59).

It was in the context of this earlier intellectual exchange that Rousseau read the poem on the Lisbon earthquake and offered his response in a 1756 letter that historians, focusing on the missive’s rousing conclusion, sometimes call the “*Lettre sur la Providence*.”³⁹ “All the subtleties of Metaphysics,” Rousseau writes, “will not make me doubt for a moment the immortality of the soul and a beneficent Providence. I sense it, I believe it, I want it, I hope it, I shall defend it until my last breath” (*L* 256). Yet this concluding rhetorical flourish is somewhat misleading, for Rousseau acknowledges earlier in the letter that Voltaire never meant to create “a work against Providence”; his fury was always directed against those who used the idea of Providence to minimize and rationalize the existence of profound human suffering—almost always happening to someone else, and often (as in the case of Voltaire and Rousseau discussing Lisbon) far away (*L* 241). Rousseau’s more salient contribution in the letter is not his defense of Providence but rather his distinction between “moral evil” and the “physical ills” caused by “imperturbable matter,” the stuff of the non-sentient world (*L* 242). The two are linked, Rousseau argues, because the suffering caused by both kinds of ills is ultimately the fault of a particular sort of human: “the free man, perfected, hence corrupted” (*L* 242). Both kinds of evil, Rousseau suggested, came from Europeans, who were the product of their own devouring form of civilization.

For Rousseau, the Lisbon catastrophe was thus largely the fault of the Lisboners themselves—not because they were sinful but because they were “civilized.” “Nature did not construct twenty-thousand houses of six or seven stories there,” he pointed out:

If the inhabitants of this large city had been more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less, and perhaps of no account. All would have fled at the first disturbance and the next day they would have been seen twenty leagues from there, and gay as if nothing had happened. But it is necessary to remain, to be obstinate around some hovels, to expose oneself to new quakes, because what one leaves behind is worth more than what one can bring along. How many unfortunate people perished in this disaster because of one wanting to take his clothes, another his paper, another his money? It is not known that the person of each man has become the least part of himself, and that it is almost not worth the trouble of saving it when one has lost all the rest. (*L* 242)

This interpretation of the Lisbon earthquake anticipates some of the concerns of modern emergency prevention and management: the height and construction of buildings, the density of urban space, the collective assessment of risk after the first

sign of the earthquake, and the immediate actions taken as it occurred. Rousseau's has accordingly been designated as "the first truly social scientific view of the disaster"; his rejoinder to Voltaire adumbrates the precept that "natural disaster" is a contradiction in terms.⁴⁰

But Rousseau also makes a more elusive point here about the devaluation of the human body and self that results from the overvaluation of material property and its currency of exchange in paper and money. The "person of each man" is endangered less by the earthquake, he suggests, than by his own sense that he is "not worth the trouble of saving" without his various forms of wealth. This latter form of endangerment—like Rousseau's later and far more famous dictum from *The Social Contract* (1762) that "man is born free and is everywhere in chains"—took its essential force from a reality that he glimpsed but did not confront as his real interest.⁴¹ Rousseau could acknowledge in passing that in France "it is claimed that it is necessary to let [peasants] die of misery, in order for them to enable us to live"; but it was the effect on "us"—not on the peasants, and even less on the enslaved peoples in European colonies—that concerned him (L 225).

Rousseau could thus assume that just as "natural men" were supposedly freer than their European counterparts, so earthquakes did not trouble "savages who dwell scattered in isolated places, and who fear neither the collapse of roofs nor the conflagration of houses." While earthquakes occur in such places, "We do not speak of them, because they do not cause any harm to the Gentlemen of Cities, the only men of whom we take account" (L 242). In contrast, Rousseau wanted Voltaire to take account of Europe's rural men: an "honest bourgeois," for example, or a "Mountaineer" hailing "from the upper Valais," or "a good artisan" or "even a peasant" from countries other than France, where they were too mistreated to be worth consulting (L 244). Moreover, he urged Voltaire later in the letter to think beyond Europe to the universe and consider, "as seems probable," that "the planets are inhabited." He asks, "Why would I be worth more in [God's] eyes than all the inhabitants of Saturn?" Rousseau seems to feel he has clinched his argument with this question, exposing the "ridicule" of attaching so much importance to the death of a single sentient person, or the single city of Lisbon, given the vastness of the universe. "This [Saturn] population being assumed," he concludes, "the conservation of the universe seems to have, for God himself, a morality which is multiplied by the number of the inhabited worlds" (L 248).

This conclusion about the morality of the universe inevitably evokes those "inhabited worlds" of the so-called New World that go unmentioned here: worlds recently "multiplied" within the framework of European knowledge and that were surely also the inspiration for Pope's "worlds on worlds."⁴² When Rousseau asks rhetorically why one earthly life should be more valuable than all the lives on Saturn, the more pressing question is clearly why some European lives should matter more than the lives of those in the "inhabited worlds" beyond. Rousseau can acknowledge that French peasants are viewed as expendable in the name of

a better quality of life for “us.” And he can imagine a better European society in which men are educated toward the virtues of “noble savages” outside Europe. But he cannot see that the “morality” he imagines for the universe—according to which the extinction of one or some beings is understood to be necessary for the conservation of a whole universal system, a moral necessity that grows in multiple factors with the number of inhabited worlds discovered to exist—derives its fundamental logic from Europe’s ongoing conquests. Rousseau can sense but not say that this multiplying morality justifies not the universe or the solar system but the “worlds on worlds,” to repeat Pope, where “Damned to the mines, an equal fate betides / The slave that digs it, and the slave that hides.”⁴³

Where Voltaire observed “this chain of bodies, souls, and worlds” and rebuked Pope for upholding its essential rightness, Rousseau found the *Essay on Man* reassuring: “Pope sweetens my ills and leads me to patience,” he wrote to Voltaire. Moreover, Rousseau defended Pope’s philosophical position—the multiplying morality produced by Europe’s conquest of new worlds—by naming Voltaire’s charge explicitly: “This optimism which you find so cruel consoles me still in the same woes that you force on me as unbearable” (L 241). The word “optimism” does not appear in Voltaire’s poem, but over the next four years, Voltaire reformulated his poetic response to the Lisbon earthquake in the famous satire, *Candide, ou L’Optimisme*, which made the term and its attendant philosophy the central object of ridicule. Rousseau never got the personal acknowledgment he wanted from Voltaire, but, as he put it later in a letter to a colleague, “My letter gave birth to *Candide*.”⁴⁴ He was not wrong: Rousseau reproached Voltaire in one line of a letter for finding optimism not consoling but cruel, and Voltaire then wrote a whole novel exploring optimism’s cruelty.

Their fundamental disagreement provides a prehistory of Lauren Berlant’s important formulation: the nineteenth-century US would be a triumphant destination for the cruelty of optimism, where sentimental fiction would provide readers with self-congratulatory and imaginary solutions to problems they could then go about forgetting with clear conscience.⁴⁵ No wonder that Rousseau, who envisioned himself “defend[ing Providence] until my last breath,” feels somehow more “American” than Voltaire, who offered no sentimental solution to the problems he addressed beyond a pointedly bootless “hope”—which was added to a second draft of his poem only to satisfy the first shocked readers of the text (L 241).

Voltaire, Leibniz, and the Colonial Making of Theodicy

In his poetic response to the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire also took on the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, whose work provided a different version of “tout est bien.” Leibniz proceeded throughout his oeuvre from what he called

“my fundamental assumption that God has chosen the best of all possible worlds,” and he was a fan of metaphorical knots that had to be carefully tied and untied or simply respected, never cut apart like the fabled Gordion version in a manner he saw as unbecoming of a philosopher.⁴⁶ Voltaire had dismissed him briefly toward the end of his poem on Lisbon:

Leibniz never taught me by what invisible knots,
In this best ordered of all possible universes,
An eternal disorder, a chaos of misfortunes,
Mixes our vain pleasures with real pain,
Nor why the innocent, as well as the guilty,
Undergo equally this inevitable evil. (DL 27)

Leibniz was not only a philosopher but also a mathematician, and thus an exemplar of what Voltaire called “Tristes calculateurs des misères humaines,” grim-faced men who justified the existence of human misery with abstruse mathematical calculations for which Voltaire had no patience, and in which he found no comfort (DL 23). Voltaire saw potential self-interest, and a certain lurking violence, in this philosophical approach: “misery’s mathematics,” as Melville would later call it in his own Voltaire-inspired investigations, to be explored in [Chapter 7](#).

Leibniz introduced the enduring term for these calculations in the title of his 1710 *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal* (*Essays of Theodicy on the Goodness of God, the Liberty of Man, and the Origin of Evil*), written and published originally in French. According to historians of philosophy, Leibniz was the first to give the project of justifying the existence of evil with belief in the oversight of omnipotent and all-knowing God the name of theodicy.⁴⁷ Voltaire did not use the term *theodicy* in his poem or in *Candide*, but he had suspicions about the project: “This misfortune, you say, is a good for someone else” (DL 23). Who might that someone else be? For the abstractions of Leibniz’s “métaphysico-théologo-cosmolo-nigologie,” as Voltaire satirically dubbed theodicy in *Candide*, emerged—like the term *schadenfreude*—in a specific historical and political moment.⁴⁸

From the beginning, there were grubby real-world issues shaping the general project of theodicy, anxieties and desires that peeked through all its orderly logic. For example, Leibniz himself could acknowledge in his *Theodicy* that, while refuting another philosopher’s conception of moral evil, he got distracted by “the pleasure one feels when one thinks to find in the mythologies of the gods some trace of the old history of fabulous times.” The trace he detected was, specifically, of “a time when the western or Celtic princes made themselves masters of Greece, of Egypt and a good part of Asia” (T 213). This earlier era of vast empire was, in his view, “confirmed by the great number of words in the Greek and German tongues which correspond so closely” (T 214). The gods of Greek and Roman myths were

in fact distant historical “Princes of Asia and Greece,” he surmised, and so “it may be that Jupiter is himself descended ... from the earlier Celto-Scythian princes” (*T* 213). Sifting through mythology, Leibniz found Germanic people steering at the helm of the ancient empires that gave birth to Western civilization, and he did so at precisely the moment when European countries were racing each other to establish new empires in the new “worlds on worlds.” That Germanic countries were not in reality at the head of the race was part of the point of this pleasurable fantasy. The abstract and philosophical project of explaining the existence of evil in a divinely created world often led, that is, in transparently political directions.

Given Leibniz’s background, this should not be surprising. Before Leibniz wrote his *Theodicy*, he was not just a young philosophy professor but also a cultural diplomat—perhaps even a “German secret agent,” as Steven Nadler calls him—in mid-seventeenth-century France.⁴⁹ There he hoped to use his persuasive skills in the interests of the German states at a time when they were precariously war-torn, divided by religion in post-Reformation Europe, and under threat from France in particular. Leibniz’s ambitious agenda was to divert Louis XIV’s attention from his military ventures against German states by refocusing his interests on Christian Europe’s common Muslim enemy. To this end, Leibniz devised his *Concilium Egyptiacum*, an advisory text advocating a grand “Plan for a New Holy War” to be waged in North Africa against Egypt. Leibniz’s agenda was thus geopolitical with added religious value: good for Germanic people and polities first and foremost by redirecting French forces toward Islamic enemies, good for Europe more broadly by ending political violence between Catholics and Protestants, and good ultimately for Christianity by setting the real-world groundwork for philosophically resolving the theological schism dividing Catholics and Protestants. Louis XIV’s rejection of this plan sent Leibniz from politics and espionage back to philosophy, bequeathing to the world the *Theodicy* as well as the concept and its discursive future.⁵⁰ And while theodicy is conventionally defined as an abstract defense of God’s benevolence and omnipotence in the face of evidence provided by the material world, its conceptual origins lie in part in the history of empire dating back to antiquity and, more importantly, in Europe’s encounter with new geographies and populations as it colonized and racialized the non-European world.

Indeed, the *Theodicy* expresses Leibniz’s early desire to unite Catholic and Protestant Europe in a “Holy War” or broadly extirpative project against Islamic culture, from the “perverse spirit in the midst of Egypt,” to the erroneous sayings of “Moghul wom[e]n,” to the “Turks” who raise kidnapped “Polish children” and force them to die in impiety (*T* 179). But unlike his earlier plan to provoke a crusade against Egyptians and Ottomans, this later text has a broader, more global purview. Its defense of the “best of all possible worlds” is replete with geographic references to the new worlds of the Americas. Moreover, in *Theodicy* Leibniz finds other forms of religious error beyond Islam. Europe’s early slaves—the Slavs with

“their Zernebog or black God”—have a counterpart in “the very many barbarous peoples, even in America [who] have been deluded by [similar belief in an evil principle] without having had need of philosophy” (*T* 208). The concept of theodicy grounds its abstractions, moreover, by referring readers to a world governed by laws regarding not just sovereignty but slavery. Theodicy’s vindication is premised on a God who is like “a great and good prince [who] ... will think of making his subjects happy ... though his subjects were slaves from birth, bondsmen (in lawyers’ parlance)” (*T* 165).

This state of religious subjection may be an ideal, but its inspiration has contemporary material and legal correspondences in European practices of conquest and enslavement, consequences that emerge when Leibniz discusses the differences between “corrective” and “punitive justice”: “one razes the houses of rebels ... to inspire terror,” for example, not for punishment but “for the sake of outward appearances” that will dissuade further acts of resistance (*T* 163). Indeed, the received knowledge Leibniz assumes in his readers relates to specific portions of the globe where conquest is underway. “We know that sometimes whole cities are destroyed and the inhabitants put to the sword, to inspire terror in the rest,” he observes before revealing the optimal nature of such events: “That may serve to shorten a great war or a rebellion, and would mean a saving of blood through the shedding of it: there is no decimation there.” There is no “Destruction of the Indies,” as per the title of Bartolomé de las Casas’s famous 1552 tract on the Spanish conquest of the Americas. All violent events, no matter how horrifying, bend toward conservation of a “general republic of spirits.” Vindicating God’s “universal harmony,” in other words, is a vast geographical project in a world that has “multiplied” over the last century for Europeans—and it requires accepting, Leibniz says, that we cannot know exactly why “the wicked of our globe are punished so severely” (*T* 205).

The global reach of empire also inspires Leibniz to argue that even the most extreme “bodily sufferings” caused by the purposeful infliction of pain should not disturb a rational person’s contentment with the order of the universe.

Even to-day entire tribes, such as the Hurons, the Iroquois, the Galibis and other peoples of America teach us a great lesson on this matter: one cannot read without astonishment of the intrepidity and well-nigh insensibility wherewith they brave their enemies, who roast them over a slow fire and eat them by slices. If such people could retain their physical superiority and their courage, and combine them with our acquirements, they would surpass us in every way ... All that which is effected by a wonderful vigour of body and mind in these savages, who persist obstinately in the strangest point of honour, might be acquired in our case by training, by well-seasoned mortifications, by an overmastering joy founded on reason, by great practice in preserving a certain presence of mind in the midst of the distractions and impressions most liable to disturb it. (*T* 284)

The specific theodicy of torture, then, is rooted in an Indigenous geography stretching from Canada to the northeastern coast of South America, from the Wyandot (or Iroquois-speaking Huron people) of the Lake Ontario region, to the Haudenosaunee (or confederacy of Iroquois-speaking people) of what is now New York State, to the Galibi people of French Guiana. It is also a French colonial geography, of course, represented to Europe in texts read widely with “astonishment.” These texts—like Leibniz’s gloss of them here—attest to the “intrepidity” of Indigenous people across the hemisphere in withstanding terrifying violence: not the rapacity of European conquest but the supposed cannibalism of their own Indigenous enemies, according to a topos of colonial projection that goes back to Columbus, and perhaps before that back to the first Portuguese slavers in western Africa. Importantly, Leibniz’s idealized savages, unlike Rousseau’s, do not provide a foil for European civilization; they simply have qualities that might be mixed with those of Europeans—as though, he seems to suggest, colonialism might produce a better kind of human, surpassing European “man.” But this hypothetical hybrid Man quickly recedes in favor of the real point: the acquisition of valued Indigenous qualities by Europeans—and not because they are likely to suffer cannibalism (as Las Casas figured the experience of conquest) but because of those “distractions and impressions” that disturb daily life in Europe. With this light improvement in the character of Europeans, the history of torture in the Americas becomes one more element in the best of all possible worlds.

Theodicy had a profound but often unacknowledged relationship to the world beyond western Europe, then, and philosophical optimism embedded a set of latent geopolitical stakes. Voltaire recognized these stakes obliquely in a key passage of his poem on the Lisbon earthquake. Would the grand perspective offered by theodicy console the sad citizens of Lisbon, asks the speaker, those directly in “the horror of the torments,” where the earthquake had struck? The question provides an opportunity for Voltaire to briefly ventriloquize the “philosophes trompés” as they offer a theodicy-structured injunction to Lisbon’s inhabitants:

Fall down, die calmly,
For the good of the world, we destroy your refuge
Other hands will build your burning palaces,
Other peoples will be born out of your crushed walls,
The North will enrich itself on your fatal losses
All your ills are a good in the general laws. (*DL* 21)

What presents itself as a system of general and universal good—the larger “bonheur du monde”—is in fact a mask for specific self-interest, Voltaire suggests. The particular beneficiaries of this system emerge in these lines as “Le Nord”—the Europe that is north of Portugal and, more broadly, comprises a Global North to the new worlds it is rapidly colonizing. This North inherits from other places’

wreckage for which it in turn disavows any responsibility. Thus the ambiguity of “on détruit,” a phrase that might be translated as “one destroys” or, in a passive construction, “is destroyed”—or, as I have translated it here, “we destroy.”

Whether the immediate cause of the destruction is an earthquake or a war of conquest, the “other hands” that rebuild and the “other peoples” who rise to power will together constitute “Le Nord”—just as the “general laws” of a philosophy that is developed in “the North” will uphold what happens as an abstract, cosmic “good” rather than a historically contingent pattern. Hidden within optimism, Voltaire warns, is a metaphysical mapping of the global world that both representationally and economically sustains “the North” upon the catastrophes at its margins: a philosophical world-system of sorts that is in fact premised on a disastrous South punished catastrophically for its purported sins, and asked to “die calmly” for the sake of the universe. Lisbon, once part of this broad North, will now, in the long wake of its great earthquake, become part of an ever-evolving philosophical story of mass destruction wrought by European empire on the Global South.

Candide and the Origins of Americanness: Or, the Lisbon Earthquake and the Guaraní War

Voltaire continued his response to the Lisbon earthquake in *Candide* (1759), the only major fictional work of the era to feature scenes set during the catastrophe.⁵¹ But while Voltaire’s Lisbon poem was largely abstract, his short novella and *comte philosophique* homed in on the actual ground of the philosophical world-system, on the geopolitics of philosophy created by the relation of theodicy and philosophical optimism more generally to the world beyond western Europe. With its pointed subtitle—“ou, l’optimisme”—*Candide* illuminated why and how it had become part of “the general laws” that “Le Nord va s’enrichir”: that “The North will enrich itself on [the] fatal losses” of other worlds. Its central philosopher-character stands in for Leibniz, who is named specifically toward the end of the novella when Pangloss announces that he will not change his thinking as a result of experiences that undermine his conclusions: “I still feel the same way ... for after all I am a philosopher; it wouldn’t do for me to retract: Leibniz could not have been wrong, preestablished harmony being the most beautiful thing in the world” (C 220). Pangloss, as his name suggests, glosses all events and circumstances in the world with his “métaphysico-théologo-cosmolo-nigologie,” interpreting everything to be as it should in a pre-ordained optimal world. His philosophical foil allows the larger novella not so much to develop a dissenting philosophy as to make a prescient historical argument about the global eighteenth century: to offer a bitter but incisive account of what European civilization had by then done, under the predatory sign of optimism, to itself and to the rest of the world.

The novella begins in Westphalia, site of the two famous treaties that in 1648 ended the massively fatal Confessional Wars begun in 1618. But *Candide*'s opening location does not signify the dawn of a new peace, nor does it celebrate the origin of the modern global order that we now call the Westphalian system. It is instead the site of a feudal order that Voltaire famously ridicules, a "terrestrial paradise" for its lordly class, perhaps, but one that is decimated within a few pages by Bulgarian soldiers who have no reason to respect a body of international law that recognizes the sovereignty of only Christian states (C 89). The true originary event in *Candide* is not the so-called Westphalian peace teased by the novella's first sentence but rather the "torments of hell" introduced in the fourth chapter when the eponymous protagonist reencounters Pangloss and sees that his face has been devoured by syphilis (C 99). The philosopher may have caught the disease by intercourse with a "docile" chambermaid, but it was first introduced to Europe, he explains, "in a direct line from one of the companions of Christopher Columbus" (C 99).

The narrator of Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao* would call this conquest-born illness the first instance of *fukú*—the "curse and doom" of the modern world—and Voltaire's implied point is much the same.⁵² Columbus's landfall, accompanied by his first kidnapping and enslavement of Caribbean Amerindians, marks the beginning of the "tourments d'enfer" that characterize the global history narrated in *Candide*. "Voilà une étrange généalogie," cries Candide when he has heard Pangloss's explanation (C 99). This "strange genealogy" bequeaths the world its cruel modernity, symbolized by a disease that "Columbus ... caught in an island in America [and] which contaminates the source of generation, and frequently impedes propagation itself" (C 99). This syphilitic modernity is a phenomenon, Pangloss avows, of Europeans: belonging to "this continent of ours" and, "like [religious] controversy, peculiar to ourselves" (C 99). The rest of the world will be inflicted by it, though, in "a few centuries"—an outcome, like everything else in the world, that finds its place in the calculus of the optimal (C 100). The modern world-system introduced by Columbus may be "evidently opposed to the great end of nature," as Pangloss speculates, but without it "we should have had neither chocolate nor cochineal" (C 99). As the mutilated and enslaved "nègre" whom Candide encounters in Surinam puts it, "it is at this expense that you eat sugar in Europe" (C 163).

Columbus's syphilis thus marks the onset in *Candide* of what Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein have called Americanity, the larger structure of Indigenous dispossession, transatlantic slavery, and racialized extraction to which the European arrival in the Americas and before that in western Africa gives rise.⁵³ The event of the Lisbon earthquake draws the protagonist even closer to this matrix of "tourments d'enfer" and simultaneously introduces the rapacious and predatory underbelly of optimism and its role in shaping a philosophical world-system. Candide and Pangloss arrive in Lisbon just in time to experience the catastrophe and

its “thirty thousand inhabitants of both sexes, young and old ... buried beneath the ruins” (C 103). The philosopher responds to the catastrophe by comforting the survivors in their state of affliction with affirmation: “Things could not be otherwise ... all this is for the best” (C 105). Meanwhile, a Dutch colonial sailor—“born at Batavia”—assesses the disaster and sees the opportunity for plunder: “There will be something here to win” (C 104, 103). The sailor is unquestionably villainous—he has already caused another man’s death with his brutishness on the ship to Lisbon—but his perspective, juxtaposed with Pangloss’s theodicy, is structurally the same. It is not a coincidence that he hails as a settler-conqueror from the non-Iberian colonial world (what is today Jakarta, Indonesia): as Voltaire had predicted in his poem, “le Nord va s’enrichir.”

Crucially, the Lisbon earthquake sets in motion the deep southernizing of catastrophe by catalyzing Candide’s eventual voyage to South America where the remainder of the novel is largely set—and where, as Voltaire reminds us through Pangloss, Peru had suffered a terrible series of earthquakes over the centuries. As the babbling philosopher observes, “This earthquake [in Lisbon] is not a new thing ... the city of Lima experienced the same shocks in America last year; the same causes, the same effects: there is certainly a train of sulfur underground from Lima to Lisbon” (C 104). The object of Voltaire’s satire is the misplaced assuredness of natural-philosophical speculation, which seeks “la raison suffisante,” the “sufficing reason,” that renders all phenomena for the optimal good. But the turn toward Lima embedded in Pangloss’s remark is of profound importance. If the Lisbon earthquake has often figured as a paradigm shift in accounts of European Enlightenment and philosophy, this abrupt orientation toward South America reframes that grand narrative as an alternative catastrophic story about colonialism, extraction, and enslavement.

Before the earthquake, Candide is a simple orphan of unrecognized parentage, buffeted about Europe as one of the continent’s castaways; his “sweet” disposition seems to set him apart morally from other characters (C 50). After his earthquake experience (and a detour through the Inquisition), however, Candide assumes a new place in the hierarchy of the global-colonial world that Lisbon has rendered visible: he sets sail from Cádiz attended by Cacambo, a South American “valet” described as “the fourth part of a Spaniard, born of a mixed-race person in Tucumán” (C 137). Beyond this Spanish “fourth part,” Cacambo’s racial ancestry remains unnamed, but the province of Tucumán (in what is now Argentina) takes its name from the Quechua language—which is also Cacambo’s “langue maternelle,” and the tongue “péruvien,” he later reencounters in the hidden (and mythical) Inca land known as El Dorado (C 153).⁵⁴ At some undisclosed point, however, Cacambo left behind, or was taken from, this Inca village and then began the transatlantic career that brings him to Cádiz. “He has been a singing boy, sexton, sailor, monk, peddler, soldier, and lackey,” the narrator remarks—all of these, apparently, while being enslaved (C 137). For “valet” and “esclave” run close

together in Voltaire's prose as in eighteenth-century French more broadly—and Cacambo is, moreover, "a valet of the particular kind one often meets on the coasts of Spain and in the colonies": that is, the kind of valet who can be bought and sold (C 137).⁵⁵ Against the backdrop of the Lisbon earthquake, *Candide* has directly entered the slave-holding imperial economy.

He is also on his way to fight in a South American war over slavery, a fact that is clear in the novel, though Voltaire never says so explicitly. Indeed, the narrator describes this war in quite different terms: as a struggle to control "the Jesuits of Paraguay, who were accused of having excited one of their hordes to revolt against the Kings of Spain and Portugal" (C 120). This Jesuit-centered interpretation of the so-called Guaraní War (1754–1756), which overlapped with the Lisbon earthquake and, as we shall see, also shaped its aftermath, was not uncommon for its time. The immediate catalyst for the war was the Treaty of Madrid (1750), which ended a particular period of conflict between Portugal and Spain over the boundaries of their respective New World empires—and required that the Jesuit missions located on the Portuguese side of the new boundary relocate to the Spanish side. When the Indigenous inhabitants of the Río de la Plata region refused to leave their land, Spanish and Portuguese armies combined forces in February 1756 to massacre over 1,400 Guaraní and capture another several hundred.

The Jesuits were blamed for the war because they initially contested the treaty and because the missions had for decades offered sanctuary to Guaraní people against the depredations of Portuguese slavers. But as scholars such as Barbara Ganson and Julia Sarreal have shown, the Jesuits did not, in fact, control the Guaraní, who had been resisting enslavement and dispossession on their own terms long before the Treaty of Madrid. With two Jesuits per mission community, each with thousands of Guaraní residents, such control was hardly possible. Collaborating with the Jesuits according to their own agenda, the Guaraní exercised political autonomy in the missions while also growing a successful economy within their Jesuit-sponsored state. They also undertook their own negotiations with both Spanish and Portuguese officials after the Jesuits conceded to the terms of the Treaty of Madrid. When the Guaraní took up arms and refused to be removed, they were thus fighting to protect their freedom from enslavement and what had been their sovereign homeland for generations.⁵⁶

In *Candide*, the narrator offers the expected European-centered interpretation of the Guaraní War. But this point of view is also at times undercut by an alternative perspective coalescing around the character of Cacambo, who first materializes in the narrative only after the ship's arrival in Buenos Aires. Here, Cacambo arrives suddenly at the outset of a chapter, and the narrator must backtrack to explain that the multilingual "valet" of ambiguous racial origins has come from Spain and is returning to his South American homeland. Cacambo's first piece of advice for *Candide*, who has run afoul of the Spanish governor of Buenos

Aires, is to run to the Guaraní-controlled state of Paraguay. “You were going to fight against the Jesuits; let us go and fight for them,” says the new character, who is both enslaved and now, importantly, also directing *Candide*’s every move (C 138). If Cacambo’s emergent power is a source of the comedy in the narrative, the character himself is drawn straight from the history of the European race for empire as depicted by Voltaire’s former teacher, the Jesuit traveler and historian of New France, Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, whose *Histoire du Paraguay* contains many such translators and guides who understand the constant side-switching of the Europeans. Like such historical figures in Voltaire’s most significant source text, Cacambo also understands that the survival of the Indigenous and African-descended subjects from whom Europe is extracting labor and life requires intimate knowledge of how to adjust accordingly in a complex colonial world.

Cacambo, though born in Quechua-speaking Tucumán, now reveals that he also knows the road to Guaraní territory perfectly well, though he casts it as a Jesuit “kingdom” and appeals to *Candide*’s vanity and ambition by assuring him that he will be well received as a soldier with Bulgarian military training and that he is certain to make a “prodigious fortune” by following the lead of his enslaved valet (C 138). To persuade *Candide*, Cacambo appeals finally to the most popular narrative of European “discovery”: “When one has no success in one world, one finds it in another. It’s a very great pleasure to see and to do new things” (C 138). Yet even *Candide*, so easily led along, seems to stumble over Cacambo’s sudden display of knowledge about the workings of Paraguay. Cacambo explains his obviously sophisticated understanding and simultaneously emplaces it in a self-deprecating frame by referring to himself a humble former “cuistre,” a bumpkin, “in the Jesuit College of the Assumption” (C 138). He can hardly complete the sentence, however, without betraying again how much he knows about the officially Jesuit-sponsored state—including its diameter and division into provinces—and pronouncing himself “to know the new government of the Fathers as well as the streets of Cádiz” (C 138). Cacambo is no yokel; he knows exactly what he is doing—including what to say to *Candide* to move him along toward Paraguay.

Of course, Cacambo is also sometimes a mere voice-box for Voltaire’s own perspectives. The South American valet thus assures *Candide* ironically that Jesuit government is quite an “admirable thing”—that the Jesuits “have everything” while the Indigenous people “have nothing,” which is “a masterpiece of justice and reason” (C 138)—while also calmly observing the syphilitic cycle of continuing violence that *Candide* as a novel lays bare. As Cacambo observes, “[The Jesuits] wage war here against the kings of Spain and Portugal and in Europe hear the confessions of the same kings; here [the Jesuits] kill Spaniards and in Madrid they send them to heaven” (C 138). With this particular comment, moreover, Cacambo invokes one of the most famous Jesuit figures shaping the aftermath

of the Lisbon earthquake—Father Gabriel Malagrida—and further embeds that European catastrophe within a complex history of South American colonialism.

Malagrida was an Italian Jesuit who had lived as a missionary in Brazil for the three decades before the Lisbon earthquake. He had survived capture and near-execution by Guaraní warriors not allied with the Jesuits, and he had helped to grow the *reducción* system and attendant plantations generating vast income for the Jesuit Society across South America.⁵⁷ He was also a “supra-national religious hero,” commanding crowds in the New World as well as the Old—and able to bring Catholic European sovereigns to their knees in seeking absolution, as Cacambo observes. He traveled to Portugal to hold King João V in his arms as the ruler expired in 1750 and never left again.⁵⁸ Because of this vast personal power as well as his leading position within a wealthy religious organization that had an outsized influence on the Portuguese economy and trade with the colonies, Malagrida was also viewed as an enemy of the ambitious Marquis de Pombal, the modernizing protagonist in most accounts of the Lisbon earthquake.

The Marquis de Pombal is often lauded for organizing methodically after the earthquake: burying the dead, bringing relief to the injured, rebuilding the city, demanding the pursuit of natural explanations for the event, and ultimately saving the Portuguese economy.⁵⁹ For the field of disaster studies, Pombal’s plan of action marks the first successful “modern” response to disaster.⁶⁰ But Pombal was also the Portuguese government’s secretary of state for foreign affairs and wars, and the architect of the Treaty of Madrid, which he hoped would strengthen Portuguese imperial power in Brazil by separating the Jesuits from Indigenous allies who were resisting enslavement and exerting political autonomy within their Jesuit-sponsored region. When the Lisbon earthquake struck in the middle of the Guaraní resistance movement, Pombal saw his chance to diminish Jesuit power and thereby solve a long-standing imperial problem that affected the control of enslaved labor in both Portugal and the colonies.

Pombal achieved this by facing off against Malagrida who, as to be expected, preached a sermon designating the catastrophe as “*furor Divino*,” a punishment sent by God.⁶¹ Any demand for spiritual reckoning interrupted Pombal’s most pressing agenda: to reinstate control over a panicked city in which mechanisms of power and discipline had been drastically interrupted. The city’s wealthiest people, including its foreign traders, had—as in the case of most disasters—fared better than its poor, and their property was now vulnerable (*LE* 35, 50). Moreover, in a city in which 10 percent of the entire population was enslaved and 20 percent of it constituted what James Sweet has called “African Lisbon”—living in communities of urban enslaved and free people and people of mixed African descent—the earthquake’s threat to an established order built on Black labor was considerable.⁶² Firsthand accounts of the earthquake’s aftermath tended to be written by those with an investment in that order, and they accordingly stress the problems of

looting and robbery and the escape of “thieves and galley slaves” from the prisons (LE 61). Indeed, those classified as criminals in a society built on the labor of enslaved and other subaltern people often developed their own strategies for negotiating the aftermath of the catastrophe—including the especially effective tactic (also used in colonial Peru) of circulating predictions of another imminent earthquake (LE 50). This resulted in landed citizens fleeing their property and created new conditions for redistribution of the city’s imperial wealth by theft. But from Pombal’s perspective, Lisbon’s most dire problem was its sudden labor shortage. He made it a crime to leave the city, established control over unhoused refugees, and had so-called “rascals” remanded into forced work gangs (LE 82). The aftermath of the earthquake within Lisbon proper thus evidenced a struggle over empire, for Lisbon in the mid-eighteenth century was a slave-holding city filled with people from Africa and the New World.

Yet historians do not typically view such aspects of the earthquake’s aftermath as part of a conflict between a modern imperial metropolitan order and those colonized, racialized, and diasporic subjects living within it to find routes to food, currency, and freedom from unfree labor conditions. To T. D. Kendrick, the first twentieth-century historian to study the earthquake, Pombal was a largely admirable modern man of action—someone to be “warmly respected” for establishing eventual control over “a state of lawless panic” (LE 76). Kendrick produced his history of the catastrophe while serving as director of the British Museum, itself a venerable imperial institution, and his project recovered the Lisbon earthquake from historical oblivion in a particular context: during the midcentury moment of Europe’s great confrontation with decolonization movements around the world. The Indian Independence Act had come into effect in 1947; the Malayan and Mau Mau Anti-British National Liberation Wars were underway; and in Portugal, Britain’s oldest ally in the world, the Salazar dictatorship remained in power with the goal of preventing the independence of any of its colonies. Kendrick’s study of the Lisbon earthquake was published in 1955, the year of the Bandung conference: the Gold Coast would become Ghana within two years. These contexts inevitably shape his interpretation of Pombal as a hero of modern disaster response rather than a man shoring up his own power in his position at the crossroads of intertwining forms of racial and disaster capitalism.

However we understand him, Pombal was not patient with those who stood in his way, and he was not pleased when Malagrida, even after he had been warned to stop, continued to preach about the earthquake’s punitive meaning. In 1756, Malagrida went a step further, circulating a pamphlet version of the sermon titled *Juízo da verdadeiro causa do terramoto*, “A Judgment on the True Cause of the Earthquake,” that took aim at the modernizer’s policies: “oh Lisboa,” he warned readers, the only cause of the disaster was “our own intolerable sins”—“not comets, not stars, not vapors, or exhalations,” or any other “natural causes.”⁶³ Not, to use Pangloss’s terms, a train of underground sulfur: the earthquake was

divine punishment for abominable wrongdoing. Of course, natural explanations for the earthquake were precisely the ones for which Pombal had endorsed investigation—and the only explanations, as he saw it, that would consolidate the power of the state to control a volatile and unfree labor force in rebuilding the city (*LE* 88). This position, too, Malagrida shot down in his sermon pamphlet: “It is necessary to devote all our strength and purpose to the task of repentance. Would to God we could see as much determination and fervour for this necessary exercise as are devoted to the erection of huts and new buildings!”⁶⁴ Malagrida thus posed a double and transatlantic threat to Portuguese power, in Pombal’s view—to the reconstruction of Lisbon by a largely colonial labor force and to the maintenance of Brazilian mines and plantations that continued to be deprived, as he saw it, of enslaved Guaraní laborers. Pombal had Malagrida exiled and then accused him of participating in a (probably spurious) plot to kill the Portuguese king. Eventually, Malagrida was tried and executed, paving the way for Pombal to expel the Jesuits from Brazil not long after the massacre that ended the Guaraní War.⁶⁵

In the world of *Candide*, that massacre—a New World catastrophic twin to the Lisbon earthquake—is imminent but never depicted. Yet the novella sketches out such historical entanglements by showing the complexity of the colonial world. We see a Paraguay patrolled by Guaraní soldiers—“officier[s] Paragvain[s]” with whom Cacambo communicates fluently—as well as a Jesuit state sustained on slavery as much as any other colonial order (*C* 138). Moreover, the novella registers the historical irony that the Jesuits trafficked in “esclaves nègres” even as their missions provided political sanctuary to Guaraní escaping Portuguese slave-hunters (*C* 140). As Cacambo steers *Candide* through this colonial thicket, he acts as an interpreter not only for his Westphalian bumpkin but for readers as well—and everything in the novella, even what unfolds before his emergence, appears differently when subjected to his oblique point of view. The most vulgar instances of racism in the text—such as those found in the notorious “History of the Old Woman,” for example—begin to coalesce as foils for the novella’s larger account of Americanness as a structure of “tourments d’enfers” that begins in—and not beyond—Europe. If the Old Woman tells a story that hinges on white supremacist and Euro-Christian mythologies, the larger gesture her account makes within the novella is to locate its scene of cannibalism, ludicrously rational, in the Old World and not the new one. In *Candide*, that is to say, Europe is the site of empire’s first workshop, the laboratory in which the atrocities of cruel modernity are first tested out before their instantiation overseas.

So, too, in the infamous monkey scene does Cacambo’s point of view subtly reframe the profound racism of the narrative’s depiction of Indigenous women in sexual relationships with non-human primates. “Why should you think it so strange,” Cacambo asks *Candide*, “they are the fourth part of a man as I am the fourth part of a Spaniard?” (*C* 147). His elevated language in the scene—referring

to “the good graces of ladies”—is supposed to be part of the white supremacist spoof (C 147). But his observation registers a deeper point: the same calculus that defines Cacambo’s characterological significance in “the fourth part of a Spaniard”—the part that earns him a name in the novella—also defines the new category of “man” that emerged with European empire: what Sylvia Wynter once termed an “ethnaclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”⁶⁶ At the same time, Cacambo’s analogy draws attention to the anthropocentrism driving Indigenous dispossession and the links between the dual projects of anthropomorphism and white supremacy (which Melville, as discussed in [Chapter 7](#), will explore in the nineteenth century). Western racism depends upon Western anthropocentrism, and vice versa.

These are not, to be sure, Voltaire’s insights—though they are insights made possible by his character Cacambo, a type drawn from the author’s historical source text, who operates at the margins of Western empire and understands and ironizes its self-sustaining discourses in ways that allow the protagonist Candide to (seem to) develop. Candide turns away, ostensibly, from one of the most powerful of these discourses when he witnesses the suffering of the enslaved man in Surinam who has been maimed, as he puts it, to keep sugar on European tables. “‘O Pangloss!’ crie[s] out Candide, ‘It’s over. I must in the end renounce your optimism’” (C 164). Candide’s repudiation of this philosophy is accompanied by a bout of sobbing as he gazes upon a figure whom the narrator now calls “son nègre,” “his negro,” to mark the proprietary nature of this tear-laden outburst: the enslaved man is its object, and he now belongs emotionally to Candide, who will use him to misrecognize and disavow his own place in the economy of slavery (C 164).

This is the work of sentimentalism, of course, and it undercuts the ending of the novella and its somewhat empty gesture toward the possibilities to be found in a non-Euro-Christian philosophical framework—that is, in the perspective of the “bon musulman,” the “good Muslim,” the Turkish farmer who tills his own small garden himself (C 227). The famous ending of *Candide* takes its words from this romanticized figure: “il faut cultiver notre jardin” (C 227). But Candide does *not* till his own garden alone. For he still owns Cacambo—“Cacambo, who worked in the garden and who went to sell the produce in Constantinople, [and who] found the labor unbearable and cursed his fate” (C 224). To celebrate one’s cultivation of a garden while disavowing the enslaved labor that accomplishes the results (Jeffersonianism *avant la lettre*): that is the enlightened imperial ruse that Candide learns in the New World following his post-earthquake self-exile. Although not happy or wealthy as he had hoped to be, Candide reaches the end of his journey still sustaining himself on the misery of Cacambo. The Westphalian protagonist’s outcome is just as Voltaire had predicted in his earlier poem: “le Nord va s’enrichir.”

Translating the Lima–Callao Earthquake of 1746: Racial Extraction and Disaster Capitalism

Candide thus offers Voltaire's extended response to the Lisbon earthquake and to the philosophy of optimism, a fictional-philosophical rebuttal that sketched the violent new world-system emerging in the centuries since Columbus. In this sense, the novella's most fundamental philosophical gesture was a historical one: to emplace the Lisbon earthquake within a global history indelibly shaped by the conquest of the Americas. With its seismic eruption, Voltaire's Lisbon even had a kind of South American twin in Pangloss's cheerful reminder that "the city of Lima experienced the same shocks last year." Voltaire was probably alluding here not just to Peru's long history of earthquakes but more specifically to the great Lima–Callao earthquake of 1746, an event that may well have inspired his line about northern self-enrichment. For Lima, along with the rest of Pacific South America, had experienced many earthquakes that Voltaire, a voracious reader of travel accounts, would have understood to be quite common. Indeed, Voltaire would also have known from such accounts that catastrophes of all kinds, earthquakes included, made colonial cities vulnerable to exploitation and even reconquest by other imperial powers.

The widely circulated account of French royal military engineer and spy Amédée François Frézier, who traveled in South America between 1712 and 1714, likely provided Voltaire with many of the historical details used in *Candide*.⁶⁷ Frézier posed as a merchant throughout his sojourn, but he was there as a royal representative to evaluate the region's natural resources, especially its mines, and to assess the strengths of Spanish colonial fortification.⁶⁸ Upon his return, he produced his *Relation du Voyage de la Mer du Sud aux Côtes du Chili, du Pérou, et du Brésil*, first published in Paris in 1716.⁶⁹ The purpose of the text as a primer for possible French invasion is intimated at every turn, with particular attention to the region's earthquakes, which Frézier notes "are very frequent in Peru, and have much damaged" Lima especially (V 210). He records the dates of major tremors in the past, assesses the damage done, and describes the conflicting Spanish colonial interpretations of and responses to various seismic events in a city in which the likelihood of earthquakes daily "make[s] the inhabitants uneasy" (V 210). Frézier notes casually that a major 1678 earthquake had special religious resonance for destroying "particularly the Churches dedicated to the Blessed Virgin"—the rending of the earth so great "it was as if God the Son had risen for his Mother," as he puts it, citing from a prior account of Lima written by the Spanish priest Francisco Antonio de Montalvo (V 210). But another and more damaging series of tremors that struck and "almost entirely demolish'd" the city in 1682 is the one, Frézier observes, that Limaeans mark annually to preserve the "Memory of that dreadful Earthquake ... by publick prayers." "If we may believe the publick report," Frézier notes drily, "it was foretold by a Religious Man of the order of the Mercenarians,

who several days before it, ran along the streets like another Jonas, crying, *Do Penance*" (V 211).

But Frézier's interest in earthquakes is hardly spiritual; he offers these details to better illustrate the Spanish colonial culture that he derogates throughout the text as far inferior to that of the French (particularly when it comes to their poetry and their ostensibly poor apprehension of the dangers posed by the Indigenous inhabitants of the region). Earthquakes inspire Frézier not with religious questions but with "natural curiosity to enquire into the cause of them"—and he finds that the speculations of "philosophers" do "not always appear satisfactory" (V 212). While these philosophers imagine "subterranean winds and fires," Frézier believes earthquakes are "an effect of the waters the earth is inwardly moistened with, as living bodies are by the veins" (V 212). Frézier is interested primarily in the relationship between earthquakes and mineral wealth, and in the role of the earth's movement in the formation of mines: sulfur, salt, and, of course, metals. Earthquakes are caused by a "fermentation" of these mines, sometimes so great that they burst and the contents flow elsewhere over time. This conjecture is supported by the New World testimony of "gens du Pais": that "the gold is formed in the earth, even without any Mineral Vein" (V 114). Earthquake is thus an opportunity to understand the formation and location of mineral wealth. It is also an uncanny metaphor for conveying the decimation of the Indigenous population of the entire region, vastly "diminish'd by the conquest by the Spaniards" and the subsequent "work at the mines": for when they have been there a while, Frézier notes, the miners are so "penetrated" by the substances within that they die "tous tremblant," in a fit of bodily rending.⁷⁰

The veins of the earth, the veins of human bodies: Frézier is in South America to understand what the French could potentially extract and how. The state of the "Indians" is misery under Spanish domination, he observes, asserting that they "only wish for an opportunity to shake it off." He cites the wisdom of the Scythians to Alexander the Great (as recorded by the Roman historian Quintus Curtius Rufus): "*Do not imagine . . . that those you conquer can love you; there is never any affection between the master and the slave, the right of making war ever continues in the midst of peace.*" He notes that the Andeans of Cuzco have exercised this "right" from "time to time" and that, correspondingly, "The Spaniards know how to appease them with threats and to amuse them with fair promises." Most powerful, though, is the military reinforcement provided by the "great number of black slaves they yearly have brought from Angola and Guinea by way of Panama and Portabelo"; the Spaniards keep the two enslaved labor forces on terms of enmity, Frézier alleges, in part by punishing "carnal communication" with castration (V 267).

If the Spaniards have been purportedly effective in controlling the bodies of the enslaved, they have been less successful in controlling the body of earth and its potential wealth. The "Indians" know the locations of unused mines, he proposes,

but their “implacable hatred” of the Spaniards prevents them from divulging the information: the “hidden treasures and the rich mines, the knowledge whereof they communicate to one another, remain unknown and useless to both of them.” Frézier thus outlines this situation as a failure to achieve proper extraction on the part of both the Spaniards and the Andeans. On the one hand, “the Indians [do not] use [the mines] for themselves, being satisfied to live poorly, by their labor and in extreme misery.” On the other hand, the Spaniards “may not make their advantage” fully in their extractive projects, because “it is certain that the Indians ... will not discover [the mines] for fear of being made to work in them” (V 268). Another imperial power, Frézier implies, would enact proper excavation with the kind of knowledge he is able to supply. For example, Frézier warns, “Indians ... alone are fit for [the work of mining] where the Blacks cannot be employed because they all die” (V 269). Efficient extraction requires knowledge of different bodies, their contents and capacities, their tendency to expire or to tremble. Efficient extraction also requires understanding, as it turns out, how to make proper use of a catastrophe.

When the Lima–Callao earthquake struck in 1746, it devastated the city of Lima and caused a tsunami that submerged the port city of Callao and the surrounding coastal area.⁷¹ As Charles Walker shows in his illuminating study, the catastrophe arrived at the heart of colonial Spanish America, and readers throughout Europe and its colonies were soon circulating news of the account. One of the most important texts to emerge after the event was the *Individual y verdadera relación de la extrema ruyna que padeció la Ciudad de los Reyes* (*Individual and True Relation of the Extreme Ruin Suffered by the City of Kings*), published anonymously in Lima in 1746. Its author wrote as an eyewitness, but like the various European writers who would respond to the Lisbon earthquake less than a decade later, he also took a position of historical and religious-philosophical authority vis-a-vis the catastrophe. He began by considering the shaking of the earth among all other “judgements proceeding from natural causes” as a manifestation of “divine justice and almighty power”: with their suddenness, earthquakes serve the double purpose of both “warnings and executioners”—terrifying events that have been known “in all ages.” Out of this broad framework, though, the writer homes in on “these kingdoms” of the Americas in particular—which, as he notes, “have suffered greatly by them ... since their first conquest.”⁷² The conquest is more than a simple historical marker for the beginning of Western knowledge of the Americas. Earthquakes and the European occupation of the New World are ambiguously but mutually illuminating.

Yet the writer of the *Relación* for the most part exercises tight control over the official document that he is submitting for approval from the relevant authorities, and it is clear that his main purpose is to confirm the extent of the catastrophe, the piousness of the city’s surviving residents, and the heroic competence and self-sacrifice of the governing viceroy—at whose command the text has been printed, as its final page attests. The *Relación* thus expresses great difficulty in

giving language to the catastrophe: an earthquake unlike any other, he submits, in the violence of its strike and in the destruction leveled in the city around him. “No [relación] es capaz de imprimirle en al Alma”: no account, he continually says, is capable of conveying even the mere idea of what a person feels in gazing upon the ruins; it is impossible to put into words, impossible for the reader to grasp.⁷³ Yet immediately following the earthquake the news arrives from Callao that the calamity there was even worse; only a few have survived to recount the mournful cries heard during the night. These losses on the coast remind the residents of Lima that worse might have befallen them, and that they must give thanks for the mercy they have been shown.

These pious preliminaries out of the way, however, the *Relación* soon introduces its very secular hero, a kind of precursor to the figure of Pombal in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake: the “Señor Virrey,” Viceroy José Antonio Manso de Velasco, who purportedly saves the city from sinking into further catastrophe in its despair.⁷⁴ Manso de Velasco makes a dramatic appearance in the text, arriving as a gift from heaven, a lone man on horseback riding over crumbling walls and dodging falling debris without thoughts of his own safety. His presence brings consolation and encouragement, the *Relación* affirms, to everyone at hand: “We are all witnesses of that brave resolution.” The viceroy is curiously well prepared for the catastrophe, so much so that the writer cannot help but imagine that this leader has studied the nature of such calamities in order to know how to respond effectively. Indeed, the writer insists that the disaster in no way caught the viceroy unprepared: no one could prevent such a thing, but when disaster struck the viceroy was uncannily ready to control its most fatal consequences. Perhaps it is true, as the account insists, that the viceroy took an interest in the management of such disasters before the event. But it is more likely the case that Manso de Velasco addressed the circumstances with such precision and timeliness because he had almost a decade of experience responding to sudden strikes of adversity as a soldier founding settlements in Chile.⁷⁵ Perhaps for the viceroy, responding to an earthquake was not so different from responding to a settlement under attack by Indigenous forces.

In any case, the *Relación*’s account suggests that Lima’s Manso de Velasco rather than Lisbon’s Marquis de Pombal should be remembered—for better and for worse—for modeling the first so-called modern response to disaster. Manso de Velasco got the city’s ovens baking, the aqueducts and fountains repaired and conveying water, the animals butchered, and the suffering survivors relieved. He also saw opportunities for double effectiveness, as when he sent burial workers along with the curates so that religious duty could be done for the dead just as the city was sanitized of stench and possible contagion. Most importantly, though, the viceroy exerted control over the labor required to begin repairing the city, enacting a brutal racial discipline to discourage any challenge to the authority of the landed elite. He sent armed horsemen to the Corregidor of Guarichiri—the conduit to Indigenous communities beyond the city—to help him “felicita[r] gente,” a

euphemism for seizing and remanding a new workforce to clear roads and begin rebuilding. He also sent for “forzados”—impressed workers—who had been sent to Callao Island before the earthquake and had them brought back to help.⁷⁶ And he appointed soldiers and hired laborers to secure and guard all “royal property”: military weapons first and then the gold and silver in the mint. The viceroy also declared it a crime punishable by death to steal anything, no matter how small, and he had four gibbets—two in Lima, two in Callao—erected in plain sight to provide a frightening reminder for those with “bad” intentions. And though the *Relación* is for the most part circumspect about who such evil-minded people might be, its casual reference to the need to restrain the “insolent commoners” from “murders, robberies, and other disruptions” is telling, for the Spanish word used here is “plebe,” a racialized term implying African ancestry.⁷⁷ The *Relación* is praising the viceroy, that is, for preventing something he never names outright: a Black revolution in the wake of the Lima earthquake—a possibility that coexists with the threat of an Indigenous overthrow of Spanish settlement in Peru, as we will see in the next chapter.

The *Relación* published in Lima traveled quickly into English, published as *A True and Particular Relation of the Dreadful Earthquake, which Happen'd at Lima*, appearing in 1748 London.⁷⁸ In the British version, however, the text's central catastrophe is embedded within a series of paratexts—describing Callao, Lima, and (as per the long subtitle) the “Kingdom of Peru in general, with its Inhabitants”—that far exceed the translated portion of the narrative in length and importance. The earthquake takes on a decidedly new meaning in this context, as the final clause of the subtitle of the *True and Particular Relation* suggests: “The Whole illustrated with a map of the Country about Lima, Plans of the Road and Town of Callao, another of Lima; and several cuts of the Natives, drawn on the Spot by the Translator.”⁷⁹ The translator and partial author of the British *Relation* had set to work quickly on the project, that is, and he intended for his earthquake text to be useful for English readers in navigating the country, not only in their geographic imaginations but perhaps also on the ground. The text was a veritable handbook, as it turns out, on how the North could enrich itself upon disaster in the South.

The *True and Particular Relation*'s subtitle announced cryptically that the original text was “translated from the original Spanish, by a gentleman who resided many years in those countries.” The story of this British “gentleman” offers a miniature study in how English and Anglo-American biographical traditions obfuscate even the deepest and most direct participation in the history of transatlantic slavery through particular narratives of intellectual formation and production. The citation for the Lima earthquake account listed in *Early American Imprints* points to one Henry Johnson as the translator, naming the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) as its source for the information. Published in 1892 in volume 30, the entry for Henry Johnson describes him simply as a “traveller,” noting that

he published several translations of French and Spanish texts throughout his life, including the account of the Lima earthquake. Of even more importance to Johnson's "national biography," though, was his prestigious status as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries: "On 31 Aug. 1720 he was elected F.S.A., and in 1730 communicated to the Society a wonderful account of the body of a pigmy found in Peru, wit. 400,000 dollars [sic]."⁸⁰

The biography does not explain how Johnson came into contact with said "pigmy," though it does note that he "resided in various parts of South America in the service of the South Sea Company, and returned to England with a large fortune." It also notes that his father was "captain-general of the Royal African Company at Cape Coast Castle."⁸¹ In the biography's euphemistic terms, then, Johnson's father, too, was a gentleman "traveller"—that is, a high-ranking officer enforcing the transatlantic slave trade in one of the notorious "castles" on the Gold Coast of West Africa. Johnson himself, moreover, did not fall far from the tree, and was not just any worker for the South Sea Company. As he explains in a 1729 letter to his cousin Maurice—written two decades before the Lima earthquake and later published in the correspondence of the Spalding Gentleman's Society—he has just been appointed as "President of the Royal Assiento of Great Britain in these parts."⁸² The man whom the *DNB* describes as "Johnson, Henry [1698–1760], traveller," who happened to come home from South America with a "large fortune," was in fact the president of the slave-trading company that provided enslaved African labor to Panama and wider Spanish America. Johnson's letter to his cousin also contains a version of the "pigmy" story referred to in the *DNB*, an episode that will reappear almost word for word in the appendices of his translated *Relation* and that sheds light on its larger context. In 1729, Johnson finds life as president of the Royal Asiento in Panama fatiguing: "The Spaniards now look upon us all as Poltroons," he complains, "and since the wonderful feats of our Squadrons on these coasts, they hold our nation in the utmost contempt." The War of Spanish Succession—which had ended a decade and a half earlier in 1714, and had resulted in England's lucrative slave-trading *asiento* with Spain—still casts a long shadow over Johnson's position in Panama, where he is surrounded by Spaniards who do not always interpret the treaty as he would have them do: "They refuse to comply with the Preliminary articles, and we are no better than Prisoners at large."⁸³

Nevertheless, Johnson does have unparalleled access to information about the Spanish empire in the Americas, and he tells his cousin with great excitement a story about a "Senor [sic] Romero," a "native Spaniard" of little means residing in Lima, who changed his life circumstances dramatically when he "Happened at last to cohabit with a young Indian woman." According to the account Johnson has heard, the Indigenous woman develops over time so much affection for this Romero that eventually she takes her Spanish lover inland and shows him an "old Indian grave" that she knows "by tradition ... to contain great treasure." Romero opens the grave and takes the treasure along with the perfectly intact body of "an

Indian man ... no more than 3 quarters of Spanish yard which is $1/8$ less than ours." According to Johnson, Romero plans to present the body to the king of Spain "in a little box wrapped up in cotton"; he also openly declared his "400,000 Dollars" of treasure and paid duties on it when he passed through Panama. The punchline of the unglossed story is that "the poor Indian girl, notwithstanding all her affection for the ungrateful Spaniard was left behind, and he has gone alone to Europe to spend their treasure."⁸⁴

Decades later, when Johnson translates the earthquake *Relación* for a British readership, he returns to the story from his 1729 letter, including it in his anonymous translator's preface. Here its larger meaning emerges with more clarity. Lima may have been a wealthy city before the earthquake, he explains, but the vast part of its wealth has yet to be discovered because "the Indians from the time they were first conquered have purposely concealed from the Spaniards" the location of the richest mines (*DL viii*). Moreover, the mines are only one source of the region's great wealth; it is also hidden in their *Guacas* or *Huacas*—a term that Johnson misleadingly describes as "the Indian word for sepulcher," joining a long colonial tradition of reductive translation of Andean spiritual concepts in doing so—"where tis certain they always buried great Quantities of Gold and Silver with their Dead" (*DL viii*).⁸⁵ If the Spaniards have for the most part failed to acquire these treasures, a few discoveries have been made by means of "Intrigues" between "the men and women of both Nations"—and here his Panama story stands in as one example supporting a larger generalization that "Amour," as he puts it, is the means by which mines and graves alike may be discovered (*DL x*). The story of the Spaniard Romero now centers on an unnamed "Spanish Gentleman," and it operates on an obvious figurative level in addition to its literal one. The story is enlisted as part of a call to England—just ending its most recent war with Spain—to seize the opportunity of the great Lima earthquake to throw off colonial Spanish rule and take up the feminized, racialized body of Peru as its own. Through Johnson's translation of the earthquake account along with his other assembled documents, England can make Peru yield, "in a fit of high affection" for her new imperial paramour, the hidden secrets of her wealth (*DL ix*).

Left out of this version of the story is the original "Indian-Woman" abandoned and left behind by Romero—for the larger, metaphorical "intrigue" Johnson now encourages in 1748, in the wake of the earthquake, involves not just English treasure-hunting in Peru but also permanent settlement there (*DL ix*). Johnson's *True and Particular Relation* thus embeds the original Spanish *relación* within a larger text proposing that the "present dismal state of things at Callao and Lima" after their catastrophe is in fact an opportunity for a new "conquest of those rich kingdoms." This conquest of Spanish colonial territories was "practicable," Johnson claims, even when Peru was at its most prosperous—for the Spanish colonial culture was always "without order and immers'd in luxury and effeminacy." Moreover, the Indigenous populations have been "born and bred in an utter abhorrence

of their Spanish lords, gasping after liberty and relief." An English conquest of Peru, rooted in "Amour," would be the veritable "deliverance" that Andeans have long anticipated in their prophecies and "old songs and sayings" (*DL* xii). To help facilitate this great liberation, Johnson's text comes replete with multiple maps, descriptions of ports and populations, and repeated aspersions regarding the undisciplined and weak state of Spanish colonial militias. Drawing on the seventeenth-century writings of Thomas Gage—architect of the "Western Design" to conquer the Spanish colonies of the West Indies during the Anglo-Spanish War (1654–1660)—Johnson reminds any timid souls among his readership that they are sorely mistaken if they believe "it is more difficult to conquer America now than it was in the time of Cortez" (*DL* 319).⁸⁶ In Johnson's view, then, the devastating earthquake in Peru offers a prime opportunity to redress the mistake that "our Henry VII" long ago made in supposedly turning down sponsorship of Columbus's voyage (*DL* 324). Seismic catastrophe in Lima yields the chance for a re-do in the great race for European empire in the New World: "If such an acquisition be reserved for Britain, or these hints should at all contribute to such an enterprize, our wishes will be then compleat" (*DL* xii).

Johnson's promotion of an English military strike on ravaged, post-earthquake Lima did not go uncontested. In 1752, a French translation of Johnson's English translation and accompanying paratexts appeared in Paris under the title *Histoire des tremblemens de terre arrivées à Lima*.⁸⁷ Voltaire would only have needed to skim the French translator's preface—an ironic commentary on Johnson's preface—to understand how earthquakes provided occasions for enrichment on the part of "the North." "The views of the [English] Author," observes the French translator, "were not limited ... to making known to his compatriots the losses that the Spanish suffered in this terrible catastrophe; or at least he hardly sought to excite their compassion."⁸⁸ To the contrary, the English translator drew attention to the "deplorable situation" in Peru simply to arouse his compatriots' "desire to take advantage of it":

To better clear the path for them, he gives them a map of the harbor of Callao so well detailed that it could serve as the guide for a [ship's] pilot [down to the very] place of anchor. And to make it more effective, one finds here a map of Perou, with diagrams of Lima, of the port, and of the harbor of Callao, and of the neighboring coasts that he assures to be all the more accurate as they are the work of the best geographers who have described this part of the world ... of which the majority are French.⁸⁹

For the French translator, a final irony underwriting the Johnson volume is its reuse of a great deal of material taken directly from prior French travelers, particularly Frézier. Yet the English volume has none of the subtlety of Frézier's acquisitive gaze upon South America: Johnson's meaning was plain for all to see.

As the French translator concluded, “the English Author endeavors to demonstrate the possibility of a conquest of Peru and the advantages that one could thereby derive.”⁹⁰

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Embedded in this chain of translated accounts of the great Lima–Callao earthquake of 1746 is a prehistory of disaster capitalism as it emerged from the rise of European empire and racial capitalism. When the Lisbon earthquake struck in 1755, then, the blueprint for a fully modern response to catastrophe was already in place—and not because the so-called first modern response to disaster was enacted by the viceroy of Lima. Rather, I would argue, all disaster response in the imperial world—after the first seizing and enslaving of Indigenous captives in western Africa in 1444 and in the Americas in 1492—was indelibly molded by colonizing experience. Although on different sides of the Atlantic, both Lisbon and Lima were built on the wealth extracted from slavery and Indigenous dispossession. Both were in a fundamental sense Black cities in which what constituted an effective response to catastrophe from the point of view of white enslavers and employers was the consolidation of state power: to terrorize and to enact new forms of racial discipline, to prevent fugitivity and resistance, to secure the labor for rebuilding and returning life to its unfree normal.⁹¹ Yet the history that connects these two earthquakes has remained—as per Pangloss’s observation—an underground train of sulfur.

For while the Lisbon earthquake became central to later, deeply Eurocentric accounts of the Enlightenment, the Lima earthquake largely receded into oblivion. More to the point, the Lisbon earthquake came to shore up a deep theoretical exclusion rooted in the received idea that modernity’s inaugural catastrophe occurred in eighteenth-century Europe—and not in the disasters that Europeans began inflicting centuries earlier in the race for overseas empire. There are insurmountable philosophical and broadly intellectual losses attending that foundational misapprehension, which in turn gave rise to forms of optimism that still structure nearly all public responses to the most unthinkable of the world’s disasters. Optimism too often amounts to unseeing the colonial foundations of modern Western thought, and of what this thought has defined as catastrophic. As Voltaire recognized, it is for this reason self-serving: by exercising its predatory optimism, the North continually enriches itself.

And yet it is also true that catastrophes—earthquakes in particular—create different meanings in other cosmologies. The Spanish priest Francisco Antonio de Montalvo, who stayed in Peru for several years and then published *El Sol del Nuevo Mundo* (1683) to introduce European readers to a land he saw as exalted, noted that earthquakes were the “unico padastro de su felicidad” (“the only bad father of their happiness”): that is, the only misfortune in a place otherwise so gifted with nature’s plenty.⁹² The point of Montalvo’s text, as José Antonio Mazzotti explains, was to show the sanctity of the land in making a case for the canonization of

Lima's former archbishop, Toribio de Mogrovejo.⁹³ Yet this deeply Christian document with a specific ecclesiastical function also records in passing Montalvo's intriguing observation about how "los negros y los Yndios" of Lima engage with the land's propensity for earthquakes. The "negros and the Indians," Montalvo claims, buy up most of the city's wine—sold to them at very low prices because of its abundance—so that they can have it in all the houses in the city, passing it into the irrigational acequias, even running a little through the streets. Wine mixed within not only cleans and services the water but also brings relief to the earth itself. Thus, the Black and Indigenous people of Lima offer this wine "para desaogo de la tierra, que respirando por sus vocas se ha asegurado en gran parte a los temblores" ("for the ventilation of the earth that, breathing through its mouths, has been in great part secured against the tremors").⁹⁴

The offering of libations has historical roots in cultures around the world; it occurs in the *Odyssey* and in the Bible. But offering libations *to* the earth, to Pachamama herself, is a specifically Andean spiritual practice, and one that resonates with the West African traditional practice of pouring libations on the ground for the ancestors—for Pachamama is also the mother of ancestors, who are in turn the "progeny of the earth itself."⁹⁵ Perhaps what Montalvo unwittingly documents, then, is the trace of an Afro-Indigenous theological relation to both earth and earthquake—a trace that gives us a glimpse of vernacular science in the seventeenth-century Andes with its language of the earth's breathing and ventilation. This trace falls outside the purview of my own scholarship as much as it does Montalvo's Christian, canonization-seeking worldview. But it offers an insistent reminder of cosmologies and modes of knowledge production alternative to the trajectory of catastrophic rationality that brings together Voltaire, Rousseau, and other European writers meditating in their various ways on disaster and its consequences and opportunities for the Global North. The foundational and interwoven catastrophes of enslavement and dispossession, occurring long before a philosophy-rending earthquake in Portugal, raise enduring questions not just about what the West has become and what it has done to the world but also about the vast literary and philosophical traditions developed in response to disaster itself. The following chapter explores one such alternative to the Lisbon-descended account of philosophical modernity by turning to what might be called theory from the torrid zone, drawn from the work of two Andean-born writers who together offer an earthquake history of the Americas.

Notes

1. On the history of the Lisbon earthquake and its global effects, see especially Mark Molesky, *This Gulf of Fire: The Great Lisbon Earthquake, or Apocalypse in the Age of Science and Reason* (New York: Vintage, 2016).
2. Molesky, *This Gulf of Fire*, 6, 263.

3. See the classic study by Thomas Downing Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955), discussed later in this chapter, as well as Susan Neiman's study of the philosophical response to the earthquake in *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), which includes meditations by Leibniz, Pope, Rousseau, and Voltaire (discussed in this chapter) as well as Kant and Benjamin. On the Lisbon earthquake in the field of disaster studies, see Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (1999): 97–115.
4. Deborah R. Coen, *The Earthquake Observers: Disaster Science from Lisbon to Richter* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 107.
5. Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake*, 5 (hereafter cited as *LE*).
6. Gilles Deleuze, "Sur Leibniz Les principes et la liberté," Cours Vincennes—St Denis: la logique de l'événement, Cours du 08/04/1987. www.webdeleuze.com/textes/147. Cited and translated in Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 49.
7. Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 51.
8. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 317–318.
9. Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 239–250.
10. Theodor Adorno, too, compared the Lisbon earthquake to the Holocaust. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995).
11. Neil Smith, "There's No Such Thing as Natural Disaster," Social Science Research Council, June 11, 2006, <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster>.
12. Diana Gonçalves, *9/11: Culture, Catastrophe, and the Critique of Singularity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 22. See also Huet's excellent chapter in *The Culture of Disaster* on the Lisbon earthquake, which notes to the contrary that some scholars have challenged the "philosophical impact" of the disaster; in her analysis, the continued scholarly "preoccupation with Lisbon—the fact that it is so often read as a defining moment in the Enlightenment," is itself worthy of analysis (55).
13. Anthony Bogues, *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, and Freedom* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 107.
14. Svend Erik Larsen, "The Lisbon Earthquake and the Scientific Turn in Kant's Philosophy," *European Review* 14, no. 3 (2006): 359–367, 361.
15. Immanuel Kant, *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), in *Kant: Natural Science*, ed. Eric Watkins, trans. Olaf Reinhardt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182–308, 192–193.
16. Kant, *Universal Natural History*, 270, 307–308.
17. Martin Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76.
18. Larsen, "The Lisbon Earthquake," 361.
19. *Ibid.*, 365.
20. *Ibid.*, 365.
21. Gerard Passannante, *Catastrophizing: Materialism and the Making of Disaster* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 209.
22. Kant, *Universal Natural History*, 269 (my emphasis).
23. Kant, "History and Natural Description of the Most Noteworthy Occurrences of the Earthquake That Struck a Large Part of the Earth at the End of the Year 1755" (1756), in *Kant: Natural Science*, ed. Watkins, 337–364, 345, 360.
24. Kant, "History and Natural Description," 360.
25. On Smith's response to the Lisbon earthquake, see D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie, "Introduction" to Adam Smith, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith, Vol. 1: Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Raphael and Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). See also Eric Hayot's fascinating reading of this passage (and Smith's work in general) in light of the fact that Smith substitutes "the great empire of China" for Lisbon as the site destroyed by an earthquake, in *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
26. On this period of Voltaire's life, see Ian Davidson, *Voltaire: A Life* (London: Profile Books), 269–278.
27. Voltaire, *De Lisbonne*, in *Poèmes, épîtres et autres poésies* (Paris: Valade, 1779) (hereafter cited as *DL*). Translations are my own in consultation with the early translation by William F. Fleming in *The Works of Voltaire*, vol XXXVI E.R. (Dumont: Paris, London, 1901), 8–18.

28. Wilco W. Van Dijk and Jaap W. Ouwerkerk, "Introduction," in *Schadenfreude: Understanding Pleasure at the Misfortune of Others*, ed. Van Dijk and Ouwerkerk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.
29. Cited in Van Dijk and Ouwerkerk, "Introduction," 3.
30. Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire Universel, Tome Second*, 2nd ed. (Rotterdam: Arnoud et Reinnier Leers, 1701), n.p.
31. Voltaire, *Commentaire sur Corneille*, in *Complete works of Voltaire*, v.54/55, eds. Ulla Kölvig et al. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968–), 244.
32. Thomas Hobbes, "Human Nature: or the Fundamental Elements of Policy," in *British Moralists, 1650–1800*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 13.
33. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 39.
34. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 276.
35. Pope, *Essay on Man*, 279.
36. See Leopold Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2007) for an account of Rousseau's conflicts with Voltaire regarding the Lisbon earthquake (296–267) and Voltaire's response to the *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, 240–241.
37. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984), 58–59 (hereafter cited parenthetically as D).
38. Voltaire, "Letter to Rousseau from Les Delices," August 30, 1755, *Voltaire in His Letters, Being a Selection from His Correspondence*, trans. S. G. Tallentyre (London: Putnam's, 1919), 150.
39. Rousseau, "Letter from J.J. Rousseau to M. de Voltaire," in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 232–246 (hereafter cited as L).
40. R. R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake," *International Journal of Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (2000): 106. For Huet, similarly, Rousseau offers "the most radical philosophical challenge to the traditional view of disasters" (*The Culture of Disaster*, 42).
41. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Classics, 1968), 49.
42. Pope, *Essay on Man*, 270.
43. *Ibid.*, 256.
44. Qtd. in Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754–1762* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 31.
45. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
46. Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, France: Open Court, 1985), 228 (hereafter cited as T).
47. For a recent overview of theodicy and the Enlightenment, see Hernán D. Caro, *The Best of All Possible Worlds? Leibniz's Philosophical Optimism and Its Critics 1710–1755* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). The scholarship on theodicy more generally is vast. I was initially guided on the subject by Susan Neiman, who investigates modern Western thought as an extended engagement with the philosophical "problem of evil" and argues that theodicy is built into all attempts, including secular and non-theist ones, to make sense of the world or consider what should be otherwise. Much scholarship on theodicy revolves around its impossibility after the Holocaust; Emmanuel Levinas famously argues for this apparent end of theodicy as "[p]erhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness," pointing to "the destruction of all balance between Western thought's explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century." On the other hand, a venerable tradition of Black theology has grappled with the problem of theodicy given the centuries of enslavement and white supremacist violence that preceded the Holocaust and that continue, as per the title of Christina Sharpe's work, "in the wake"; see especially Anthony B. Pinn's *Why, Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995) and the edited collection by Anthony B. Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002). Shayne Lee's recent study, *Cinema, Black Suffering, and Theodicy: Modern God* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), also helped me to better understand "theodicy as a modern intellectual enterprise" through what he terms "theological secularity," while Jared Hickman's concept of "a distinctly modern anthropotheodicy"—"an explanation, ever shading toward justification, of the historical fact of the apotheosized Euro-Christian's exercise of freedom at the expense of the freedom

- of the anathematized African”—has been indispensable for my own interests. Hickman, citing Odo Marquard, underscores the project of historicizing “theodicy” as a specific neologism, distinct from ancient questions about suffering and evil, that emerges in the particular moment of Europe’s conquest of non-European worlds; see *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 92.
48. Voltaire, *Candide; ou L’Optimisme*, ed. René Pomeau (Paris: Editions A.-G. Nizet, 1979), 84 (hereafter cited as C). Translations are my own, in consultation with the translation by Roger Pearson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
 49. Stephen M. Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God, and Evil in the Age of Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3.
 50. See the account of the plan in Nadler, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, 3–14.
 51. Molesky, *Gulf of Fire*, 357.
 52. Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead, 2007), 1. Díaz’s narrator also notes that “the Admiral [Columbus] died miserable and syphilitic” after his voyage to the Americas (1).
 53. Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanity as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System,” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 134 (1992): 549–557.
 54. There was of course no such hidden Incan land. The connection between the Incas and El Dorado was first publicized, if not invented, by Walter Raleigh, as Ralph Bauer observes in *The Alchemy of Conquest: Science, Religion, and the Secrets of the New World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 369–400. Although it is presented in the novel as historical fact, Voltaire likely knew from the work of his own former teacher, the Jesuit historian Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, that the existence of El Dorado was deemed fabulous by many: *Histoire du Paraguay, Tome 1* (Paris: Didot, Giffart, Nyon, 1756), 6.
 55. See, e.g., Voltaire’s “Zadig ou la destinée,” in which a “valet” is sold (ironically along with “le maître”), in Voltaire: *Choix de Contes*, ed. F. C. Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 55.
 56. See Barbara Ganson, *The Guaraní under Spanish Rule in the Río de la Plata* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Julia J. S. Sarreal, *The Guaraní and Their Missions: A Socioeconomic History* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).
 57. On Malagrida, see Molesky, *This Gulf of Fire*; and William W. Ireland’s sketch in *Through the Ivory Gate: Studies in Psychology and History* (Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute, 1889), 265–276.
 58. Molesky, *Gulf of Fire*, 5, 66.
 59. On Pombal’s role in the aftermath of the earthquake, see especially Kenneth Maxwell’s study *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Markus Friedrich, *The Jesuits: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 575–620; and Molesky, *Gulf of Fire*, 186–212.
 60. See Ben Wisner et al., *Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction* (London: Routledge, 2012), 45; and Scott D. Watson, *International Order and the Politics of Disaster* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2019), 64.
 61. Gabriel Malagrida, *Juizo da verdadeira causa do terremoto, que padeceo a corte de Lisboa, no primeiro de novembro de 1755* (Lisbon: Na Officina de Manoel Soares, 1756).
 62. James Sweet, “The Hidden Histories of African Lisbon,” in *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade*, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra et al. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 233–247.
 63. Malagrida, *Juizo da verdadeira causa do terremoto*, 3–4.
 64. The passage is translated and discussed in Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake*, 89.
 65. On the alleged regicide plot, see Molesky, *Gulf of Fire*, 349.
 66. Wynter, “Unsettling,” 260.
 67. On the circulation of Frézier’s account, see Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Poole suggests Voltaire would likely have been familiar with Frézier (222).
 68. On Frézier, see Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra’s *How to Write the History of the New World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 15–18.
 69. Amedée-François Frézier, *Relation du voyage de la mer du Sud aux côtes du Chili, du Pérou, et du Brésil, fait pendant les années 1712, 1713, et 1714* (Paris: J.-G. Nyon, E. Ganeau, J. Quillau, 1716).

- I have quoted here from the English version, *A Voyage to the South-Sea, and along the Coasts of Chile and Peru* (London: Jonah Bowyer, 1717) (hereafter cited as V).
70. On the relationship between colonial mining and racial thinking, see Allison Bigelow's important study, *Mining Language: Racial Thinking, Indigenous Knowledge, and Colonial Metallurgy in the Early Modern Iberian World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
 71. Charles Walker's *Shaky Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) is the definitive study of this catastrophe.
 72. Anonymous, *Individual y verdadera relación de la extrema ruyna que padeció la Ciudad de los Reyes* (Lima: En la Imprenta que estaba en la Calle de los Mercaderes, 1746). Translations are my own. The work is often wrongly attributed to Pedro Lozano in catalogs, especially listings of the English translation (discussed in what follows); see Walker, *Shaky Colonialism*, on the misattribution (6).
 73. *Individual y verdadera relación*, 5.
 74. See also Walker's account of Manso in [chapter 4](#) of *Shaky Colonialism*.
 75. *Ibid.*, 76.
 76. *Individual y verdadera relación*, 13.
 77. On the term *plebe*, see Walker, *Shaky Colonialism*, 156–157.
 78. Benjamin Franklin also published an edition of the *True and Particular Relation* in Philadelphia (1749), but it did not include the same paratexts as the London edition.
 79. Henry Johnson, *A true and particular relation of the dreadful earthquake which happen'd at Lima ...* (London: T. Osborne in Gray's Inn, 1748) (hereafter cited as P).
 80. "Johnson, Henry," *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885–1900, vol. 30.
 81. *Ibid.*
 82. Johnson to Maurice Johnson, December 15, 1729, in *The Correspondence of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, 1710–1761*, ed. Diana and Michael Honeybone (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 47.
 83. *Ibid.*
 84. *Ibid.* For a recent discussion of the Asiento, see Farid Azfar, "Leviathan and the Asiento: A Counter-History of the Racial Contract," *New Literary History* 52, no. 3/4 (2022): 431–476.
 85. On the colonial tradition of associating *huacas* and treasure, see Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640–1750* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 42.
 86. On Thomas Gage and his Western Design, see David S. Shields, "Sons of the Dragon: or, the English Hero Revived," in *Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas*, ed. Bauer and José Antonio Mazzotti (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 105–106 and [chapter 2](#) of Kristina Bross, *Future Histories: Global Fantasies in Seventeenth-Century American and British Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 53–80.
 87. Full title: *Histoire des tremblemens de terre arrivés à Lima, capitale du Pérou, et autres lieux; avec la description du Pérou; traduite de l'anglois* (A La Haye, 1752). Because the British edition includes a general piece on the causes of earthquakes by the British scientist Stephen Hales, the French translation is erroneously listed as the work of "Étienne Hales."
 88. *Histoire de tremblemens*, viii.
 89. *Histoire de tremblemens*, ix–x.
 90. *Histoire de tremblemens*, x.
 91. On the role of Black subjects in eighteenth-century Lima, see especially Tamara Walker, *Exquisite Slaves: Race, Clothing, and Status in Colonial Lima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
 92. Francisco Antonio Montalvo, *El Sol del Nuevo Mundo: ideado y compuesto en las esclarecidas operaciones del bienaventurado Toribio Arzobispo de Lima* (Rome: Impr. De A. Bernavo, 1638), 22.
 93. José Antonio Mazzotti, "El Dorado, Paradise, and Supreme Sanctity in Seventeenth-Century Peru: A Creole Agenda," in *Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas*, 386.
 94. Montalvo, *El Sol del Nuevo Mundo*, 21.
 95. Penny Dransart, "Cultural Transpositions: Writing about Rites in the Llama Coral," in *Creating Context in Andean Cultures*, ed. Rosaleen Howard-Malverde (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92. See also Waskar Ari, *Earth Politics: Religion, Decolonization, and Bolivia's Indigenous Intellectuals* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 92.

3

Pachacuti

Theory from the Torrid Zone

In Roberto Bolaño's 1996 novel *Estrella Distante* (*Distant Star*), the narrator recalls his youth as a student of poetry during what he calls "an earthquake of history": the 1973 CIA-sponsored coup in Chile and the catastrophic aftermath of torture and disappearances under the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship.¹ At the center of this political earthquake is Carlos Wieder, a spy, torturer, and admirer of the Nazis who poses as an aspiring poet so that he can ferret out young left-wing writers in their poetry seminars and disappear them in advance of the coup bringing Pinochet to power. The story follows Wieder's career in Chile and then abroad, where he is always just beyond the horizon, operating in many places under many names, and wherever he goes creating the conditions for neofascism under the guise of fostering avant-garde art. As the narrator tracks Wieder down through pseudonymous verses, video games, and perverse aesthetic manifestos, he untangles how the historical nightmares enacted by the Nazi state during the Holocaust have an afterlife that spans the US-supported Chilean coup and the unfolding of the global Cold War and its cultural fronts across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. The nature of time itself is thus central to the narrator's predicament as a survivor of a Chilean prison camp and of the coup that disappeared many of his friends and fellow writers. The narrator opposes the simultaneously gradualist and nihilistic temporality of Wieder—to whom "time ... was like a stone," imperceptibly eroding (*D* 154). The narrator's own account, however, never manages to articulate what he calls the "ethical and aesthetic reflections on the passing of time" that might help him to come to terms with the political catastrophe of the dictatorship (*D* 154).

Yet the narrator draws close to this articulation of temporality—glimpses it through layers of failed translation—when he paraphrases the misunderstood testimony of a Mapuche woman named Amalia Maluenda. Maluenda serves as the prosecution's key witness against Wieder during his trial in absentia, held in the early 1990s, for torture and disappearances during the Pinochet regime: she saw first-hand his murder decades earlier of two Chilean sisters, for whom she once worked as a servant—as "la empleada mapuche" of the family (*D* 112). In the intervening years since the crimes, however, Maluenda has returned to her own people and her Spanish is now halting; when she speaks in court, "her statements were filled with Mapuche words," and she has only two young Catholic priests escorting her to serve as translators, who filter through their own interpretive frameworks

everything she wishes to say. This barrier of linguistic difference proves almost less insurmountable than the generic problem introduced during her testimony: Maluenda's account takes the form of a poem—"a heroic verse (epic), cyclical"—interweaving the contemporary event of the murders with the long history of European conquest (*D* 119). When she speaks of Wieder, she refers to him at times as an "invader," and when she recounts the night of the murders, she recalls hearing the "music of the Spanish" (*D* 119).

The courtroom audience is stupefied by her testimony, in which the account of Wieder's crimes and the "history of Chile" itself are inextricable as an ongoing story of terror (*D* 119). Neither Maluenda's actual words nor the *longue durée* of conquest and colonial violence she attempts to articulate transmit successfully, and the point of the trial is soon lost. "Chile forgot him," as the narrator says, and forgot along with Wieder the foundational crimes to which Maluenda tries to bear witness (*D* 120). The trial record thus embeds a mistranslated and ultimately lost history of catastrophe that might have illuminated Chile's late twentieth century and the "earthquake of history" that was the Pinochet dictatorship. With her testimony in an epic poetry that both invokes and counters the "music of the Spanish," Maluenda comes closest to offering the apprehension of time to which the narrator and presumably the novel's readers have only limited access. Through this mistranslated and fragmented Mapuche testimony, Bolaño's novel gestures toward the ongoing colonial histories shaping the global Cold War and also asks readers to reconsider temporality itself not as a linear flow but as a series of related eruptions: a time unloosed from the chronopolitics of a modernity created by European conquest. As the Chilean narrator puts it, to imagine history as if "time were ... an earthquake"—an idea that originates in the Indigenous Andean part of the hemisphere and that captures both the totality and the fundamental impermanence of the Spanish conquest itself (*D* 51).

This chapter turns first to *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (*The First New Chronicle and Good Government*) (1615), a chronicle of pre-Columbian and colonial Peru by the Andean historian Guaman Poma de Ayala, as a meditation on the all-devouring Western historical system that emerged in the late fifteenth century that he implicitly opposes with his own account. Guaman Poma's particular adaptation of both Christian scriptural knowledge and the vexed early modern European tradition of natural and moral philosophy generates an earthquake theory of history specific to the Andes: a figuration of colonial reality as a swallowing up by the earth, and a deployment of earthquake as a mode of interpretation that continually pushes against colonial knowledge. With his tremor-ridden text, Guaman Poma inscribes a strand of earthquake thought that also informs the contemporaneous Andean-born writer, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. The son of a royal Inca woman and a Spanish conquistador, Garcilaso is best known today for his history of his mother's people in Peru and their conquest by the people of his father, the *Comentarios reales de los Incas* or *Royal Commentaries of the Incas*, first published in Lisbon in 1609. Like Guaman Poma, Garcilaso discerns in earthquake

a critical framework of undeception, a theory rooted in the ongoing and always uncertain nature of settler colonial time and taken from the so-called *zona tórrida* or “torrid zone” as a means of contesting the very geographic fantasy out of which this category emerged. Garcilaso’s influence on eighteenth-century European writers such as John Locke and later Voltaire invites us to reconsider not only the place of Indigenous Peru, and of Andean knowledge, in their works but also the directionality of Enlightenment itself, including the origins of the new generic formation, the English novel, which emerged with the rise of European global subjecthood in the eighteenth century. Ultimately, I suggest, the earthquake histories of Guaman Poma and El Inca Garcilaso illuminate certain essential entanglements—historical-material and psychic-theological—linking the rending of the earth to the project of unsettlement: connecting earthquake to the end of settler time and settler rule.

Guaman Poma’s History as *Pachacuti*

The Andean historian Guaman Poma’s *El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno* is a history of preconquest Peru followed by an account of the conquest and life under Spanish rule up to around 1615, when the text was completed.² Full of accounts taken, as Guaman Poma says, from “the *quipos* or memorials or reports from ancient times,” the chronicle is also illustrated throughout, “drawn by my own hand [which] will make it easy to understand a text lacking in the polished style of great writers” (CG 7). Like most authorial apologies, this one too belies its own virtuosity—in this case, not only that of the accompanying illustrations but also of the text’s incorporation of passages in Indigenous languages, Aymara and various forms of Quechua, into its Andean style of Spanish. As Guaman Poma puts it, “I write in the Spanish language, drawing also on Aymara, Colla, Puquina Conde, Yunca, Quechua of the Incas, Huanca, Chinchaysuyo, Yauyo, Antisuyo, Condesuyo, Collasuyo, Cañari, Cayampi, Quito” (CG 8). This long list, which conflates languages and places, ensures that the reader will not miss the text’s dazzling multilingual effect: “Holding this book in your hands as you see the writing,” Guaman Poma writes, “bear in mind that in order to make sense out of these stories I had to put out ... much effort” (CG 8).

Near the beginning of *El primer nueva corónica*, Guaman Poma invokes the encounter of Christian tradition with Andean reality. Addressing the Holy Catholic Royal Majesty, King Philip, Guaman Poma explains the origins of the Andean people from “el primero yndio” (“the first Indian”), Vari Viracocha, who is descended from Noah after the “Flood”:

God commanded the people to leave this land and spread and multiply throughout the world. Of these sons of Noah, God took one to the Indies; others say that he came from Adam himself. The Indians multiplied; God knows all; and with his powers, he can put these Indians in a separate place. (CG 21)

Guaman Poma inserts Indigenous history into both biblical narrative and a popular early modern debate about the origin of Indians in the Americas, and he does so on his own terms. The passage does not compare the theories of descent from Adam versus Noah; the author's point is rather that Indigenous existence is divinely sanctioned. Whether or not Noah's sons followed the injunction to reproduce elsewhere in global space, the historian does not say—but he does testify that the Indians obeyed and “multiplied.” The passage indelibly rebukes early modern globalism's incipient attempt to map colonial difference across the geography known broadly as “las Yndias”—the Indies—with a simple reminder of sacred power. Competing European theories of Indian origin matter less than divine omniscience and omnipotence; “God knows all” when it comes to Indigenous location.

The passage thus limns the parameters of what Rolena Adorno theorized in 1987 as a *zona de contacto* between Spanish and Andean subjects in her introduction to an early edition of Guaman Poma's astounding text, then little known to North American readers.³ For Adorno, the chronicle epitomized the knowledge production of the *indio ladino*, the Indigenous subject of the colonial contact zone whose fluency in Spanish as well as Andean languages created new bicultural forms of understanding.⁴ Mary Louise Pratt later brought the concept of the contact zone into scholarship in English as the place in which “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations”—but of course highly unequal ones: for it is the *yndios*, as Guaman Poma notes, who are said to be set *aparte*, in “a separate place,” and not vice versa.⁵ The observation speaks to the intercalation of the global and the colonial: it was in part the European “global labor of religious conversion,” as Pratt observes, that created “the space of colonial encounters” known as the contact zone.⁶ Like Adorno's, Pratt's aim was to restore multidirectionality to what had previously been, in English-language scholarship, a unidirectional, “diffusionist” conceptual field by showing how “colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's terms.”⁷ European ideas circulated on a global scale but simultaneously transformed as they encountered colonial exigencies, adapted and remade to different ends by those whom Europe sought to dominate.

The “arts of the contact zone” are now commonplace in literary studies. But in this academic moment—in which the proliferation of the global in literary curricula so often coincides with the Anglophone and the contemporary—Adorno and Pratt speak to us with renewed urgency.⁸ From Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano to Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, and Sylvia Wynter, the foundational figures of decolonial thought in the Americas remind us how the colonial and the global do not encompass discrete periodizations—the colonial “past,” the globalized “present”—but constitute each other.⁹ Guaman Poma comments wryly on the emergent racialization—the so-called “Indians,” multiplying in the separate place where God has put them—that provides the logic by which conquest reproduces itself through global circuits of power.¹⁰ Global spaces create colonial

subjects, but so too the reverse: settler coloniality in the Americas continually structures the unfolding of global history across time.

Guaman Poma's chronicle of pre-Columbian and colonial Peru brings the figure of earthquake to bear on both colonial history and the global Christian narrative that frames the entire project. Retelling the biblical story of Noah, Guaman Poma also supplements it: in his account, the colossal flood coincides with an earthquake. "God commanded that it rain for forty days and forty nights, without letting up, and this was enough to cover the world," he explains, conforming to the scriptural version of the story (CG 19). But along with inundation, there is "the thunder and the earthquake and the whirlwind that was tossing the mountains about" (CG 19). This earthquake and its accompanying thunder and whirlwind—neither of which appears in the biblical account—might seem to constitute an insignificant addition. Roland Hamilton's translation renders the full sentence as follows: "But first he noticed the thunder and the earth shaking and the whirlwind that was tossing the mountains about" (CG 19). The syntax of the translation suggests that it is Noah who apprehends the thunder, earthquake, and whirlwind; but, in fact, the ambiguous "he" is the translator's attempt to clarify for twenty-first-century Anglophone readers a potential question arising in the original text from a different biblical name: "primero sintió *Helias* el estruendo y el temblor de la tierra y el torbellino que trastornaba los montes."¹¹

Supplementing the account of the flood with an earthquake, Guaman Poma also invokes Helias, or Elijah in Hebrew, embedding within the story of Noah a figure who also appears in the Book of Kings. This seeming non sequitur highlights the earthquake attending Noah and the biblical flood, speaking to the Andean earthquake framework structuring *El primer nueva corónica* and its broader understanding of the conquest. Guaman Poma is responding here and elsewhere to the paradoxical early modern Spanish discourse of earthquake, and specifically to the *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (1590) by the Jesuit historian José de Acosta, one of the first Europeans to write about earthquake in the Americas.¹² That Guaman Poma would respond to Acosta is no surprise; his familiarity with prior Spanish histories feeds his ingenuity in countering the central claims of colonialism with a coherent position favoring Native autonomy.¹³ But the specific figure of earthquake illuminates the centrality of catastrophe to settler colonial modernity. Andean earthquake thinking was, in some sense, a response to globalizing Christian and early scientific narratives brought to bear on colonial Peru.

Acosta arrived in the New World in 1571, just as the massive *Reducción General de Indios*—the forced concentration of Peru's Native peoples into colonially controlled spaces—was underway. Ordered by the viceroy in 1569, the *Reducción* was a carefully conceived spatial and social project bent on systematically eliminating indigeneity through conversion and violence.¹⁴ As Ralph Bauer and others have shown, the methods of missionary practice were central to the design and implementation of "reducing" Indigenous life to its intended function in the

coerced labor or *mita* system. Acosta supported this general reduction project, and the violence of the conquest more broadly, with his formidable intellectual powers, culminating in his inimitable *Historia natural y moral*, which in turn played a foundational but later overlooked role in the development of both empiricism and modern science.¹⁵ This recognition of Acosta's place in a history of Western science that has wrongly assumed the Protestant origins of scientific modernity has also helped illuminate the deep connections between missionology and early modern science. Orlando Betancor has suggested that such connections form part of a wider imperial metaphysical ideology emerging from the proto-ethnographic and scientific knowledges necessary for and yielded by mining. The result was what Betancor calls a "metaphysical instrumentalism," according to which the technological extraction of material wealth from the land and people of the Americas, and the violence necessary to this extraction, are imagined as God-given means of attaining the highest spiritual ends.¹⁶

Betancor's concept of metaphysical instrumentalism, derived from his extensive research into Scholasticism as an occluded foundation of contemporary modernity, helps to explain both Acosta's writing on earthquake and Guaman Poma's response to it. In chapter 26, book 3 of *Historia natural y moral*, Acosta treats the troubling subject of earthquakes—"de los temblores de tierra"—which are of course inherently antithetical to the broad project of controlling the natural world. This quality is also what makes earthquakes a profound and common subject in religious thought, as Acosta well understands. The narrative proceeds in a broadly corrective mode as Acosta establishes the global reach of his knowledge while explaining the colonial world. The Indies are notable for the frequency of their earthquakes and volcanoes, he concedes, but the logic of exceptions—"they also occur in places where there are no volcanoes nearby"—troubles a definitive causal link (*HN* 157). In his double role as natural philosopher and theologian, Acosta warns against totalizing explanation—to which, he writes, the fiery emission of volcanoes lends itself far too easily: "Some say that it is fire from hell and comes from there as a warning, to make us consider what the other life may be like," he notes, but then argues against the proposition based on both the teachings of Saint Basil and the diameter of the globe (*HN* 157). Citing from early Christian writings while also touting the importance of first-hand observation, Acosta blends theology and natural history together to keep the physical world of earthquake and volcano at a distance from the Christian realm of hell without losing his own claim upon a larger metaphysical meaning. The intertwinement of theology and natural history, that is, affords the text a remarkable position of conceptual power over both earthquakes and those who might interpret them as divine punishment or censure for what is in fact occurring in the Indies during these years.

Yet the elided violence of conquest is precisely the background that comes to the fore as Acosta proceeds to describe the mechanics of earthquake in natural terms. Describing hot blasts of air that shake the earth violently when they build

up underground, Acosta draws analogies that bring earthquake closer to the eye, making it easier to understand: “Just as does gunpowder, when flame touches it, break rocks and walls in mines, or a chestnut placed in the fire leaps and breaks and crackles” (HN 158). The image of the wholesome chestnut would seem almost cheerful were it not for the preceding reference to gunpowder and mining, and thus to violence and forced Indigenous labor. The strange cluster of examples recalls images from Bartolomé de las Casas’s *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (1552) describing the Spaniards’ terrorizing practices during the conquest: “oppressing and tormenting [the Indians] and sending them into the mines” and the “further refinements of cruelty” such as “burning them alive,” “grill[ing] them over a slow fire,” “sprinkl[ing] them from time to time with oil to ensure a nice even roasting.”¹⁷ In describing the mechanics of earthquake, Acosta summons the worst atrocities of colonialism while also insisting that seismic irruptions must not be understood as a “warning” from God.

Instead, Acosta defines earthquake as “una cosa maravillosa y mucho de notar”—“a marvelous thing and also one very worthy of notice” (HN 77). The discursive force of the early modern European marvelous came from its proximity to the miraculous; from Columbus onward, the language of the marvelous allowed writers to elicit readerly wonder while also breezing past possible objections to the report of miracle on theological grounds.¹⁸ Moreover, the human arts and sciences replaced God’s miracles in early modern missionologies in ways that ultimately served imperial interests.¹⁹ In Acosta, the “marvelous” nature of earthquake thus hints at larger religious import while discouraging any specific interpretation. Instead, earthquake calls for observation: it deserves attention and notation like all natural matters that affect the larger extraction of wealth from Peru. This productive tension between the moral and the natural, the theological and the empirical, also marks Acosta’s description of the 1586 earthquake in Lima, as he notes its length and breadth in leagues and observes that it causes a flood similar to one accompanying an earlier earthquake, leading him to draw conclusions about proximity to the sea as the cause of most tremors: “that the water closes and obstructs the earth’s apertures and holes” (HN 159).

In a similar vein, to support this natural theory of water as a cause of earthquake, Acosta points to frequent tremors in Ferrara, Italy, with its proximity to the Adriatic Sea—an example that illuminates problems of religious interpretation that metaphysical instrumentalism aims to solve. As Acosta well knew, Ferrara had been struck by a series of earthquakes in 1570.²⁰ Pope Pius V blamed divine intervention against the ruling duke, who had refused to banish the Jews during the 1560s despite a papal order commanding the expulsion. The Duke of Ferrara fought back, commissioning scholars to develop theories of natural causation—much like Acosta’s. The Ferrara episode connects the foundational

projects of *limpieza de sangre* or purity of blood in Europe to those in the New World, but the deeper implication of the conflict between the pope and the duke is that natural catastrophe threatens the established order, calls governance into question, and invites conflicting interpretations. Acosta's metaphysical instrumentalism negotiates between the natural and divine explanations by attributing earthquakes not to God but to mechanical causes, which can be investigated in ways that support imperial interests, even as he assigns the phenomena more broadly to the category of "things that God made so that he might be feared," one of "the agents of Divine Justice" (HN 159).

Acosta concludes his discussion of earthquake with an example, "moral" as much as it is "natural," through which his empirical understanding of nature can be subsumed into the higher cause of spiritual purification that must both define conquest and retroactively justify the violent means by which it is achieved. The example is an unusual or "strange thing" ("un caso en esta materia, raro"): a dramatic 1581 mudslide in the district of Angoango that covered a whole lake (HN 159). The slide moved across land for a league and a half, "as if it were water or melted wax," as "almost impossible to believe (although reliable persons attest to it)" (HN 159). The slide's near miracle is exterminatory, coming on suddenly and striking precisely to destroy a town "where there were idolatrous Indians dedicated to witchcraft" (HN 159). Like the gunpowder and mines that explain the mechanism of earthquake, this terrible slide of the earth evokes the violence of conquest while also serving as its justification: by "killing a large number" of Indigenous worshippers, this scrutinized natural event becomes a divine intervention to punish the practitioners of Andean religion (HN 159). The violent effects of a natural catastrophe that Acosta also studies empirically thereby mirror and vindicate the violence of conquest itself. As Betancor argues, Acosta's defense of the dispossession of Peru's Indigenous peoples is in fact what makes possible the emergent empiricism of the *Historia natural y moral*.²¹

Acosta's violent philosophy of earthquake sheds some light on Guaman Poma's twinned invocations of earthquake and Elijah. The story Guaman Poma summons is the biblical account of Elijah returning to Mount Horeb, where he hides in a cave because he has lost hope of converting his people from the false worship of their idol Baal. This intransigent idolatry and the hopelessness of a would-be converter clearly resonated with Guaman Poma's larger chronicle of colonial Peru and his particular response to Acosta, who had argued in his earlier *De procuranda Indorum salute* (1588) that the Indigenous people of Spanish America lacked the intellectual capacity to fully absorb Christianity. In the biblical account, Elijah gives up on his responsibility as a religious leader for similar reasons, forsaking the people he sought to convert when they resisted violently, having "thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword."²²

In response, God tries to coax Elijah out of his spiritual dejection and tells him to behold a series of events depicted in a famous passage in the Book of Kings:

The Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a still small voice.²³

Elijah witnesses the wind, earthquake, and fire—and even hears the voice—but none of this moves him or pulls him out of dejection because God has not appeared before him; God is not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire. The account suggests that Elijah has failed to apprehend divine revelation—made apparent through these forces—and God instructs the prophet to pass on his mantle to a new religious leader.

In citing the story of Elijah and his biblical failure to interpret catastrophe, Guaman Poma registers a subtle critique of Acosta in which the implications of Christian scriptural knowledge defy alleged colonial reality. For Acosta's *De procuranda Indorum salute*, which preceded the *Historia natural and moral*, had sought to explain the absence in the New World of the kinds of miracles that early Christians had drawn upon to evangelize. The text imputes this absence to a fundamental lack in the Indigenous people, who were, Acosta claimed, "inferiores" in "ratione, cultu, auctoritate": in their reason, culture, and power.²⁴ God had offered no miracles during the arduous process of converting them because, in effect, they were not capable of appreciating them. Guaman Poma's allusion to the Elijah story effectively rebukes Acosta's position, however, precisely because it is in part about the instrumentalist misuse of miracle. Before this crucial turning point, Elijah has been trying to prove the Hebrew God to be stronger than the idol Baal by demanding that God set fire to a watery altar in acceptance of Elijah's sacrifice. The Baal worshippers have failed to produce a similar fiery effect, so Elijah orders their priests killed after demonstrating his own immediate access to divine power. Yet not only does the fire fail to convince his enemies but the failure also undoes his own faith in his role. Even after God speaks to him directly outside the cave, Elijah misunderstands and undervalues the events of wind, earthquake, and fire: phenomena not to be summoned like God himself (God is not in them) but instead interpretable and therefore meant to induce the awe that the biblical leader fails to experience.

In summoning Elijah, then, Guaman Poma responds in kind to Acosta's metaphysical instrumentalism: the "ultimate ideology of the Spanish empire," as Betancor puts it, in its aspiration to justify the violent means of colonialism by an appeal to higher ends.²⁵ Guaman Poma's response directly negates Acosta's purported

disappointment in a lack of New World miracles, and in the supposed incapacity of the Indigenous people to appreciate them, with a sharp rejoinder drawn from Andean history. There have been “many other miracles,” he says, “in the time of the Inca,” though for the most part “not written down” (CG 70). Miracles are indistinguishable from what the Christians call punishments; they exist simultaneously within one event: “milagros y castigos.” They include “the fall of the hills and crags ... knocked down”; “the eruption of volcanoes and the rain of fire from the inferno” (here Guaman Poma directly contradicts Acosta); “solar sand over a city”; “measles, small pox, croup, and mumps”; “the great mass of snow and hail that fell from the sky”—and, most significantly, “also said to be miracles are earthquakes” (NC 70). Earthquake is the quintessential of the “miracles and punishments” precisely because, in Andean thought, as Guaman Poma explains, this category is called “*pachacuti* [el que transforma la tierra]”; “*pacha ticra* [el que la pone cabeza abajo]”: “that which transforms the earth”; “that which puts the earth upside down.”

Pachacuti is a central concept in Andean thought, extensively studied by early chroniclers as well as contemporary historians and anthropologists.²⁶ There are many kinds of *pachacuti*, as Guaman Poma notes, and the one most associated with Noah resides in Indigenous memory as “*uno yaco pachacuti* [el cataclismo causado por el agua]”—“the cataclysm caused by water” (GC 39). The Jesuit scholar Diego González Holguín, writing about Quechua languages in the early seventeenth century, understands *pachacuti* to refer to natural catastrophe or cataclysm; yet the ninth Inca ruler—Cusi Yupanqui, who consolidated the empire from Cusco to all of South America west of the Andes—was also known as “Pachacuti,” remaker of the world.²⁷ So too was the Spanish conquest a *pachacuti*, a rupture in space-time that turned the world *cabeza abajo* or upside down. *Pachacuti* thus bears powerfully on those complexities of events that make up sequences in historical time. *Pachacuti* is not just cataclysm; it is also the turning of earth, a process of reversal and change represented by a humble curved stick furrowing the ground.²⁸ So tied is *pachacuti* to a movement of the earth that the term is sometimes translated into English simply as “earthquake.”²⁹ But if this translation reduces the complexity of *pachacuti*, it also places the figure of earthquake in a more Andean frame. As anthropologists of the colonial Andean world have shown, *pachacuti* registers the very containment of time by the earth: not just in the sense that the land literally holds the marks of past history but in the sense that the earth’s very movements and oscillations also hold time. *Pachacuti* thus announces both an alteration of the physical ground and the remaking of time: an overturning or “world upside down” (“*pacha tiera*”).³⁰

The geotemporal complexity of *pachacuti* helps explain why Elijah appears where he does in Guaman Poma’s story. Although Elijah emerges after Noah in the Bible and in the linear unfolding of historical time, the exegetical worldview of *pachacuti* allows Noah and Elias to exist at once in the same dimension. And

no wonder there is not only a flood but also an earthquake: Noah's story is about a *pachacuti* of epic proportions. So too is the Spanish conquest a *pachacuti*, an earthquake of the sacred world that has disrupted the *huacas*, the stones and rocks embodying spiritual power.³¹ Thus the Jesuit scholar Bernabé Cobo, who studied in Cuzco in 1609, described one notable *huaca* as "a bit of flat ground," "where they said that the earthquake was formed."³² Like the *huacas*, earthquake is an embodiment of power and, like all parts of this Andean world, the two exist in ever-changing relation.

This may explain why the idea of being *tragado por la tierra*—"swallowed by the earth"—structures so much of the most important Andean sacred speech in Guaman Poma's text (CG 54). The phrase figures more than death or even burial; it describes a rending of the earth from within rather than without. The placement of agency suggests an earthquake rather than, for example, the digging of a grave. Before the conquest, when the Incas lived under a good government, "they took an oath": "*Runacamac unanochiuachun cay allpa millpuuachon*," "Creator of people let me be killed and swallowed by this earth" (CG 53–54). They also used these words to make "curses that they use among themselves," pronouncing to their cursed interlocutors, "The earth will swallow you. Neither will you live all this year" (CG 220). Adapting Christian history to Andean thought, Guaman Poma pronounces the biblical Sodom destroyed not by fire and brimstone but "swallowed in five pieces of earth" (CG 83). At the same time, sorcerers who worship in caves will say "*machay mama* ... Mother cave, do not eat me" (CG 213). Finally, describing the relation between Indigenous interlocutors and friars after the Spanish conquest, Guaman Poma explains that the latter would incite divine wrath in the form of natural disasters:

The friars would ask God to punish the Indians by burning them with flames from heaven, and in some places it covered the hills. Some of the towns were covered with lakes and the earth would swallow them, as did happen in the case of the great punishments by God in the world and the miracles from the beginning. (CG 70)

The conflation of punishment, miracle, and divine judgment in this text, Sabine MacCormack argues, suggests that, in Andean thought, they occurred not in response to sin or wrongdoing but "irrespective of human merit" in a world so undone by colonialism that chaos was its only rule.³³ Guaman Poma is thus, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui puts it, "a theorist of the colonial condition"—able to "decipher signs of time-space, and navigate world beyond the contingencies of history."³⁴ The earth's swallowing marks its colonial contingency but also its potential ground for creating a different order. In Christian cosmology, an earthquake might be a response to sin, fitting into an explanation of cause and effect, and creating a globalizing framework for dividing the innocent from the guilty in

ways conducive to colonial power. But in Andean thought, earthquake seems to have opened questions rather than answered them and to have figured modes of interpretation unsettling colonial knowledge in its various forms. More simply: earthquake enabled and registered a seismic theory of history. If *pachacuti* coincided with the arrival of the Spanish and the onset of conquest, *pachacuti* might also bring about its end.

El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Theory from the Torrid Zone

When El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega published his *Comentarios reales de los Incas* in 1609, he presented a history of the pre-Columbian Indigenous past and of the Spanish conquest quite unlike the chronicle Guaman Poma was writing during those same years. Garcilaso was living in Córdoba as a fully acculturated relative of his father's family just as Guaman Poma finished his own text. In Spain, Garcilaso had also served in the military and battled against the Moriscos in the War of the Alpujarras in southern Andalusia (1568–1571), giving him a unique vantage point on the shifting contours of the early modern global world in its various colonial formations.³⁵ And while Guaman Poma's chronicle was lost until the early twentieth century, Garcilaso's much-read body of work secured his position as a notable prose stylist of the Spanish early modern era as well as a celebrated inaugurator of Latin American literary history.

The foundational research of Garcilaso scholars has long established that the *Comentarios reales* achieved a monumental history of Peru, and a seeming celebration of both its vanquished peoples and its conquerors, masterfully recounted according to the terms of classical and Renaissance models that early seventeenth-century European readers would admire. Moreover, Garcilaso's personal allegiances when it came to the unfolding circumstances of the conquest are necessarily complex, given his conquistador father and his own pursuit of remuneration from the crown for his father's loyalty as such. Some scholars have suggested, for example, that in conceiving his entire history around both sides of his lineage, Garcilaso sought to vindicate his father in particular against accusations of disloyalty to the crown by criticizing the imperial order established after the original conquest.³⁶

Yet Garcilaso's critique of conquest writ large remains powerful, not least in his insistence on the epistemological limits of Spanish imperial historiography, which he foregrounded through attention to the enduring inability of conquistadors and settlers to understand the Indigenous languages and the concomitant problems attending mistranslation and misapprehension. At the same time, as José Antonio Mazzotti, Christian Fernández-Palacios, and others have shown, the *Comentarios* powerfully engages Andean frameworks of cosmology and knowledge production. Transformational scholarship on what Mazzotti calls the "Andean resonances"

of the *Comentarios* has made clear that the great Spanish prose stylist Garcilaso was, simultaneously, the *quechuahablando* author who had absorbed Quechua language and knowledge, as the Inca once put it, with his mother's milk. Garcilaso's writing, that is, was always speaking to two audiences at once, Spanish and Andean, and always with an eye to an Indigenous future, a *nación indiana* or "Indian nation."³⁷

In his careful visual analysis of Garcilaso's invented coat of arms, which appeared in the frontispiece to the first edition of the *Comentarios* in 1609, Fernández-Palacios has uncovered the *pacha* or earth cosmologies embedded within the heraldic shield, including the prominent figure of the *amaru* or serpent symbol—a figure with crucial tectonic significance as a deity of the underworld and of earthquakes. The decision to include the *amaru* on the first page of his text—a text whose most immediate readers would be Christian ones who associated the figure of the serpent with sin and evil—was an inherently dangerous one, as Fernández-Palacios observes. Yet Garcilaso chose, despite these risks, to consign the earthquake-serpent to the posterity of future readers, and perhaps specifically Andean ones.³⁸ For like Guaman Poma, I want to suggest, Garcilaso developed a kind of earthquake history, enlisting it to hone a particular historical-philosophical position with consequences for an as yet unrealized future.

Garcilaso articulated this position, and the earthquake theory it afforded, first by locating himself as a subject of *la tórrida zona*, which was under new discussion in the sixteenth century as the Spanish conquest continued. Acosta in particular had made a point of challenging ancient theories of geography with the new knowledge obtained by first-hand experience. Responding to Aristotle's claim that the torrid zone's scorching heat rendered it uninhabitable, Acosta had famously written of experiencing a chill while crossing the equatorial line at sea: "And here I confess I laughed and mocked Aristotle's meteors and his philosophy" (CG 86). But if Acosta laughs in empiricist triumph over Aristotle, Garcilaso in a sense one-ups him with a birthright: "I was born in the torrid zone ... and was brought up there until I was twenty," he affirms: "The ancients were wrong ... [and] the philosophers."³⁹ By his very act of writing, Garcilaso restored humanity to the torrid zone, along with the history and philosophy that Western colonial thought has so often denied it. "Pues soy indio" ("Because I am an Indian"), as Garcilaso famously puts it: what seems a familiar topos of authorial apology construed through the lens of Indigenous heritage actually makes a claim for a kind of theory from the torrid zone—a theory positioned against the philosophical traditions of what Garcilaso himself, writing from Europe, calls "this other temperate [zone] of the north where I am writing this [history]" (CR 1:7, 10).⁴⁰

The torrid zone generates its own theory, and earthquakes are central not only to its geography as "the region subject to earthquakes" but also to its critical vantage point (CR 2:130). As in Guaman Poma's history, earthquake in the

Comentarios reales structures the most important Andean sacred speech. “I will swear to the earth, asking it to open and swallow me alive as I am if I am lying,” exclaims a *curaca* giving legal testimony to some confused Spaniards; he is unwilling to swear either by the Christian god, because he has not been baptized, or by the Inca sun and moon, whose names are not to be used for juridical purposes “but in order to worship them.” The event in this scene occurs, Garcilaso writes, “after the Spaniards won this [Inca] empire”—but he narrates it out of sequence, early in the first half of the history, which is devoted to establishing the significance of the pre-Spanish, Indigenous past (CR 1:66). Earthquake in this Andean context seems less a punishment for lying than a frame for assaying the concept of truth itself. The stability of the earth emphasizes the larger contingency of a world that will be rent apart by the arrival of the Spanish and the fall of the Inca empire. As the conquest approaches toward the end of book 9, Garcilaso describes an especially severe series of “great earthquakes and tremors,” and though “Peru is scourged by this plague” in normal life, this new seismicity stands out—“they noticed that the tremors were bigger than the ordinary ones and that many high hills fell”—and is accompanied by strange ocean tides and colored rings around the moon. The ruling Inca leader, Huaina Cápac, hears from “a soothsayer or magician, which the Indians call *llaica*” that all of it portends what is to come: “all will be finished ... wars and the death of your people ... the destruction of our religion and republic and the dispossession of your empire,” and then, ominously, “all will turn to smoke” (CR 2:236).

But if the geologic phenomenon of earthquake allegorizes the Spanish conquest, it also unsettles the foregone conclusion of conquest as an event consigned to the past with a powerful admonition of its opposite: the fragility of settler colonialism and the ongoing uncertainty of its stability and duration. When Garcilaso abruptly breaks the thread of his Inca narration for several chapters in book 7 to discuss, out of chronological order, the expansion of the Spanish conquest from Peru into Chile, he meanders from his own long digression in a metanarrative turn: at the very moment he is writing this part of his *Commentaries*, he is also receiving “new reports of wretched and pitiful events that occurred in Chili”: “great earthquakes” whose ravages coincide with his telling of “the revolt of the Araucanian [Indians]” (CR 2:136, 138). But Garcilaso refuses to name a connection between the two earth-shattering series of events, natural and human. “Of all this I do not know what to say, except that they are secret judgments of God, who knows why he permits it” (CR 2:140).

Earthquake instead enacts an organizing metaphor for the Indigenous overturning of colonial rule. The fate of the conquistador Pedro de Valdivia, the colonial governor of Chile, whom Garcilaso ostensibly celebrates for his “great deeds” and his “prudence and wisdom,” exemplifies this particular idiom of earthquake (CR 2:129). When a rebellion of Mapuche (or Araucanian) Indians breaks out in Chile, Valdivia sets out with an army bent on violent destruction: “al castigo” (“to punish

the rising”) (CR 2:130). But in retaliating, Valdivia has not come close to absorbing the larger implications of this Indigenous revolution, its meaning vis-a-vis the long-term imperial project: for he “tak[es] no notice of the Indians, as the Spaniards never do with similar revolts and uprisings” (CR 2:130). This failure of apprehension recurs on a larger scale in colonial Peru, in the uncanny scene that follows: a lone Mapuche arrives in La Plata with a puzzling message “written on a scrap of paper without signature, location, or date”; its contents are anonymous and cryptic, informing the Spaniards that

Pedro de Valdivia and 150 lances that were with him were swallowed by the earth. The transfer of these words, with the testimony that it was brought by an Indian from Chili, ran the length and breadth of Peru to the great scandal of the Spaniards who could not guess what the swallowing of the earth meant. (CR 2:130)

The ominous words become famous but the Spaniards cannot parse the message. And because, as el Inca tells us, “They could not believe that any Indians had the power to slay 150 Spaniards on horseback,” they assume a literal meaning: “They said (as this country [Chili] is also like Peru ... the region subject to earthquakes) that it might have been that the Spaniards were walking through some deep chasm [when] a piece of the mountain fell and caught them below, and everyone affirmed this [idea]. (CR 2:130)”

The awkward syntax calls attention to the convoluted distortions to which the Spaniards must resort in order to avoid the unthinkable. The earth that devours Pedro de Valdivia’s forces is, of course, metaphorical: the conquistador army has been felled by an insurgent Native population that the Spaniards have profoundly underestimated and misunderstood. Indeed, the pivotal figure in the defeat of the Spaniards in the Andes is an acculturated, *ladino* Indigenous man “called Felipe and by his Indian name Lautaro,” a phrase that foreshadows a bicultural understanding of the conquest the Spaniards cannot yet grasp. Lautaro has been “brought up since boyhood with the governor Pedro de Valdivia,” and he understands both the Castilian language and the conquest all too well “for having been brought up among [Spaniards]” (CR 2:133). Using his bilingual skills, Felipe decamps to the revolutionaries and informs on the Spaniards’ plans. “Do not lose heart, brothers,” he tells them: “See to what brings the liberty of our country and the death and destruction of these traitors [los españoles]” (CR 2:133). Knowing when and how to attack, the Mapuche strike quickly: Valdivia and his army are thus, in Guaman Poma’s phrase, “tragado por la tierra.” The aftershocks, as Garcilaso suggests, are still being felt at the time of his writing:

For forty-nine years they have sustained the war that this rebellion caused ... and we do not know when it will come to an end; it seems from year to year to be

increasing in strength and focus ... after forty-nine years of their rebellion and after sustaining perpetual war [of] fire and blood. (CR 2:135–136)

Here, Garcilaso pauses to cite multiple first-hand sources describing Indigenous rebellion and the violent destruction of colonial cities in Chile, including Valdivia, named after its governor, where in one district only twenty Spaniards survived, and only “because, driven by hunger, they went over to the side of the Indians” (CR 2:138). Thus, when Garcilaso concludes the chapters on Chile by announcing, “I fear that I cannot come to an end of so long a journey as would be recounting the Spanish conquest of that kingdom,” he is not merely lamenting the time-consuming difficulty of writing a complex history of conquest (CR 2:135–136). He is also articulating a foundational premise of contemporary settler colonial theory: conquest is not an event that one can finish narrating during the time of occupation. Invasion is not completed in the past, cordoned off as a “colonial period,” but rather comprises a structure that exists indefinitely across time. This settler colonial structure is also an unending condition of conflict or *guerra perpetua* (“perpetual war”)—and thus a “region subject to earthquakes”—that the settler society, too, must inhabit. South American earthquakes indelibly shape the colonial history Garcilaso writes: like Guaman Poma, he works within a kind of earthquake language, a critical idiom of *terremoto*, to represent the violence and temporal upheaval of colonial experience as well as Indigenous efforts to respond. Like Guaman Poma, Garcilaso interprets earthquakes within Indigenous knowledge frameworks, enlisting the earthquake as a unifying metaphor for colonialism but also, conversely, a powerful idiom for the *pachacuti* that might bring about colonialism’s end.

The Inca’s Enlightenment

Garcilaso’s theory from the torrid zone was avidly read, if not necessarily understood, by key philosophical thinkers in England and France as they were formulating some of the ideas and concepts that comprised the so-called “Age of Reason”—a westward transmission of knowledge rooted in Garcilaso’s upbringing in Peru. As Europeans began writing about colonial Peru, Garcilaso’s descriptions of an ancient Inca polity based in the qualities of “reason and justice, with piety, mercy, and mildness” provided an ideal historical model—even if that historical model was rhetorically indebted to Sir Thomas More and Cicero—for anyone exploring the limits and possibilities of political utopia, as Voltaire did when he located the mythical paradise El Dorado in the Andes (CR 1:38). From a Protestant Enlightenment point of view, moreover, Garcilaso’s Incas constituted ideal victims of Spanish-Catholic atrocity, of the violent excesses of religious fanaticism

(as in Voltaire's *Alzire*). And for John Locke, Garcilaso's *Commentaries* helped to illuminate the potential problems of monarchy based on royal descent.⁴¹

Locke's reading of Garcilaso, though, hinges on a misapprehension of Andean irony, which also informs the Inca's particular earthquake idiom. Locke cites Garcilaso at least three times in his major writings: twice in the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) and once in his *Essay on Human Understanding* (1689). In the first treatise, Locke was apparently so taken with the Inca historian that his citation of Garcilaso, from the first volume of the *Commentaries*, is one of the longest quoted passages in the text. It stages one of the most well-known rhetorical features from the playbook of colonialism: the topos of cannibalism. In this section, in which Locke is contesting the argument for a divinely ordained monarchy based on patriarchy, he turns to colonial Peru to show what can come of blindly following the "Authority of Example" and assuming that "what hath been done, be the Rule of what is to be."⁴² For in Peru, Locke explains, one may find "people that begot children on purpose to fatten and eat them."⁴³ The larger point would be clearer if Locke had stuck to it, but he pauses here in a spurt of enthusiasm, for "the Story is so remarkable, I cannot but set it down in the [author's] words":

In some Provinces, *says he*, they were so liquorish after Man's Flesh, that they wou'd not have the patience to wait till the Breath was out of the Body, but would suck the Blood as it ran from the Wounds ... They had publick Shambles of Man's flesh, their Madness herein was to that degree that they spared not their own Children which they had begot on Strangers taken in War: For they made their Captives their Mistresses and choisly nourished the Children they had by them, till about Thirteen Years Old they Butchered and [ate] them.⁴⁴

Locke goes on to claim that even these Peruvian cannibals, acting without civilized reason, are morally superior to rational men who would, despite their reason, subject themselves to the "Authority of Example" and thus to the political slavery of monarchy.⁴⁵

But Locke's explanation for enlisting a detailed discussion of supposed cannibal infanticide rings oddly false. While he presents the tradition of cannibalism, ostensibly, to show the danger of unthinkingly placing authority in "what hath been," he seems oddly determined to linger on it.⁴⁶ The point of the child-eating example—an embodiment of the political theory of paternalism he wishes to contest—gets more or less lost in the lurid details of the passage. Perhaps Locke wants or needs these pornographic images of New World cannibalism to stay at the forefront of the eighteenth-century English reader's imagination as he moves on in the second treatise to philosophically justify the enslavement of Indigenous people and the seizure of their lands through his far drier accounts of property and war. Locke's gory citation from Garcilaso, in other words, lends rhetorical support for the Indian slave trade—a slave trade that had its North American hub in Carolina,

for which Locke had helped write the *Fundamental Constitutions* (1669). Certainly, Locke had at his fingertips many sources that registered skepticism about the colonial topos of cannibalism in his personal library; yet he chose to cite this seemingly guileless colonialist passage from Garcilaso, whose self-stated authority as both “Inca” and *indio* apparently made him Locke’s strongest possible source. Locke does not mention that Garcilaso was discussing certain “Ancient[s],” supposedly civilized by the imperial rule of the reason-loving Incas, who immediately abolished the practice, according to the account; nor does Locke acknowledge that Garcilaso was by his own account paraphrasing this particular cited passage from an early chronicler, the conquistador Pedro Cieza de León.⁴⁷

Nor, finally, did Locke seem to understand, or choose to understand, the rhetorical dimension that clearly distances Garcilaso from his conquistador source—as when El Inca describes the supposed custom of raising and nourishing children in order to eat them as a “seminario de muchachos,” a college or school for boys who will be consumed (CR 1:32). This imposition of a Western institution—the *seminario* or seminary—signals the figurative and non-ethnographic dimensions of Garcilaso’s paraphrase, suggesting that its almost absurd horrors may gloss the behavior not of the Indigenous inhabitants of these provinces described by Cieza de León but rather of the Europeans who constitute the primary early seventeenth-century readership of Garcilaso’s work. It is the conquistador Spaniards, after all, who have been putting their own children—who are also the children of their now vanquished Indigenous enemies—into seminaries where they will be, if not literally eaten by their fathers, then figuratively consumed by the conquistador culture that now structures their apprehension of the world. Garcilaso’s paraphrase of Cieza de León, that is to say, makes a point that exceeds its source—one that Locke apparently missed. Unlike Locke, however, Jonathan Swift managed to see the rhetorical potential of the same passage in Garcilaso when formulating his own modest proposal of cannibalism as a solution for the Irish population problem: an idea he took, Swift said, from “a very knowing American.”⁴⁸

This ambiguous, knowing Americanness is precisely what defines Garcilaso’s critical idiom as a writer who located his intellectual origins in a land of earthquakes, who defined himself by his birth and youth in the torrid zone, and who called at the opening of the *Commentaries* for “greater confusion of and affront to” Western natural philosophers (CR 1:11). Writing from the perspective of the earthquake-ridden land of his birth—from the vantage of his early proximity to the catastrophe of Spanish conquest—Garcilaso enlightened his readers with sudden conceptual jolts throughout the *Comentarios*: jolts to political definitions, to historiographical authority, to economic thought, to modes of literary narration, and finally to the framework of providentialism that justified the violence of the colonial world. In a note to the reader on the “General Language of the Indians” that opens the first volume, for example, Garcilaso pauses to discuss a specific Spanish term: “It must also be noted that the word *vecino* in Peru is understood to

mean the Spaniards who have *repartimiento de indios*, and in this sense we always [mean] it when it is offered [here]" (CR 1:7–8). Why does Garcilaso include this brief gloss on a Spanish term to open a section on Indigenous language? Elsewhere in the *Commentaries*, El Inca constantly foregrounds his reasons for putting bits of text in their proper place and explaining whenever he interpolates something that might seem to belong elsewhere, and the opening note to an entire volume seems an unlikely place to make obvious errors. Moreover, the moments in which Garcilaso uses the word *vecino* do not appear to require this lexical contextualization; it is clear enough that *vecinos* are always Spaniards, and when their enslaving of Indigenous South Americans is relevant, Garcilaso will also mention the *repartimiento de los indios* or allotment of Indians. The information seems unnecessary to the reading experience or to comprehension, in other words—and yet to insert the information is to highlight it, to make sure that it doesn't get lost in the thicket of Inca history.

Today *vecino* means "neighbor" in Spanish, but in its early modern sense *vecino* was a political category, implying something like community member, one with very specific rights and responsibilities, a protocitizen before the language of *cuidadanía*, associated with republicanism, was developed.⁴⁹ *Vecindad* in early modern Iberia was, like most political categories, about inclusion and exclusion; *conversos* and *Moriscos* could not be *vecinos* because they were thought unfit to perform the social, moral, and political duties of *vecindad* and thereby achieve inclusion. A Catholic born elsewhere in Europe but residing in a Castilian community, by contrast, could become a *vecino*. But in Spanish America, as Tamar Herzog has shown, *vecindad* was quickly essentialized to exclude all non-Spaniards.⁵⁰ This shift in definition would hardly have been surprising to Garcilaso's readers, as it was in strong accordance with their own practices. The exclusion from *vecindad* of non-Spaniards—*indios*, *negros*, *mulatos*, *mestizos*, *cholos*: all terms used in the *Commentaries*—was therefore not what Garcilaso wanted to flag for his Spanish readership. Perhaps he merely wanted them to know that to be *vecino* in Peru signified a greater degree of wealth and status than it did in Spain, where most Catholic male heads of household in a community were understood to be such. But the unusual economy of Garcilaso's pronouncement combined with its odd out-of-placeness suggests that he also wanted to deliver a certain shock, bringing readers into a clear understanding that to be accorded the rights and responsibilities of *vecino* in Peru required the ownership of the bodies and the labor of Indigenous people. He wanted to signal, in other words, that the category of *vecindad* was not just premised on slavery—after all, the intellectual work of the citizen in the *polis* was always assumed to be materially supported by someone who was excluded, whether women or enslaved persons—but that it was now explicitly *defined* this way. Garcilaso's commentary foregrounds this difference. To perform the responsibilities of *vecindad* was indeed to enslave people; and Garcilaso wanted his

readers in Spain to see, quite baldly, that this crucial, unifying political category had devolved in its colonial context.

Garcilaso's most notable contribution to the "confusion of and affront to" Western thought, though, lies in the jolts he delivers to historiographical authority.⁵¹ At times, he cites official Spanish sources with unrelenting enthusiasm but then layers up evidence that exposes the very claims he appears to be celebrating as flatly absurd. The opening of the second volume, for example, seems to celebrate the conquest of Peru by posing an extended and uncertain comparison between the Roman Second Triumvirate of Marc Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian and the three Spaniards collaborating in the initial conquest of Peru: Francisco Pizarro, Diego de Almagro, and Hernando de Luque. The three Spaniards offer a familiar classical analogy—a "triumvirate" that mirrors "the three Roman emperors at Laino"—though the analogy is retracted in the next sentence: "But so different the one from the other that it seems ridiculous to wish to compare" them. The chapter oscillates between these two positions, apparently opposing the wickedness of the Romans with the virtuousness of the Spaniards—the Roman triumvirate was formed "to destroy the whole world" while the Spanish one meant "to enrich it"—while also slyly advancing the initial thesis of imperial comparability. The chapter ends with a citation from Francesco Guicciardini, the Italian political theorist who introduced the concept of "reason of state" to Machiavelli: "Marc Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian ... under the name of a noble triumvirate, established and notarized all the oppressions that were executed in Rome ... that can never be sufficiently condemned." Praising Guicciardini as "the great historian of his own times," Garcilaso also expands the Italian thinker's original pronouncement to include a distinction between the name of a given political formation, the "noble ... triumvirate," and the actual effects of its actions. Guicciardini's vilification of transhistorical imperial violence—which included the execution of Garcilaso's rhetorical forebear, Cicero—serves as the chapter's final word.⁵²

The overall effect of this citational framework is to lend a certain satiric outrageousness to the entire account when Garcilaso expostulates on the good fortune brought to all by the conquest: to the "Peruvian and Mexican empires" as well as the conquistadors who "brought them out of the infernal darkness in which they were dying and gave them the evangelical light in which they live today!" as well as "all the nations of the Old World," who must celebrate the "glorious name and race of the Pizarros" for "the riches you have brought from the New World!"⁵³ At this point the *Commentaries* turn to the French economist and philosopher Juan Bodino, or Jean Bodin, widely credited for undertaking the first modern systemization of political science and first articulating the quantity theory of money that influenced mercantilist theory and later economists, including John Keynes. Garcilaso's interest in this work derives in part from Bodin's famous postulation that the influx of silver and gold accounted for the price revolution in sixteenth-century Europe

and the vigorous development of markets, resulting in widespread inflation. Garcilaso registers an almost absurdist discrepancy between what he claims and what he slowly discloses, asserting that he is citing Bodin “in order to prove how our triumvirate enriched the whole world”: that the empire of Peru is “an ocean of gold and silver, [and] its growth bathes and fills all the nations of the world with wealth and contentment.”⁵⁴ But the examples interspersed between such tributes largely involve violence—the increased cost of ransoms and wars—along with, perhaps comically, some new “Cordovan shoes” that have cost the Inca writer much more than the pair he was replacing.⁵⁵

Throughout the entire discussion, Garcilaso coolly observes and judges the very claims he simultaneously purports to advance. First, he directs his presumably Spanish readers to consult the cited text directly by naming the title, volume, and chapter where Bodin speaks at great length on the subject of the Spanish economy.⁵⁶ But in turning to Bodin, readers will find that the actual thrust of the economic argument hardly praises Spain—“rich, haughty, and lazy”—for its contributions to European inflation: Bodin insists to the contrary that “men” and the commodities they yield and trade “are the only strength and wealth.”⁵⁷ Second, lest readers fail to consult Bodin or miss the point, Garcilaso ends his long economic digression by summarizing a different point of view—made by those who see “con otros ojos” (“with other eyes”)—regarding the influx of Peruvian wealth: that the new riches “have damaged rather than advantaged” the imperial center. Here, Garcilaso rehearses traditional *in malo* Christian arguments about wealth producing “vices rather than virtues,” “inclining its possessors to pride, to ambition, to gluttony and luxury,” while also citing a rise in the “effeminized” state of the European ruling class that corrupts the ability of men to properly govern. The latter argument will over the next two centuries begin to reshape the Black Legend into a new form, one conducive to an emergent US-American national myth of self-reliant men plowing their own fields, chopping their own trees. But it is Garcilaso’s incisive economic commentary on the wealth-induced price revolution that truly endures:

If the incomes of the rich have grown so that they live in abundance and delight, the miseries of the poor have also grown so that they die of hunger and nakedness, due to the high prices that the great wealth has caused in necessities and clothing ... the poor today cannot dress themselves nor eat because of this high cost ... the riches of the new world, if closely examined, have not increased the necessary things for human life.⁵⁸

Although it is no secret which of the two positions regarding transported Peruvian wealth bears more ethical weight, Garcilaso purports to be unable to decide which he should support. Claiming a state of “perplexity,” he asks only to be permitted to return to the thread of his history.⁵⁹ Moreover, it is his shuttling between perplexity and enthusiastic if absurd certainty that allows Garcilaso to develop a very specific type of irony in narrating the history of conquest, approaching the brink of

outrageousness without ever being caught there unequivocally. Thus, for example, as he nears the end of the first half of the *Comentarios* and drones on about the numerous commodities to be found in Peru (in chapters on everything from mares and horses to carrots and aniseed), he abruptly introduces a new chapter with a purported afterthought in the same flat, descriptive voice: “The best of all that has crossed to the Indies we were forgetting: which are the Spaniards and the Negroes.”⁶⁰ Garcilaso’s parallelism is darkly comic here, clearly aimed to deliver a small jolt to its early seventeenth-century Spanish readers, along with a shock of violence: for one of these two, twinned imports crossing to the Indies is in fact a true commodity (“the Negroes,” as Garcilaso notes, “have since been taken there as slaves”): bought and sold, along with allotments of Indians, by the other.⁶¹ Garcilaso’s narrative voice thus achieves a way of positioning the conquest within the requisite framework of providentialism—while also calling into question the optimality of what was, from the point of view of “the torrid zone,” a catastrophic epoch.

Garcilaso’s Defoe and the Origins of the Classic Enlightenment Novel

Garcilaso had many eighteenth-century transatlantic inheritors who read and interpreted his work in ways that have yet to be fully recognized. One of his readers was almost certainly Daniel Defoe, who contributed in his own way to the literary earthquake history of the Americas. If *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) helped invent a new literary form and became an avatar for global English in its interlocked relation to the colonial, the novel did so by way of a vast inheritance, textual and thematic, from Ibero-America.⁶² One element of this inheritance, however indirect, involves a remarkable incident from the *Comentarios reales*, telling the story of a Caribbean shipwreck survivor named Pedro Serrano. It is one of the most gripping of Garcilaso’s many digressions, so self-contained that the editor of the 1997 *Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* chose to publish it in translation as an early selection—justifying the inclusion by citing scholarship attesting to the “imaginative quality” of the work despite its status as a history.⁶³ Both the editor’s choice and his qualification raise the perennial question of how to demarcate the literary, to draw its edges across time. Garcilaso himself almost seems to be foregrounding the constitution of the literary in a particular imperial moment.

The Serrano story appears near the beginning of the history, framed with the virtuosic navigational technique of “Francisco Drac, inglés,” the English privateer Sir Francis Drake (CR 1:20). Drake stood as much in Garcilaso’s moment for English attacks on the dignity of the Spanish empire as he would centuries later when Gabriel García Márquez invoked his piracy to inaugurate the long line of the Buendía family at the center of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Just as García Márquez begins that family saga with a humiliation by Drake—the

sixteenth-century European race for empire thus bequeathing the long catastrophe of Macondo's global-colonial modernity—so too did Garcilaso launch his history of conquest off a well-placed barb involving the English privateer. Drake, he alleges, has solved the enduring navigational problems for those traveling between Panama and Peru by ingeniously sailing farther out to sea and then back in, unlike fearful Spanish pilots who cling to the shore and cause shipwrecks with their “imaginings” of danger farther out. One such Spanish pilot, he avows, thereby brought about Garcilaso's own brush with death on his voyage to Spain (CR 1:21).

But Garcilaso survives this global moment of inter-imperial rivalry, and lives to write the history that is the *Comentarios reales*. And in this respect, he has his own doppelgänger in the figure of Pedro Serrano—another victim of the false imaginings of a pilot “in search of new regions”: “Spaniards never thought of anything else in those days” (CR 1:22). After miraculously surviving a shipwreck in the Caribbean—“he alone escaped by swimming”—Serrano sustained himself for seven years “with industry and great skill”: “a historical case worthy of the greatest admiration.” The observation is passing, only a trailer for what is to come: “we may be able to tell about it elsewhere,” Garcilaso muses (CR 1:21). Aligning his own survival at sea with Serrano's historic survival, Garcilaso begins a metatextual reflection ranging from narrative context and *ordinatio* to the appropriate length of individual chapters to the possibility of intellectual theft, given that his manuscript “passed through many hands”: “All I now fear is that another historian may rob me” (CR 1:26).

There is a certain retrospective irony in Garcilaso's framing of this rumination within the larger history of early modern imperial contest. The small Hispanophone story of Pedro Serrano lives, for the most part, even at the edges of scholarship focused on Garcilaso himself, while the great English generic innovation for which it was a precursor over a century later, *Robinson Crusoe*, remains a central node in global literary networks. A few scholars over the centuries have introduced the question of direct influence—of whether, as a writer for *The Dial* put it in 1908, “Pedro Serrano ... may have given Defoe the idea for his ‘Robinson Crusoe’”—noting that the 1688 English translation of the *Comentarios reales* “seems a likely candidate to be among Defoe's sources.”⁶⁴ As Lisa Voigt notes, however, “such speculations ... are probably unverifiable” without new concrete evidence otherwise—and proving direct influence is far less interesting than her own detailed and persuasive reading of the indirect relationships between the two texts.⁶⁵ The Serrano story creates a temporally disruptive, antiperiodizing problem for longstanding critical narratives about the rambling eighteenth-century English novel and its celebrated protagonist's spiritual peregrinations, enlightenment energies, and colonial aspirations. Garcilaso's economical, three-page story of sixteenth-century Pedro Serrano sheds an ironizing light on these supposedly watershed eighteenth-century sites of narrative, intellectual, and ultimately disciplinary development.

As Defoe would a century later, Garcilaso writes within a providential framework, noting that “God in his mercy has prolonged [his] life” in order that he may write his *Commentaries* (CR 1:22). But unlike Defoe, Garcilaso offers none of this providentialism to his island-stranded protagonist: Serrano escapes to “this deserted island” and unambiguously saves himself by virtue of being a “great swimmer” (CR 1:27, 22). Where Crusoe experiences the event as God-given salvation with “Extasies and Transports of the Soul,” Serrano arrives “in a state of despair”—already sensing that his escape from death at sea is improbable given the lack of water and fuel and—recognizing his beastly state—“not even grass he could graze on.”⁶⁶ There are no thoughts of providence or mercy here; to the contrary, Serrano observes that drowning would have been a better fate “because it is quicker.” He spends his first night “weeping over his misfortune, as distressed as one would suppose a man to be in such an extreme plight” (CR 1:27). Thus while Garcilaso’s providentially driven narration is no less invested in his protagonist’s psychological state than Defoe’s, it emphasizes a significant distance between Serrano’s religious status and his response to his predicament, which Garcilaso asks readers to imagine, empathetically, that the castaway experiences as “un hombre,” a man rather than as a Christian. The slippage between the two categories in colonial understanding is part of Garcilaso’s point.

Before exploring the significance of Christian status, though, Garcilaso attends to the actions and qualities that make Serrano as successful in surviving on the island as his Protestant and Enlightenment-era successor: Serrano again exhibits “industry and great skill” as well as “great perseverance,” along with an ability to reason out solutions from trial and error. The dawn after his despairing first night finds him searching for shellfish and drinking the blood of turtles. In the process, he must learn which turtles he can kill and which might carry him out to sea. Here experimentation is Serrano’s guide: “So experience taught him which turtles he could attack and which to abandon” (CR 1:28). This and other accounts highlight Serrano’s *diligencia* and methodical resourcefulness in perfecting knowledge for survival—two centuries before “Reason” reminds Defoe’s Enlightenment hero how well “furnish’d” he is by the providential arrival of his boat and the “Necessaries of Life”: gun, ammunition, tools, clothes, bedding, and a tent (RC 54–55).

Other differences highlight how trenchantly Garcilaso’s story—*avant la lettre*—rebukes utopian fantasy and reveals providentialism as the mask of cruelty. Unlike Crusoe, Serrano is “naked as when he was born” after the rotting of his few clothes (CR 1:28). Yet as the sole inhabitant of his new world, he is also, far less than his successor, a new Adam, freshly apprehending his relation to God. “He count[s] himself fortunate” after he finally creates a fire, but he never views himself as the beneficiary of God’s mercy—as Crusoe does when his “Reason” asks him, “Did you not come Eleven of you into the Boat, where are the Ten? Why were not they sav’d and you lost?” (RC 54). Instead, Serrano becomes so depressed by ships that

pass without stopping that he almost gives up and dies. Serrano recognizes that once he has created fire “he needs nothing more” for physical survival (CR 1:28). Garcilaso’s larger point—one that Defoe clearly misses—is that overcoming the insecurities of nature through his use of reason and experience is not enough to sustain his status as a human within the philosophical framework of colonialism.

Both Garcilaso and Defoe endow their protagonists with a companion and both use this plot device to frame their accounts within a larger colonial structure—though to very different ends. While Crusoe’s acquisition of Friday consolidates a sovereign Lockean Englishness, Garcilaso’s Serrano suffers a return that brings him dangerously close to bestiality: “Owing to the harshness of climate hair grew all over his body till it was like an animal pelt and not just any animal’s but a wild boar’s” (CR 1:28). And in this state of utter non-sovereignty—for the boar stands even in the animal world against Machiavelli’s princely foxes and lions—the islanded Serrano meets a man:

This man had been wrecked on the shoals the night before and had saved himself on a ship’s plank. As soon as dawn appeared, he saw the smoke of Pedro Serrano’s fire and guessing what it was, made his way there ... When they saw one another, it would be hard to say which was the more surprised. Serrano thought it was the devil come in the form of a man to tempt him to some desperate act. His guest believed Serrano was the devil in his true form, he was so coated with hair, beard, and hide. Each fled from the other and Pedro Serrano went off saying: “Jesus! Jesus! Oh Lord deliver me from the devil!” Hearing this, the other was reassured and returned to him saying: “Flee me not, my brother, for I am a Christian like you,” and to prove it, as he still ran away, he shouted the Credo. (CR 1:29)

In this striking scene, Serrano experiences his only true religious moment in the text when he interprets the sight of another human being and thus the possibility of social interaction as the devil’s temptation to suicide. Crying out for deliverance, he proves his humanity to the newly shipwrecked sailor who has misrecognized Serrano in his bestial appearance as the devil. But the moment also questions Neoplatonic theories of climatological difference circulated in the sixteenth century by Bodin: for Serrano’s appearance, caused by “las inclemencias del cielo,” has no bearing on his human status.⁶⁷ If Serrano’s address to Jesus leads to an epiphany on the part of the other shipwrecked sailor, the moment of realization further exposes the changing definition of humanness, for here the text slides suddenly from “hombre” to “cristiano” when the newcomer proves his religious bona fides by shouting the credo. His Christianity—his Europeanness—is what makes him human.

Like Defoe, Garcilaso frames the encounter as a scene of colonial hospitality in which the figure of the *hostis*, true to etymology, may be either host or enemy or both. The newcomer whom Serrano fears as a *demonio* is also his *huésped*, or

guest, just as Crusoe arms Friday and his father with muskets to welcome their new “Guests” while also preparing “a full Supply of Food” for them (CR 1:25; RC 208–209). Yet Crusoe’s famous gestures of hospitality to Friday are accompanied by his teaching of the word “Master,” with all the latent violence and dominion it implies (RC 174). Serrano, on the other hand, receives his guest within the framework of demonology, until his Christianity is proven. Unlike Crusoe, who rejoices in the first sound of a human voice after so many years—the voice of a man who will soon carry out his orders—Serrano can recognize “la necesidad del huésped” (“his guest’s need”), and can comfort him with some of his own food and water, without assuming a relation of mastery (CR 1:29).

Like *Robinson Crusoe*, Garcilaso’s story explores the creation of a new society formed on a deserted island. Yet Serrano’s island has no servant, only another European guest with whom he must cooperate to arrange their shared destiny. “They arranged their life,” “dividing the hours of night and day” according to the necessary tasks for survival, particularly keeping the fire going, which requires a “perpetual vigil ... hour by hour, lest it go out” (CR 1:29). This new social world is no “happy” one like Crusoe’s, where he may call himself “King, or Emperor over the whole Country ... [with] none to dispute Sovereignty” (RC 97, 109). Instead, it is a place of endless toil where guest and host clash so violently within a matter of days that they resolve to live apart. The conflict revolves around labor: one of them accuses the other of not doing the necessary work in the appropriate manner. Garcilaso glosses this anti-utopian turn of events as a demonstration of the vast “misery of our passions” (CR 1:25). The men have fallen into the valley of instinctive emotions and must use their reason to reascend to the philosophical heights of virtue and redemption—a feat they soon achieve by recognizing their *disparate* or madness, and thereby rising above it to sociality, begging each other’s forgiveness (CR 1:29).

Yet the story undermines its own tidy political fable. For if host and guest reach a provisional peace, their tiny society has no reason to celebrate its distance from the fallen world of their former civilization: each time a passing ship fails to stop, they become “so depressed that they all but died” (CR 1:29). And when the longed-for return to European life finally arrives, the two castaways “no longer had human appearance”; they cry out the words of the credo “and call ... the name of our Redeemer aloud”—not to express their Christian faith but so that the sailors “would not think they were demons and flee from them”: to prove their status as Europeans. Nor does religious speech secure their full humanity for long. The wanted return brings death for Serrano’s guest, who succumbs on the transatlantic voyage, and Serrano himself decides to remain in his nonhuman guise: “He kept his pelt as it was, as proof of his shipwreck and all he had gone through.” The pelt becomes Serrano’s sign for the impossibility of return: it embodies his islanded American experience, which requires evidence to be believed, but also the new quasi-human status that he cannot forget: even after he has cut his hair and beard

to just above the waist, “to enable him to sleep at night, he plaited it for otherwise it spread out over the bed and disturbed his sleep” (CR 1:30).

Returned to Europe bearing the marks of coloniality, Serrano finds that his appearance of monstrous nonhumanity is a source of income in an increasingly global world. The highest earnings at his exhibitions come from lords and knights, as well as the Holy Roman emperor himself, who grants Serrano a reward of 4,000 pesos to subsidize a new life—though not in Europe, but in Peru. Despite his favor by the center of imperial power in Europe, Serrano now belongs to the new world rather than the old. Lest we miss the irony of this reversal, Garcilaso notes that “On his way to enjoy this, he died at Panama and never saw it” (CR 1:30). Serrano’s fate anticipates Trinculo’s observation in *The Tempest*, first performed two years later, that while Londoners “will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will give out ten to see a dead Indian.”⁶⁸ And in death, the now Indianized Serrano returns to his islanded condition—one that Robinson Crusoe will later describe as the state of having “no more use for [money], than the *Indians of Peru* had, before the *Spaniards* came there” (RC 165).

Garcilaso concludes the story of Pedro Serrano by establishing its source as a colonial account now traversing a global stage: “All this story, as I have repeated it, is told by a gentleman called Garci Sánchez de Figueroa, from whom I heard it. He knew Pedro Serrano and warrants [*certificaba*] that he heard it from him” (CR 1:30). The quasi-legal provenance of the story—*certificar* implying a subject of authority acting in an official context—attests to its truth value as it circulates. Yet the account’s fictional commitments seem almost parodic by this point; it is a political fable that tracks its own dissolution into a paradox of spectacular illegibility.

Moreover, while Garcilaso offers earthquake as a figure for both colonialism and the Indigenous remaking of the world across settler colonial time, Defoe’s novel also parses the relationship between rupture of the earth and the rending of philosophical foundations. When Robinson Crusoe experiences an earthquake during his time shipwrecked in the Americas, he concludes that his new home is, like Garcilaso’s “region sujeta á terremotos,” a place where the ground of all ideas is unstable. Just before the earthquake occurs, Crusoe is consumed by the business of eighteenth-century order: setting up work hours, “managing ... household Affairs,” beginning a journal in which he records his daily activities (RC 66). These very Enlightenment energies soon spark in Crusoe a certain sinful disregard for providence. When he discovers stalks of “our *English* barley” growing on the island, Crusoe, astonished, believes that “God had miraculously caus’d this Grain to grow without any Help of Seed sown” (RC 67). But as soon as he realizes that he himself inadvertently planted the seeds as he tossed away some husks of chicken feed salvaged from his ship, his nascent religiosity, his “Thankfulness to God’s Providence,” quickly flickers out (RC 68). His island is then struck by an earthquake.

Crusoe's initial response to this seismic disruption is to believe that earthquake offers him divine and decodable content. It is worth noting, though, that there is no conversion catalyzed by the "terrible Earthquake"; if the event initially "sunk [his] very Soul within [him]," its potentially converting effect recedes quickly: "No sooner was the first Fright over, but the Impression it had made went off also. I had no more sense of God or his Judgments ... than if I had been in the most prosperous condition of life" (RC 69, 77). What does appear to affect Crusoe is rather his later "terrible Dream" of the earthquake, a curious sequence that recalls descriptions from the *Comentarios reales* regarding divine apparition in the "land of tremors." Crusoe dreams of a curiously Garcilasan apotheosis, the emergence of

a Man descend[ing] from a great black Cloud, in a bright Flame of Fire ... He was all over as bright as a Flame, so that I could but just bear to look towards him. When he stepp'd upon the Ground with his Feet, I thought the Earth trembl'd just as it had done before in the Earthquake. (RC 75)

The dream affiliates earthquake—as Cotton Mather, discussed in [Chapter 4](#), also would—with the voice of God. As the earth trembles, the man addresses Crusoe "in a Voice so terrible it is impossible to express the Terror of it" (RC 75). But this Puritan-like moment also uncannily evokes Garcilaso's figuration of earthquake in a specifically colonial frame. For the man who appears before Crusoe recalls the vision of the eighth Inca emperor, who is visited in a dream by "a phantom": "son of the sun," sent by "the Sun, our father" (CR 1:231). Similarly, this apparition carries a warning that is initially disregarded, and he is later remembered for his capacity to bring punishment. The Andeans call him Viracocha, and he predicts the coming of the Spaniards, and thus the ongoing earthquake of colonialism. But like *pachacuti*, Viracocha can represent other kinds of change, including the ongoing Indigenous threat to the survival and duration of settlement. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the apotheosis carries in his hand "a long Spear or Weapon": a reminder from a very Garcilasan "messenger of the Sun" (in the *Comentarios reales*, "richly dressed, wrapped in a blanket, with a spear in his hand" [CR 1:414]) that is perhaps "a Messenger of war and not of peace" (RC 75).

Crusoe's dream formation brilliantly conflates the biblical figuration of earthquake as divine displeasure with Garcilaso's Inca cosmology and the figuration of earthquake as a potential eruption of Indigenous war against settler colonialism. In its tacit relation to El Inca Garcilaso's *Comentarios reales*, then, *Robinson Crusoe* participates in articulating a small piece of a larger earthquake history of the Americas—a narrative of enlightened English conversion linking London not only to what Crusoe calls "the Brasils" but also to Peru (RC 30). And though Crusoe eventually believes that his tolerant, cosmopolitan version of Protestantism is destined to transform the novel's "global providential order," as David Alvarez

observes, the ground of his island will always be the same earth that almost swallowed him alive such that he “never wanted a Grave-Digger” upon his death (RC 64).⁶⁹ In Garcilaso’s earthquake idiom, the ground of colonial reality can never be stable. What emerges from this collocation of the global and the colonial is a certain idea of the literary, bequeathed in the genre of the modern novel that Defoe’s work came to define and in the short story form to which Pedro Serrano’s account has more recently been consigned. Garcilaso’s earthquake history of the Americas parses the erasures and contradictions of colonial knowledge while also generating its own philosophical positions across the centuries.

Earthquake and the Unsettling of Spanish America

Garcilaso cultivated a special vantage point for seeing and creating based on his early experience of post-conquest Peru and on Indigenous ways of narrating the American past and its potential future. This perspective enabled particular critical capacities of observation and judgment about the order of the world, and it fostered an emergent discrimination of broad categories such as man and nature as deeply implicated in the logics of conquest, including those categories shaping the settler colonial regime of the early modern world Garcilaso described. His doubled authorial location, as he generated theory out of the torrid zone while writing in Spain, produced a certain appraising distance, a tone, at times, almost of disdain, as he made coolly philosophical observations in the face of the earthquake of colonial history and its attendant atrocities. His influence on the European Enlightenment was thus especially significant after Europe had to confront its own major catastrophic event in the midcentury with the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755.

As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), Voltaire drew a connection between this disaster and the 1746 earthquake in Lima less than a decade earlier. The object of the satire is Pangloss’s genially ignorant grasp of European science. But the directionality of his commentary—from Lima to Lisbon; from Pacific and, via Garcilaso, Indigenous America to Europe—embeds a subterranean history of ideas: an underground critical idiom running from Lima to Lisbon, as Pangloss says, transmitted to and not from the West. Indeed, the world-system by which “the north” grows rich upon the catastrophes at its margins, which Voltaire articulated in his philosophy-rending poem, may have been gleaned in part from reading *El Inca* as a philosopher of the torrid zone, a theorist born in what we now call the Global South. As scholars have observed, moreover, the flat and distanced narrative voice that Voltaire developed for *Candide*, registering shocking cruelties as a series of absurdities, sounds uncannily at times like Garcilaso in the *Commentarios*, suggesting that Voltaire’s critique of theodicy may have emerged first in *El Inca*’s land of earthquakes.

In colonial South America, however, Garcilaso had a different kind of influence. His *Comentarios reales* may even have held a kind of blueprint for a revolutionary eruption, for an earthquake sundering of the cycle of colonial time—in ways that can be imagined by but are indiscernible to contemporary non-Indigenous readers. After all, the contemporary field of geology has been shaped by a non-Indigenous perspective, with the assumption that people could not and did not understand earthquakes until they had the tools of Western science, the frameworks of seismology and Richter-scale measurements. But preinvasion Indigenous peoples of the Americas already had their own tools for understanding geological processes, their own “empirical environmental knowledge” of seismic processes and events in Peru, as recent work in geological, archeological, and ethno-historical interdisciplinary study has shown.⁷⁰ And though the various cultures of conquest in the Americas have largely ignored this environmental knowledge across the centuries, varied forms of Indigenous science offered modes of prediction and registers of time—as well as their own systems of figuration and interpretation.

When the great Callao–Lima earthquake struck colonial Peru in 1746, it offered an occasion for Spanish settlers to ponder the source of God’s displeasure, as we saw in [Chapter 2](#), and for English readers to consider the vulnerability of wealthy Peru to invasion and recolonization in an extended Pacific Western design. But the Lima earthquake also evinced precisely what Garcilaso had described a century and a half earlier as a swallowing by the earth of Valdivia’s conquest in Chile: a sudden opportunity to turn back the tide of settler colonial history. The broad project of unsettlement undertaken in the wake of the 1746 earthquake brought together a powerful coalition of racialized subjects in colonial Peru. As the historian Charles Walker has shown, two days after the earthquake, a figure described as “un negro ... á [sic] caballo,” a Black man on horseback, rushed through Lima shouting that the sea was coming toward the city and warning people to flee.⁷¹ A panicked stampede killed at least one person as the city emptied. When Spanish landowners returned, they discovered they had been duped in an organized raid on their property; even the doors on houses had disappeared. Enslaved and free Black Limeños were also gone; they had looted Lima for weapons and supplies before decamping to aid the Quechua-speaking messianic leader who had in their view caused the earthquake: Juan Santos Atahualpa, who knew when the earth would shake because he himself could ask it to.⁷² The Juan Santos Atahualpa revolution almost overthrew Spanish colonial rule in Peru: this combined force of Afro-Peruvians, highland Andeans and *mestizos*, and Indigenous groups from the Amazon basin fought Spanish Peru for over ten years. Intriguingly, its elite leaders had been reading Garcilaso’s *Royal Commentaries*, his account of colonialism as an unending catastrophe whose rendings of the earth also provided an idiom for the destruction of colonial settlement.⁷³

Earthquake both figured and catalyzed revolution against the settler state across the Americas. In 1547, the leader of an uprising of Zapotecs and Mixtecs in Oaxaca, Mexico announced that there would be “eight days of earthquake and great darkness and that all of the Spaniards would be brought to death” at the same time. It was not necessary “to kill the Spaniards” for the land itself would enact this outcome, returning “all the earth” to its former Indigenous possessors, “as it had been before the Christians came.”⁷⁴ A 1647 earthquake in Santiago, Chile incited a rebellion against colonial authorities led by an enslaved Black man who called himself the “King of Guinea”—as if the rending of the land had brought the Atlantic coast of West Africa to the Pacific coast of South America in a seismic act of unsettlement.⁷⁵ And in 1797, an earthquake in Riobamba, Ecuador prompted the planning of a vast Indigenous revolution in which fires would be set in the sulfur mines of Tixán to create—in another example of Indigenous seismic science—a “volcano that would devour the province of Azuay,” and drive out the Spaniards.⁷⁶ No wonder that by the time of the great 1868 earthquake in Ecuador, “los ‘blancos,’” the descendants of Europeans, asked for armed forces to subdue the Otavalo people whom they were sure would soon attack. Earthquake and Indigenous revolution, it was assumed, reinforced and portended each other.⁷⁷ And in Peru, after the 1746 earthquake, the Limeña figure Santa Rosa, who had earlier prophesized a return of Incan rule at the end of the decade, became a new kind of cult figure. As the renowned Peruvian historian and essayist Alberto Flores Galindo observed in his classic study *Buscando un Inca*, after the earthquake Santa Rosa’s prognostication returned to popular memory. Everyone knew what earthquake stood for: a potential end to the settler colonial state and a return “of the empire ... to its legitimate possessors.”⁷⁸

Perhaps part of what Juan Santos Atahualpa revolutionaries apprehended in Garcilaso’s text, then, was its multivalent form of earthquake history: its history of colonialism as a catastrophic sundering of the earth followed by intermittently recurring tremors and large-scale rending. Colonialism in this understanding is an ongoing form of catastrophe—an always echoing “music of the Spanish,” in Amalia Maluenda’s words in Bolaño’s novel—and its upheaval of Indigenous worlds and unending wars are as predictably continuous as the recurrence of earthquakes in the Andes (*D* 119). Unlike settler time, which flows away from a discrete past, earthquake history apprehends that “past” as it erupts into the moment of the present, revealing sedimented and densely accrued layers of history. Such eruptions may be small (mere *temblores* in colonial time) or catastrophic, but their shock waves and sunderings can also anticipate new cycles in time and new modes of existence and organization. This is the essential paradox of earthquake history. Earthquake marks both colonialism’s shattering of Indigenous worlds and the possibility of breaking the cycle of time, of producing an existence free from colonial subjugation. Colonial catastrophe is both ongoing and always possible to resist.

Even in our own moment, as activist scholars such as Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar and Rivera Cusicanqui have shown, the philosophy of *pachacuti* still shapes Andean Indigenous struggles for a new political order that might reverse the course of global-colonial capitalism.⁷⁹ As Rivera Cusicanqui writes, “The contemporary experience commits us to the present—*aka pacha*—which in turn contains within it the seeds of the future that emerge from the depths of the past [qhip nayr uñtasis sarnaqapxañani].” But *pachacuti*—“the revolt and renewal of the world”—always has its opponents: “The upside down world created by colonialism will return to its feet as history only if it can defeat those who are determined to preserve the past, with its burden of ill-gotten privileges.”⁸⁰ The earthquake history of the Americas is ongoing; it may be impossible, just as Garcilaso wrote, “[de] Llegar al fin” (CR 2:135–136). Guaman Poma’s chronicle reminds us that any project that seeks to discern the earthquake history of the Americas depends on trying to understand the sixteenth-century Indigenous Andean philosophy embedded within layers of linguistic and cultural translation of a phrase as simple as *tragado por la tierra*. Garcilaso’s history, on the other hand, captured something important about the relationship between earthquake and the workings of the settler colonial unconscious. His earthquake history thus provides a theoretical framework for the next chapter, which turns to the shaking of the land and the psychic fragility of settler experience in Puritan New England.

Notes

1. Roberto Bolaño, *Estrella Distante* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1996), 18 (hereafter cited as *D*). Page numbers refer to the Spanish original. I have also consulted the English translation, *Distant Star*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2004).
2. Guaman Poma de Ayala, *The First New Chronicle and Good Government: On the History of the World and the Incas Up to 1615*, trans. Roland Hamilton (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010) (hereafter cited as *CG*). Occasionally I have modified Hamilton’s translations after consulting *El primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno* (1615) (Copenhagen: Royal Library of Denmark, 2001), ed. Franklin Pease (Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1980), <https://poma.kb.dk/permalink/2006/poma/info/en/project/project.htm>, which includes an exhaustive (and ongoing) bibliography. The modern scholarship on Guaman Poma is vast. My first and best resource has been Rolena Adorno’s groundbreaking *Writing and Resistance* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), which appeared in a second updated edition in 2000. In addition to Pratt and Adorno, Sabine MacCormack’s scholarship guided my understanding of miracle in Guaman Poma (see, for example, *Guamán Poma: Writing and Resistance in Colonial Peru* [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986]), while Sara Castro-Klarén’s “El orden del sujeto” was indispensable for approaching Guaman Poma as a genealogist skeptical of European modes of thought (see Castro-Klarén, “El orden del sujeto en Guaman Poma,” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 21, no. 41 [1995]: 121–134). *El primer nueva corónica* has long been understood within Latin Americanist scholarship dating back to the 1980s as having “inaugurated a thoroughgoing inquiry into the modes and consequences of Western historiography” (see Castro-Klarén, “Posting Letters: Writing in the Andes and the Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Debate,” in *Coloniality at Large*, ed. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008], 130). Scholars who have put Guaman Poma in conversation with early Native American Studies and early (North-/Anglo) Americanist scholarship include Ralph Bauer, Birgit Brander Rasmussen, and Molly Farrell (see especially Farrell’s introduction to *Counting Bodies: Population in Colonial American Writing* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016], 23–28). For a reading

- of Guaman Poma de Ayala's drawings, see also Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinikax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Colonization*, trans. Molly Geidel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).
3. See Rolena Adorno's introduction to Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, *Nueva coronica y buen gobierno*, ed. John V. Murra, Rolena Adorno, and Jorge L. Urioste (Madrid: Historia 16, 1987).
 4. Adorno, *Polemics of Possession in Spanish American Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 23–25.
 5. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008 [1992]), 8.
 6. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 26.
 7. *Ibid.*, 9.
 8. Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40.
 9. See, for example, Enrique D. Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation, 1492–1979* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982); Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Neplanta: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute, 1987); Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into Literature* (Indianapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1999) and "The Imaginary as Will to Feel: Beyond the Decolonial Turn in Chicana/Latina Feminism," *Atzlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 45, no. 1 (2020): 243–256; and Wynter, "Unsettling," 257–233. On the history of decolonial thought in the Americas, especially as it relates to the theme of the intercalated global and colonial, see Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
 10. On race as ideological residue of the colonial-global, see Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 1–30.
 11. In a footnote, Hamilton suggests that Guaman Poma either made a mistake, intending to refer to Noah, or was perhaps making a deliberate parallel: "Comparing the whirlwind that took Elijah to heaven with the storm of the Flood" (CG 297). I think the second interpretation is better, but I also think Guaman Poma simultaneously invokes a different and earlier scene involving Elijah.
 12. José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006). English quotations are from Frances López-Morillas's translation of *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) (hereafter cited as *HN*). On the few occasions where I have modified a translation, I cite instead from the Spanish edition above.
 13. See Adorno, *Guaman Poma: Writing and Resistance*, 31–32.
 14. Jeremy Ravi Mumford, *Vertical Empire: The General Resettlement of Indians in the Colonial Andes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
 15. On Acosta's particular style of empiricism, see especially Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write a History of the New World*; Antonio Barrera-Osorio, *Experiencing Nature: The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006); and Bauer, *The Alchemy of Conquest: Science, Religion, and the Secrets of the New World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 100.
 16. Orlando Betancor, *The Matter of Empire: Metaphysics and Mining in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).
 17. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, ed. José Miguel Martínez Torrejón (Alicante: Universidad de Alicante, 2006), 124, 163.
 18. Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 79.
 19. See especially Bauer, *Alchemy of Conquest* and Betancor, *The Matter of Empire*.
 20. On the history and effects of the Ferrara earthquake, see Rienk Vermij, *Thinking on Earthquakes in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 115–120.
 21. Betancor, *The Matter of Empire*, 182.
 22. 1 Kings 19:10.
 23. 1 Kings 19:11.
 24. Acosta, *De procuranda Indorum salute: Pacificación y colonización* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1984), 320.
 25. Betancor, *The Matter of Empire*, 4.
 26. On the concept of *pachacuti* (or *pachakuti*), see the foundational study by Thérèse Bouysse-Cassagne and Philippe Bouysse, *Lluvias y Cenizas: Dos Pachacuti en la Historia* (La Paz: Hisbol, 1988), as well as Sabine MacCormack, "Pachacuti: Miracles, Punishments, and Last Judgment: Visionary Past and Prophetic Future in Early Colonial Peru," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 4 (1988): 960–1006. On the role of flood, see Verónica Salles-Reese, *From Viracocha to*

- the Virgin of Copacabana* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), 60–79. See also Alberto Flores-Galindo's classic *Buscando un inca: Identidad y utopía en los Andes* (Mexico City: Conejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993), esp. 33–34.
27. Diego González Holguín, *Vocabulario en la lengua General de todo el Peru* (Lima: Francisco del Canto, 1618), 225.
 28. On the Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui as “Turner of the Earth,” see Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, *The History of the Incas*, trans. and ed. Brian S. Bauer and Vania Smith (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 115.
 29. See, for example, Karen Olsen Bruhns, *Ancient South America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 331.
 30. See also McCormack, “Pachacuti” and Nathan Wachtel, *The Vision of the Vanquished: The Spanish Conquest of Peru through Indian Eyes, 1530–1570* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1977).
 31. *Huaca*, too, is a term that resists translation; see especially El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's discussion in *Comentarios Reales de los Incas*, ed. Aurelio Miró, 2 vols. (Quesada: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985), 1:29–30; 2:103, 204 (hereafter cited by volume and page number as CR). I have also consulted the Harold V. Livermore translation, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas*, trans. Harold V. Livermore, 2 vols. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1966).
 32. Bernabé Cobo, *Inca Religions and Customs*, trans. and ed. Roland Hamilton (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 54.
 33. McCormack, “Pachacuti,” 993.
 34. Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinikax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Colonization*, 8, 20.
 35. See John Grier Varner, *El Inca: The Life and Times of Garcilaso de la Vega* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014); Aurelio Miró Quesada Sosa, *El Inca Garcilaso* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú, 1994); and Donald G. Castanien, *El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishing, 1969).
 36. Christian Fernández and José Antonio Mazzotti, *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2022), xx.
 37. Mazzotti, *Coros mestizos del Inca Garcilas: resonancias andinas* (Lima: Bolsa de Valores de Lima, 1996) and “La nación indiana, el Inca Garcilaso y la transferencia de saber en el siglo XVII,” in *Transferencia de saberes y de textos en el archivo virreinal de las Indias*, ed. Esperanza López Parada, Paloma Jiménez del Campo, and Evangelina Soltero Sánchez (Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2022).
 38. Christian Fernández-Palacios, “Rhetoric and Politics: Transatlantic Images and Paratexts in the Royal Commentaries,” in *El Inca Garcilaso and Contemporary World-Making*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and Christian Fernández (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press: 2016), 33–61.
 39. Garcilaso de la Vega, *El Inca. Comentarios reales de los Incas*, ed. Aurelio Miró Quesada (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985), 1:10 (hereafter cited by volume and page number as CR). I have also consulted the Harold V. Livermore translation, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas*, 2 vols. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1966).
 40. I am adapting the phrase “theory from the torrid zone” from Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America Is Evolving toward Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
 41. On Garcilaso's influence on John Locke, see James W. Fuerst's *New World Postcolonial: The Political Thought of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), a study of Garcilaso's *mestizo* identity and his political thinking as it bears on Locke as well as Thomas Hobbes.
 42. John Locke, *The First Treatise*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 183, 181.
 43. Locke, *The First Treatise*, 182.
 44. *Ibid.*
 45. In fact, Pedro Cieza de Leon is referring to New Granada, not Peru, as Garcilaso seems to suggest regarding these passages.
 46. Locke, *First Treatise*, 181.
 47. *Ibid.*, 183.
 48. See Ian Campbell Ross, “‘A Very Knowing American’: The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega and Swift's *Modest Proposal*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2007): 493–516.
 49. Raúl Coronado has written with wonderful insight about the grafting of the language of citizenship onto previous political understandings of community in early nineteenth-century Texas, and I'm interested here in a similar shift in meaning being signaled by Garcilaso in the early

- seventeenth century. See Coronado, *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
50. See Tamar Herzog, *Defining Nation: Immigrant and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).
 51. On Garcilaso and historiographical authority, see especially Margarita Zamora, *Language, Authority and Indigenous History in the Comentarios Reales de los Incas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
 52. The two-volume Biblioteca Ayacucho edition ends at the conclusion of part I of the *Comentarios*. For part II, I cite here, in consultation with the Livermore translation, from *Comentarios reales*, ed. P. Carmelo Saenz de Santa Maria, S. J. (Madrid: Atlas, 1960), vol. 3 of *Obras del Inca Garcilaso de la Vega*, 18–19. To avoid confusion, all citations from this edition will be in the notes rather than in the text proper.
 53. *Ibid.*, 19.
 54. *Ibid.*, 19, 2.2.7:25.
 55. *Ibid.*, 2.2.6:24.
 56. *Ibid.*, 2.2.1:19.
 57. Jean Bodin, *Réponse de J. Bodin aux paradoxes de M. de Malestroit* (1568), 42 and *Les six livres de la republique...* (Lyon: Pour Barthelemy Vincent, 1693), 705–706. For a detailed consideration of Bodin's economic theories of inflation, particularly as they operated on the European continent, see D. P. O'Brien, *The Development of Monetary Economics: A Modern Perspective on Monetary Controversies* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), 9–36.
 58. *Ibid.*, 26–27.
 59. *Ibid.*, 27.
 60. *Comentarios reales*, vol. 2, ed. Aurelio Miró Quesada (Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1985), 265.
 61. *Ibid.*
 62. Barbara Fuchs notes that critics have overlooked *Robinson Crusoe's* “Iberian literary predecessors just as the text itself elides imperial and economic entanglements” (“*Crusoe's Absence*,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 49 [2020]: 30).
 63. Roberto González Echevarría, *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.
 64. “Casual Comment,” *The Dial* 45 (1908): 77.
 65. Lisa Voigt, *Writing Captivity in the Early Modern Atlantic: Circulations of Knowledge and Authority in the Iberian and English Worlds* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 91–98.
 66. *CR* 1:25. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 40 (hereafter cited as *RC*).
 67. Bodin discusses the supposed effect of climate in *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* (London: Octagon, 1966), arguing that “the strength of inward heat brings it about that those who live in northerly lands are more active and robust than the southerners” (92).
 68. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 2.2.31–33.
 69. David Alvarez, “Daniel Defoe's Protestant Roman Catholics: Global Religion, Colonialism, and the Limits of Toleration in *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*,” *I castelli di Yale* 4, no. 2 (2018): 1–28.
 70. Andy Combey et al., “Evidence of a Large ‘Prehistorical’ Earthquake during Inca Times? New Insights from an Indigenous Chronicle,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 34, part B (2020): np, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2020.102659>.
 71. See Walker's excellent discussion of the episode in *Shaky Colonialism*, 158–187. The original account appears in “Carta que Escribió el Marques de Obando,” printed in a nineteenth-century collection of earthquake writings edited by Manuel de Odrizola, *Terremotos: colección de las relaciones de los mas notables que ha sufrido esta capital* (Lima: Empronta Antuerpiana, 1863), 47–69.
 72. On the organized efforts after the earthquake, see Walker, *Shaky Colonialism*, 158.
 73. On the long circulation of Garcilaso's commentaries in Andean intellectual circles, among leaders such as Juan Santos Atahualpa, see Alcira Dueñas, *Indians and Mestizos in the Lettered City* (Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2010). On Garcilaso's role in the Tupac Amaru II rebellion, see Pedro M. Guibovich Pérez, “The Dissemination and Reading of the Royal Commentaries in the Peruvian Viceroyalty,” in *Inca Garcilaso and Contemporary World-Making*, ed. Castro-Klarén and Christian Fernández (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 141.

74. Alicia M. Barabas, *Utopías Indias: Movimientos Sociorreligiosos en México* (Plaza de Valdés, Mexico: Conaculta, 2002), 131.
75. Frank Graziano, *The Millennial New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48.
76. Ozvaldo Albornoz Peralta, *Las luchas indígenas en el Ecuador* (Guayaquil: Editorial Claridad, 1971), 32. Cited in Graziano, 259.
77. Albornoz Peralta, *Las luchas*, 39.
78. Galindo, *Buscando un Inca*, 90.
79. Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, *Rhythms of the Pachakuti: Indigenous Uprising and State Power in Bolivia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 50–52.
80. Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinikax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Colonization*, 48–49.

PART II

FROM SHAKING GROUND
TO “THE STILLNESS”

4

The Fragile Ground of New England, 1638–1755

When the *Mayflower* finally arrived after two hard months at sea—and not at the planned destination near Jamestown but instead far to the north—William Bradford and his community of Puritan separatists “fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof.”¹ Bradford’s classicizing description of this “joyful” moment of deliverance is a celebration less of arrival than of reprieve from the ocean: “Wise Seneca was so affected with sailing a few miles on the coast of his own Italy ... that he had rather remain twenty years on his way by land than pass by sea to any place in a short time, so tedious and dreadful was the same unto him” (P 61). Seneca never says quite what Bradford attributes to him here, though the Stoic philosopher does describe his own seasickness in vivid terms; indeed, even Ulysses’s voyage home was prolonged less by Neptune’s fury bringing him to shipwreck than by frequent stops to end the agony of *vomititus marinus*.² Were he to undertake Ulysses’s sea journey, Seneca jokes in *Moral Epistles*, it would take him twice the time, or twenty years, prone as he is to the malady. Nodding to Seneca’s Odyssean seasickness, Bradford commemorates the epic arrival in the New World as the moment when the Pilgrims are “again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element” (P 61).

But ensuing seismic events in colonial New England would prove Bradford wrong about the fundamental ground of existence. For North America soon endured a series of major earthquake crises, from the 1638 earthquake that shook the Plymouth Plantation and the Massachusetts Bay Colony at the end of the Pequot War to the devastating 1692 Port Royal earthquake that struck at the heart of the plantation world in Jamaica, to the 1755 Cape Anne earthquake that roughly coincided with the Lisbon catastrophe. Throughout this period, New England settlers also confronted the instability of the Native grounds they now occupied. These twinned psychological and material realities introduced a particular settler relation to the earth and its movements, heralding a new phase in the troubled relationship between religion and science across the Americas.

When the Puritans first traveled to the place they named New England, they brought with them the language and imagery of all the seismic events of the Bible. These events included earthquakes caused by the lord’s “blazing rage” as described by Ezekiel as well as the opening of the earth that coincided with the

crucifixion as recounted in Matthew and of course the great earthquake that accompanies the Apocalypse as promised in Revelation.³ The first book printed in British North America, the 1640 *Bay Psalm Book*, was full of shaking earth translated from the Hebrew into awkward English meter: earth that trembles in fear before God's presence; hills that melt like wax; earth that opens to devour Dathan, thereby destroying the rebellion against Moses.⁴ New England settlers could read in these pages the mixed message that one must praise God for a relatively stable earth—"From age to age thy faithfullnes: / thou form'dst the earth, & it standsure"—while also recognizing that earthquake can arrive in a single divine glance: "The earth doth tremble, when that hee / upon the same doth look / the mountains he doth touch, likewise / they therupon do smoak."⁵

The popular *Day of Doom* (1662), a religious poem about the coming of divine judgment published by the minister Michael Wigglesworth, drew similarly from Revelation to describe the visitation of a terrible earthquake: "The Mountains smoke, the Hills are shook, / the Earth is rent and torn, / As if she should be clear dissolv'd / or from her center borne."⁶ Meanwhile, John Eliot, the so-called Apostle to the Indians, recalled earthquake as a harbinger of God's "still voyce" speaking to Elijah when he wrote to his patrons in the London Royal Society to describe the "Progresse of the Gospel" in the Wampanoag language: "*For the Shaking of all Nations maketh way for the coming of him, who is the desire of all Nations,*" Eliot mused, before figuring what he saw as the "earthquake" effect of the Puritan errand itself: "*How much those winds and shakings which carried m[any] good men out of Old into New England have made way to the publishing of the name of Christ in those barbarous places.*"⁷

Yet the Puritan understanding of earthquakes in the seventeenth century was not shaped solely by scripture and doctrine. Earthquakes were part of the broader category of "wonders," as David D. Hall has defined them: unusual or extreme "events betokening the presence of the supernatural"—whether comets, meteors, and lightning storms or the sudden strike of disease.⁸ As Hall explains, the early modern European "lore of wonders" was an unwieldy body of thought shaped by clerics and elites as well as a "mixt multitude" of servants and commoners.⁹ This shared language thus featured the role of wonders in the Bible and antiquity as well as their meanings in other kinds of ritual and magic. In the early Protestant context, these two broad bodies of belief—orthodox and folk—existed in a tense and mutually informing relation; even as puritan reformers sought to purify their communities of heterodox belief, their own thought was indelibly shaped by it throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁰

At the same time, the rise of the new science rooted in empirical induction in seventeenth-century England also informed early New Englanders' interpretation of earthquakes. "Where New appearance is before the Eyes, / New Suppositions thereupon arise," as Charles Morton put it in his *Compendium Physicae* (1687), the science textbook he taught from at Harvard.¹¹ Although wonders continued

to evidence God's providence and illustrate the great cosmic drama of the godly versus Satan, they were therefore also worthy of close observation and detailed, comparative records. Puritan ministers and scholars were thus interested not only in interpreting the religious content and meaning of earthquakes but also in observing their natural qualities and effects.

Eliot, for example, has nothing spiritual to say about the seismic effects on the landscape he observes near the praying town of Nashope, the homeland of the Nipmuc people, when he writes to the royal commissioners for gospel propagation in 1671: "In this place after the great Earthquake, there was some eruption out of the Earth, which left a great *Hiatus* or Cleft a great way together."¹² Although it is unclear which earthquake he is referring to or where he gets his information, he clearly views the details of the geological event as valuable enough to pass on to the royal commissioners in England, including the fact that "out of some Cavities under great Rocks, by a great Pond in that place, [there] was a great while after often heard an [hum]ming noise, as if there were frequent eruptions out of the Ground at that place."¹³

Likewise, the Puritan judge Samuel Sewall, noted for his close involvement in the spiritual and legal crisis of the Salem witch trials, found no religious meaning in the reports of an earthquake in Wenham and Ipswich in February 1684; his diary instead records the fact that some people heard "a startling dolefull Sound" without feeling the event, though "many felt the Shaking also."¹⁴ Eight years later, in the summer of the witch trials, Sewall reports on his own prayers, the verbal evidence provided by a "Spectre," and the "awfull" sight of the "afflicted persons" responding to those accused of witchcraft—as well as on the news of the Port Royal earthquake and "desolation at Jamaica." But amidst a religious catastrophe in Salem, he reports of the Caribbean disaster only the number of fatalities and the loss of property, which seem to overlap: "1700 persons kill'd, besides the Loss of Houses and Goods by the Earthquake."¹⁵ Although Sewall interprets Salem's crisis as a spiritual one, the Port Royal catastrophe seems to register as a primarily financial one. It clearly is so for Sewall's "Landlord and Landlady Jennings" whose "Son in Jamaica has a Plantation spoiled by a Mountain thrown upon it by the late Earthquake." Even as Sewall reports that an accused Salem resident is "press'd to death for standing Mute," the news that a mountain has moved appears to hold no divine message or meaning beyond its role in impeding the work of the plantation.¹⁶

But to Sewall and his educated peers, this seeming double standard posed no contradiction, for the science of settler colonial extraction—that broad body of emergent knowledge required for settler life in the New World—assured its practitioners that its inquiries led inevitably if indirectly to the refinement of the soul.¹⁷ As Morton explained in *Compendium Physicae*, because true apprehension of the "Glory of God" proceeded *from* discovery of the useful, "That which puts a man upon the Study of nature, both may, and should be, both practice, and operation

... which can never be well handled without some understanding of the nature of those things which we have in hand.”¹⁸ And while the science required for practice—for the maintenance of a Jamaica plantation, for example—might seem separate from the care of the soul, the former led in fact to the latter, at least in Morton’s neat textbook couplet: “The scient meditates for operation / The science hath its end in contemplation.”¹⁹ Scientific apprehension of nature revealed the “Glory of God” and thereby fostered pious meditation, but only because the scientist himself kept his eye on the expedient uses of science in real-world practice.²⁰ What could such science reveal about earthquakes? For Morton, seismic events were implicitly bound up with extractive geographies: “These things happen most,” as he observed, in “mineral countryes.”²¹

Yet Puritan settlers, with their wonder-filled traditions and their new sciences of extraction, also had to confront the fact that they were now in a different cosmological space, the realm of Wôpanâak or Dawnland.²² As New Englanders faced this reality, they contributed to and also drew upon the comparative studies of Indigenous culture and religion undertaken throughout the hemisphere by Catholic and Protestant missionaries, which resulted in a kind of empirical, proto-ethnographic method that Ralph Bauer terms “ethno-demonology” for its increasing obsession with proving that Native religion was not merely pagan but in fact satanic: not merely erroneous, from a Euro-Christian perspective, but deeply agentive and powerful.²³ In such a context, seismic events threatened more than the physical stability of houses and churches. Earthquakes also disturbed the fragile psychological and metaphysical ground of colonial occupation, emblemizing the continual problem of settler security and raising questions about Indigenous understanding of the earth’s movements.

For example, in Eliot’s 1663 translation of the Bible into Wampanoag, the *ohke*—the Algonquian earth or homeland—is supposed to respond with the trembling and shaking of abject terror, as it does especially in the Hebrew Bible, to the presence of Jehovah. Yet what these scriptural earthquakes signified to the Indigenous intellectuals who translated and transcribed the Eliot Bible, or to seventeenth-century Native readers, is another matter entirely; as Sarah Rivett puts it, “The Eliot Bible represents a fantasy, not the reality, of linguistic control.”²⁴ Moreover, New England settlers themselves understood on some level that those whose ancestors had inhabited the land long before their own arrival apprehended the ground of the New World in ways that they could not. Eliot’s description of the “great *Hiatus* or Cleft” near Nashope town and the strange humming sound that ensued close to the adjoining pond does not include an account of his likely Nipmuc informants as the source of this information, for example. But such settler descriptions may offer small details toward what Lisa Brooks has described as the broad project of recovering Native space.²⁵ They also point us toward her important reminder that “the land itself is an archive that demands interpretation.”²⁶

Like all wonders, earthquakes required interpretive vigilance on the part of those with most power to prevent other possible meanings from surfacing. But the particular kind of earthquake vigilance that emerged in early New England became central to the culture of a settler enlightenment, shaped in part by the cognitive dissonance entailed in occupying, enclosing, and defining as ownable grounds that always proved to move and shift. From suspicions about Anne Hutchinson as a prophetess of earthquake to fears that Benjamin Franklin's experiments with lightning rods might unsettle the ground itself, the Puritan preoccupation with earthquakes refracts the violence of settler conquest as well as the new scientific and religious thought that it both required and legitimated.

The 1638 New England Earthquake and the Indigenous "Multitude"

Bradford's belief that the Pilgrims were stepping onto "a firm and stable earth" would surely have been corrected by "wise Seneca," the Stoic philosopher whom the new governor quotes in his account of New England arrival. Seneca had devoted a whole chapter of his *Natural Questions*—Book VI: "Which Treats of Earthquakes"—to establishing the opposite point: that the earth is not always "firm and stable" and is never so in any permanent sense. "All the world is subject to the same fate," Seneca writes:

If [a place] has not yet suffered from earthquake, it may; perchance this spot on which you stand in full security will be rent this night, or even this day before night ... Nature framed nothing to be immovable ... the very earth of which we stand is not permanent. The flaws of the ground are to be found everywhere.²⁷

Bradford would learn this lesson himself in 1638 when a "great and fearful earthquake" struck New England, an event that he interpreted in *Of Plymouth Plantation* as a warning visited upon his colony by an angry god (P 302). Some of the colonists, forsaking Plymouth, "were about to move from the place," Bradford observes; just as they were discussing their decision, the ground began to shake—"as if the Lord would hereby show His displeasure, in their shaking a-pieces and removals one from another" (P 302).

The divine sanction is almost elegant in its parallelism: the lack of cohesiveness in the colony mirrors the sudden incoherence of the Pilgrims' "proper element." As the colonists have threatened to shake apart and remove from one another, they have in proportion experienced the earth shake "with that violence as caused platters, dishes, and such-like things as stood upon shelves to clatter and fall down" (P 302). As they have imperiled the arduously made Plymouth plantation, they have in turn been made to feel "afraid of the houses themselves": "So powerful

is the mighty hand of the Lord as to make both the earth and the sea to shake, and the mountains to tremble before Him when He pleases, and who can stay His hand?" (P 302, 303). But this story of a divinely sanctioned settlement subject to the seismic chastening of a righteous god emerges alongside a shadow earthquake-narrative of conquest followed by slavery: an occluded history that goes back to Bradford's own initial referent in Seneca and more broadly to the new and changing history of science in which Puritan thought was deeply engaged.

Like Seneca's *Moral Epistles*, his *Natural Questions* too are written as letters to his younger friend Lucilius, who was serving then as the procurator of Sicily under Nero.²⁸ By definition, this imperial role required the management of extractable wealth from the province—the first that the Romans had acquired and the notorious site of nearly ten years of slave revolutions between 135 and 100 BCE. By the time Seneca was writing on earthquake in *Natural Questions* (ca. 65 CE), however, the "Breadbasket of Rome," as Sicily was known, was being cultivated smoothly by its enslaved laborers (many brought from Asia through the slaving port of Delos) who worked the *latifundia*, the great plantation estates constructed for Roman elites.²⁹ From the perspective of these elites, life in the colonies of Sicily was largely peaceful. Pompeii, on the other hand, had recently been struck by catastrophe: "We have just had the news, my esteemed Lucilius, that Pompeii ... has been overwhelmed in an earthquake, which shook all the surrounding districts as well" (NQ 221). Seneca devotes a portion of his ensuing disquisition to analyzing why earthquake frightens in the particular manner that it does, with "some people ... driven out of their minds, and wander[ing] about in helpless idiocy" (NQ 222).

Earthquake instills "overmastering fear," Seneca speculates, because it provokes foundational inquiry, literally but also figuratively; it raises questions about the nature of security more broadly (NQ 222). What can be considered safe if the world itself is shaken, when its most solid parts totter and fall? How can fears have limits if the one thing considered immovably fixed begins to move and rock and loses its chief characteristic of stability—especially if this one thing upholds all other things? What refuge is there from earthquake? And—in the general panic caused by earthquake—what might happen when "all hurry pell-mell out of doors ... abandon their household treasures, and trust for safety to the public street?" (NQ 222).

As an enslaver on a larger scale (he demonstrated his famous "arguments in favor of a simple life" by taking only a "very few slaves" on an experimental austerity trip), Seneca understood that seismic disruption posed not just physical but psychological dangers to a slave-owning class in a moment in which the figurative ground of political reality is unsettled along with the literal ground itself.³⁰ The point of Stoic philosophy is to "deliver the wise from fear" so as not to be in a state of emotional *captivitas*. To embrace the inevitability of dying and death is a virtue because it offers the only true security humans have in their knowledge of the future: "The one safety of the *victis* [the conquered] is to hope for none" (NQ

225). Stoicism, that is, promotes and promises delivery from an internal state of *servitudo* to the passions; it needs the conceptual existence of slavery to celebrate its own virtues—along with the vast material support, the household treasures, that such enslaved labor made perpetually available.

The culture of slave-owning thus pervades Seneca's understanding of earthquake, which boils down to a state of war: "What is there that will stand as sure defense either of oneself or of others [in the case of earthquake]?" he asks (NQ 222). In a traditional war, "An enemy I can drive from my city wall. The mere difficulties of approach to turrets set on the dizzy heights will stop the march even of great armies" (NQ 222). But if that enemy comes from within, and from below—as a slave revolt does—such turrets do no good: "If the earth itself stir up destruction, what refuge or help can we look for?" (NQ 222). Even the natural causes of earthquake become a kind of war for freedom fought between the elements: "a disturbance in the part of the ground under which the struggle has occurred" (NQ 246). For some elements are meant to be free: air must "obey the law of its being ... whenever its free course is checked"; "When it is opposed ... it becomes furious, bursting all obstacles," just as water "manifests its violence through the havoc it wreaks" as it "escapes headlong down its channel, bearing the very obstacles that blocked its path" (NQ 246). Yet earthquake is not simply a rich metaphor for thinking about political reality and upheavals of that reality. All educated elites in Seneca's time knew the story of the great Sparta earthquake in 464 BCE when massive slave revolts broke out and forced the slave-owning class to call in aid from other city-states to respond—an interpolity event that led to the outbreak of the First Peloponnesian War.³¹ As Seneca puts it, "This calamity of earthquake extends beyond all bounds, inevitable, insatiable, the destruction of a whole State. Nor is it only families or households or single cities that it swallows; it overthrows whole nations and regions" (NQ 223).

Although centuries and a continent away from Seneca, the 1638 New England earthquake that captured William Bradford's imagination also occurred in the context of an emergent slaving polity. The earthquake struck toward the end of the Pequot War, a conflict that would consolidate New England as a slaving society built in part on captive Indigenous labor. Within a few years, the Massachusetts Bay Colony would pass the earliest slavery law in the English colonies to formalize traffic in the Pequot captives taken during the war—some of whom were sold by Boston merchants in the Caribbean, beginning a cycle of Indigenous enslavement that would endure for almost two centuries, as Margaret Ellen Newell has shown.³² In Bradford's account, the 1638 earthquake seems almost to punctuate the end of the war and the arrival of this new political reality of Indian enslavement in North America. In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, the earthquake occurs not long after Bradford's infamous account of the 1637 English massacre of Pequots in a dawn raid. "It was conceived they thus destroyed about 400 at this time," Bradford writes: "It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire, with streams of blood quenching

it; the smell was horrible, but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemies and give them so speedy a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy" (P 296).

Fearful sight of burning Native people, fearful earthquake: both are legible to Bradford as divinely ordained, part of a spectacular language spoken by God. And yet Bradford cannot stop himself from speculating about earthquake outside this providential frame: "It was observed that the summers for several years after this earthquake were not so hot and seasonable for the ripening of corn and other fruits as formerly, but were colder and more moist and subject to early and untimely frosts, so that often much Indian corn came not to maturity" (P 303). Did the climate change because of the earthquake? Bradford demurs: "Whether this was any cause, I leave it to naturalists to judge" (P 303). But he is edging toward the inquiry of Seneca's natural science here, especially when he notes that the earthquake was "not only on the seacoast, for the Indians felt it within land" (P 303). How far "within land"? Too far, apparently, for the information to come directly from an English settler. And by what chain of translation and transmission does Bradford come to know that the earthquake was therein "felt"? The very opacity of the remark evokes Indigenous modes of apprehending New England earthquakes to which Bradford does not have access.

Writing from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the newly reelected governor, John Winthrop, also recorded the 1638 earthquake:

Between three and four in the afternoon, being clear, warm weather, the wind westerly, there was a great earthquake. It came with a noise like a continued thunder or the rattling of coaches in London, but was presently gone. It was at Connecticut, at Naragansett, at Pascataquack, and all the parts round about. It shook the ships, which rode in the harbor, and all the islands, etc. The noise and the shakings continued about four minutes. The earth was unquiet twenty days after, by times.³³

The journal entry offers no initial spiritual interpretation of the event. Winthrop evinces instead a clear interest in what can be empirically observed about the earthquake: not just the date but also what time the earthquake struck, the weather conditions, the different locations of rending, the effect on ships and islands, the immediate duration, and the intermittent aftershocks. If Winthrop's journal goes out of its way to preserve something like the phenomenology of the earthquake for future readers, the image of the twenty-day aftermath of "unquiet" earth is an apt figure for other accounts of disturbance in the fragile ground of colonial occupation and land enclosure. The next journal entry, dated four days after the "great earthquake," recounts the arrival in Boston of the Mohegan sachem Uncas, who is leading a group of thirty-seven "Pequods," as Winthrop notes, who have

survived the two-year decimation of the Pequot War.³⁴ Although Uncas comes bearing gifts, the colonists remain apprehensive about his intentions until they receive “good satisfaction of his innocency”—along with a promise to “submit to the order of the English touching the Pequods he had.”³⁵ The end of the war consolidates the English policy of enslaving Indigenous subjects. The earthquake, on the other hand, unsettles any certainty about the future ground of settler polities.

Another Massachusetts colonist, Edward Johnson—who had fought in the Pequot War—also described the 1638 “great and terrible Earth-quake” in the first printed history of New England, *The Wonder-working Providence of Sions Saviour in New England*, published in London in 1654.³⁶ If “the Lord caus’d” the earthquake, it was notable initially for its effect upon plantation labor: “The motion of the Earth was such, that it caused divers men (that had never knowne an Earth-quake before), being at worke in the Fields, to cast downe their working-tooles, and run with gastly terrified looks, to the next company they could meet with-all” (W 131). The parenthetical here has the effect of separating the field laborers (still largely indentured Europeans) from the affluent colonists, including presumably Johnson, who had experienced earthquake before. John Winthrop, too, had felt a seismic event as a fourteen-year-old in England when a 1601 earthquake in the North Sea affected the eastern coast and caused outcry in London; this earlier experience seems to inform his careful but matter-of-fact description of the 1638 quake in New England.³⁷ Johnson’s account, by contrast, frames its description of the earthquake in at least nominally spiritual terms, but he also clearly positions himself and his readers apart from its strong emotional effects upon the agricultural workers who till the fields.

From this privileged vantage point, Johnson reads the geographic directionality of the earthquake as well as its ostensible meaning in the unfolding of linear history:

It came from the Westerne and uninhabited parts of this Wildernesse, and went the direct course: this brood of Travellers came, the Ministers of Christ many of them could say at that very time (not from any other Revelation, but what the word holds forth) that if the Churches of *New England* were Gods house, then suddenly there would follow great alterations in the Kingdomes of Europe. (W 131)

In this retroactive reading, the earthquake is an observable sign of a political future that has already come to pass: the event traces in reverse the Puritan “errand into the wilderness”—a moral-political geography that was “uninhabited,” of course, only in the sense that its actual Indigenous stewards represented, to the English settlers, obstacles to pasture as often as they did harvestable souls.³⁸ But Johnson’s association of the earthquake with Indigenous force and agency is nevertheless suggested in the paragraphs that follow, which is perhaps why he insists here that

the future meaning portended by the event lies not in New England but in the earthquake's "direct course" eastward, back to the "Kingdoms of Europe" (*W* 131). Writing in the early 1650s, Johnson can cast the event as a "Revelation" of the English Civil War to come, and the violence of these "great alterations" as the dire consequence of religious error that the true "Ministers of Christ," living in "Gods house" in Puritan New England, could predict even "at that very time" simply by reading the earthquake through what biblical "word holds forth" (*W* 131).

But of course New England continued to suffer its own "great alterations" after the earthquake in the form of ongoing wars of Indigenous dispossession, as settlers made their way farther into territory still "uninhabited" by Europeans and their descendants. Indeed, Johnson pivots quickly from describing the earthquake to condemning the religious dissenter Anne Hutchinson for entering precisely such "parts of this Wildernessee" after her banishment from the Massachusetts Bay Colony when she "withdrew her self, her husband, and her family also, to a more remote place" in New Netherland (*W* 132). In fact, Hutchinson's dissenting religious behavior sounds oddly less egregious, in Johnson's account, than her deliberate choice of living with her followers away from clusters of European settlers and "amongst a multitude of Indians"—even, he claims, "boast[ing] they were become all one Indian" (*W* 132). Here, too, Johnson appears to offer a retroactive typology in which Hutchinson's purported "boast" predicts the catastrophic circumstances of her own later death in a subsequent attack of Siwanoy warriors in 1643.

Nathaniel Hawthorne gave the story of this death a prominent literary afterlife in his famously ambivalent 1830 essay "Mrs. Hutchinson" with its anxious vision of female intellectual power as the alluring but racially tainted and ultimately violent foundation of American history whose future must be avoided at all costs. Hawthorne describes Hutchinson as a "disturber of Israel" whose ministry is faith-shaking, leaving the weak-minded women of the colony "shuddering and weeping"; her death at the hands of a "savage foe" is "as difficult to be portrayed as a shipwreck" or any other disaster—fire, flood, earthquake—for "the shrieks of the victims die unheard ... and a shapeless mass of agony is all that can be brought home to the imagination."³⁹ If Hawthorne's account registers both the unrepresentability of extreme suffering and the unspeakable violence at the heart of colonialism, it does so by directing the nineteenth-century settler-reader to reflect upon the inchoate miasma of earlier settler suffering, which becomes itself a rhetorical figure for the dark and complex colonial past of a national literary future that requires his own authorial gifts. Colonialism thus becomes for Hawthorne a temporally elsewhere catastrophe—suffered by settlers but not those they dispossessed or enslaved—that affirms the rightness of his own moral imagination.

In Winthrop's version of the story of Anne Hutchinson, the problem of interpreting wonders such as earthquakes in the seventeenth-century colonial context becomes explicitly political. For Winthrop, Hutchinson plays the role of a "great

imposter" and "instrument of Satan" who "interrupts the passage of the Kingdom in this part of the world, and poisons the Churches here planted."⁴⁰ In his account of her final appearance before the court that determined her banishment, Hutchinson requests the right to speak—to present "the ground of what I know to be true"—and purportedly casts the judgment as a martyrdom, "foretold" to her as Jesus's was, by the "great Jehovah": "Therefore take heed how you proceed against me—for I know that, for this you goe about to doe to me, God will ruine you and your posterity and this whole State" (R 336, 273). Hutchinson even supposedly claims that her excommunication is "the greatest happiness, next to Christ, that ever befell her" (W 250). In Winthrop's authorial hands, Hutchinson's predictions thus retroactively evidence her demonic status because they do not come to pass: her banishment does not ruin the lives of her judges or lead to the destruction of the colony.

But two months into her banishment to Rhode Island, the 1638 earthquake struck, and Winthrop's narrative control over his villainess turns more ambiguous:

Mrs. Hutchinson and some of her adherents happened to be at prayer when the earthquake was at Aquiday, etc., and the house being shaken thereby, they were persuaded (and boasted of it,) that the Holy Ghost did shake it in coming down upon them, as he did upon the apostles. (W 287)

If Johnson accused Hutchinson of "boasting" that she and her followers had become indigenized, Winthrop disparages them for asserting that she has summoned a visitation by the Holy Ghost in the form of (or signaled by) an earthquake, dismissing the claim as exemplary of "the delusions which these people were taken with" (W 287). But the account raises new questions. To whom did Hutchinson and her community members boast of the earthquake's meaning, and how did their interpretation reach Winthrop from the "remote place" where they were living at a great distance from Euro-American settlement and "amongst a multitude of Indians"?

Perhaps Winthrop's story of the alleged earthquake boasting is invented, given that it clearly echoes his own account of Hutchinson's earlier prophesy of ruin for her former colony. Indeed, Hutchinson's purported boast offers an intriguingly prophetic interpretation aligning the event of the earthquake with the day of Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit "down upon ... the apostles" recounted in Acts 2:9–11—likening Hutchinson and company to the original disciples of Jesus. Like Hutchinson's small community at prayer, the apostles too were in a religious wilderness on the day referenced here, surrounded by people who spoke many other languages and believed in other gods: "Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians" (Acts 2:9–13). Like Hutchinson and her followers, the apostles were "were all with

one accord in one place” when sudden movement and sound “filled all the house where they were sitting” and “they were all filled with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:4). In the biblical account, the narrator emphasizes this arrival as a moment of linguistic unification—a temporary overcoming of God’s punitive language divisions, effected as a result of the Tower of Babel: suddenly “there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire” and the ecstatic apostles “began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:3).

If Hutchinson and her company transformed, as Johnson put it, into “a multitude of Indians” “become all one Indian,” the account in the Bible passage referenced by Winthrop also affirms an extraordinary amalgamation with his reference to Acts 2:6, in which “the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.” Just as Winthrop and Johnson deride the Hutchinson community for “delusion,” the apostles, too, are scorned by “mocking” skeptics who call them drunken fools, “full of new wine” (Acts 2:13). The apostles, too, are judged severely by those in power who see their religious reformism as dangerous and heretical; in Acts 16:26, from their imprisonment, they summon a divine response with the force of their prayer: “And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed.”

The biblical account cited by Winthrop and attributed to Hutchinson’s community thus seems particularly suited to their likely perception of their own situation; perhaps it did come from their lips—however the spiritual analogy, or “boast,” then found its way to Winthrop. The communication may even have come by way of Narragansett negotiators with Massachusetts Bay Colony leaders.⁴¹ To describe Hutchinson as boasting about the earthquake was to draw her closer to “the Indians [who] felt it within land,” to the undifferentiated Indigenous “multitude.” For like all early New England earthquakes, the 1638 event could not be disentangled from Indigenous frames for apprehending the shaking of the earth, even though English settlers had vastly limited access to these understandings. As Brooks has shown, the Wampanoag and Narragansett apprehension of earthquake was rooted in a broadly Algonquian cosmology. Earthquake was a manifestation of the generative power of the Sky World, the “upper world creator spirit of Kiehtan,” but it was also potentially “a warning that erupted from the lower world, calling for restoration of a world off-balance, which the people felt in their bellies, even as they witnessed its impacts.”⁴² The physiology of earthquake resembled the embodied meaning of war itself: a “pulsing wave [that] came from the lower world of waters” in “moving, spiraling tendrils from the earth.”⁴³ European settlers, whether they could articulate it explicitly or not, always knew on some level that those whose ancestors had already inhabited the land long before their arrival understood earthquake in the New World in a way that they could not. In the Anglo-Creole imagination, that is, earthquake struck at the fragily settled ground of colonial

occupation, dramatically figuring the continual problem of settler security and the threat of a Native “multitude” whose specific forms of agency were complex and unknowable.

Global Earthquake History, Slavery, and Just War

By the turn of the seventeenth century, earthquake was a reality of New England life that required careful interpretation. Seismic events also offered Puritan elites an opportunity to write global histories of catastrophe that could bolster an emerging culture of slave ownership and sanctify the practice through a host of biblical and classical analogies.⁴⁴ For example, readers seeking to understand their regional history of disturbances of the earth could look to clergyman and Harvard president Increase Mather, whose *A Discourse Concerning Earthquakes* appeared in 1705.⁴⁵ The immediate pretext for his study was a series of earthquakes occurring earlier that year, in June. But if the *Discourse* was, according to its title, “Occasioned by the earthquakes which were in New-England, in the province of Massachusetts-Bay ... and in Connecticut-Colony,” Mather used the occurrence of these local events to inquire about the phenomenon more broadly, and to speculate about the interrelation of earthquake and other kinds of upheaval.

As a trained clergyman and typological reader of wonders, Mather explained the alignment in part as an augural one, whereby literal earthquake portended an event in the future that might in turn be figured as an earthquake: “*Sometimes Earthquakes in a Literal sense, are Prognosticks of Earthquakes in a Metaphorical sense.* They are a Sign of State-quakes, of Church-quakes, of Kingdom-quakes, of Province-quakes, Great Changes and *Revolutions* in the world, are in the Scripture called *Earthquakes*.”⁴⁶ Mather’s account casts the metaphor’s tenor as the inevitable and literal outcome of an equally literal prophetic vehicle. Such events could be either “happy”—as “when *Constantine* was established in the Imperial Throne, [and] there was a sudden and very astonishing Change of affairs, which is fitly compared to a Great Earthquake”—or they could be “a *Sign that Men have Sinned, and that God is Angry*” (D 14, 11). But earthquake always entailed God speaking to humanity, he insisted: “And they are very stupid, if they do not hear His Voice therein” (D 8). Earthquake thus required analysis across time and geography, from the records of classical antiquity and the Bible to “the last Intelligence which we had out of *Italy*” (D 26).

Like Seneca, Mather understood earthquake as by definition a worldwide phenomenon—because “there is no Land totally free or exempt” (D 21). But he was especially interested in earthquake’s occurrence in the Western hemisphere:

But let us come back into *America*: Has not the Earth been shaken there too?
In the Southern *America*, the City of *Lima* was Seventeen Years since totally

overthrown with an *Earthquake*, not one House left standing, and many of the Inhabitants buried in the Ruines of the City. Nor has the Northern *America* been Exempted. Was not the Island of *Antigua*, visited with frightful Earthquakes Fifteen Years since? One then wrote to his Correspondent here, that the Earth was seen to heave, and rowle like the Waves of the Sea, that Rocks were thrown from the Mountains, Houses shattered, and some Points of Land were swallowed up. And have we forgotten what God did in *Jamacio* Thirteen Years ago, when two Thousand People (*Whites & Blacks*) perished by the Earthquakes there? And now Behold, the Earthquakes are come into *New-England*; Although' through the great Mercy of God no hurt has been done thereby. We see then that the Lord is shaking the Earth all the world over. And is there not some Great and Notable Day of the Lord at hand? Moreover, there are at this Day, Great Earthquakes in a Metaphorical sense. Nations are shaking, mighty Kingdoms are shaking; yea, the greatest Kingdoms in *Europe* are so. (D 27–28)

The passage brings readers rhetorically “back into *America*” from the far-flung and transatlantic sites of earthquake Mather has been describing in Europe and elsewhere. This geographic maneuver must be understood first and foremost as a part of what Kirsten Silva Gruesz has called “the global designs of a Creole family”: the deep enmeshment of the Mather family in the project of bringing “the American hemisphere as a whole to the forefront of the world’s intellectual stage.”⁴⁷ By claiming the entire American hemisphere as the purview of the Puritan mission, this intellectual project aimed to become a missionizing one, one day bringing a purified Protestant light to the darkness of people steeped in the errors of their Spanish and Catholic colonizers. But the project was also inherently geopolitical and economic, forming as it did around the so-called Western Design: Oliver Cromwell’s elaborate plan for an English conquest of the Spanish West Indies, which would disrupt colonial rule in all the Spanish portions of the hemisphere, leaving them vulnerable to future English attack and acquisition of their famed mineral wealth. The resulting Anglo-Spanish War of 1654–1660 transformed Jamaica into an English colony, but the venture failed to bring the demise of Spanish empire writ large. By the time Cromwell’s rule was over, the war looked foolhardy when viewed from England, which had little financial gain from its new colony. But for New England creoles, the history of the Western Design bespoke their own geopolitical centrality; for the Mathers especially, as Gruesz shows, the mission “to turn all the peoples of the Americas toward the Reformed way” was nothing less than a “family inheritance,” involving Richard Mather, Increase Mather, John Cotton, and eventually Cotton Mather, to be returned to again and again.⁴⁸

Read in light of this context, Increase Mather’s passage on earthquakes appears to traverse the territory of the Western Design, which had ended thirty years

earlier, from its once projected end point to its New England center of geopolitical meaning. He begins in the hemisphere's southern half and works forward temporally and northward geographically: from "Seventeen Years since" to "Fifteen Years," "Thirteen Years," and finally "this Day"; and from Lima to Antigua and "*Jamacio*," and finally "into *New-England*"—as if time itself ran on a longitude moving steadily away from the South. While foregrounding earthquake's universality, Mather's account also recognizes that the 1705 New England seismic event occasioning his discourse is different from the other earthquakes because it has not taken lives or caused damage. Mather seems caught between registering this difference as "the great Mercy of God" and recognizing the event as a possible prelude to an even vaster rending: "some Great and Notable Day of the Lord," hastening toward the end times promised in Revelation. Mather observes "that Earthquakes have been oftner in some parts of the world than in other places"—but he is not sure whether his 1705 New England is one of those "oftner" parts (D 21). He slides accordingly back to considering earthquake "in a Metaphorical sense" and notes that the "greatest" polities of Europe are in the process of rending, including the "German Empire," the "Kingdom of France," the "Kingdom of Spain," and the "Kingdom or Republick of Poland" (D 28). The New England earthquakes of 1705, as Mather suggests, also occurred alongside a series of wars that might be metaphorized as rendings of the ground: "When there are great Battles fought on the *Land*, the Lord *shakes those Lands*" (D 29).

The countries that Mather names—those undergoing metaphorical rending—are all in Europe, then caught up in the War of the Spanish Succession. But this figurative European earthquake had also visited closer to home in the New World front of the inter-European conflict known as Queen Anne's War: "Nor has the Northern *America* been Exempted." Queen Anne's War was also part of a much longer conflict that—as its outdated moniker, the Third Indian War, suggests—had in some sense been ongoing between the English and various Indigenous polities of North America since the first attempted colonies in the late sixteenth century in Roanoke.⁴⁹ Thus, when Mather speaks of earthquakes as analogues and predictors of "great battles fought on the Land," it is hard to imagine that he was not thinking also of the Pequot War, which ended in the same year as the 1638 earthquake, King Philip's War, and the prior three years of war between English settlers and the various Indigenous forces allied with their French and Spanish competitors. Just the previous February, in 1704, a coalition of several hundred "Abenakis, Hurons, Kahnawake, Pennacooks, and Iroquois of the Mountain" accompanied by some fifty French Canadians had attacked Deerfield—which fell under the jurisdiction of the province of Massachusetts Bay—and taken more than a hundred captives, including children, back to Canada.⁵⁰

But the vastly greater "earthquake in the Metaphorical sense," whether Mather could see this or not, was the English capture of Indigenous men, women, and children to be enslaved or sold into slavery elsewhere, often in exchange for

other enslaved Indigenous or African-descended people.⁵¹ The English colonies, including those in New England, abounded with a human traffic to and from the Caribbean, Spanish Florida, and the Spanish Main, including the trade of so-called Spanish Indians and Spanish Negroes.⁵² As the so-called Indian slave trade intersected with the African one, the various “Indian wars”—which brought the Lord to shake New England in Mather’s distillation—were in some cases mere pretext for the expansion of slavery as an institution.

As early as 1645, for example, Emmanuel Downing wrote to Massachusetts Bay Governor John Winthrop and urged him to see that

A warr with the Naraganset is verie considerable to this plantation ... If upon a Just war the lord should deliver them into our hands wee might easily have men, women, and Children enough to exchange for Moores, which wilbe more gaynefull pilladge for us than we conceive, for I doe not see how wee can thrive until wee get into a stock of slaves sufficient to doe all our buisnes ... And I suppose you know verie well how we shall maynteyne 20 Moores cheaper then one English servant.⁵³

With its insidious wink, Downing’s last sentence offers a reminder of how steeped in the understanding of Indigenous and African slavery the puritans were. The passage also lays bare just how instrumentally the abstract philosophical concept of “just war” was then being widely leveraged to make a case for a system of slavery that was “cheaper” than indentured labor and created more quickly those conditions in which a slave-owning class and its larger society could “thrive.”

Just war theory was itself the product of the global earthquake history that underwrote colonization and enslavement. The concept had been laid out in the Protestant context in 1625 by the Dutch philosopher and theologian Hugo Grotius, whose works Increase Mather and his son Cotton owned and admired.⁵⁴ Grotius considered slavery lawful and drew in part on the ancient Greek founders of Western political thought to say so.⁵⁵ In his landmark 1625 *De jure belli ac pacis*, a foundational work in the emergence of international law, he opined on the circumstances that made people morally and legally subject to enslavement, and the related question of “in what manner the rights of a people may become extinct.”⁵⁶ Despite its presentation as abstract and universalist, Grotius’s thinking on this subject was closely attuned to the colonial projects of Europeans in the Americas.⁵⁷ Arguing for the retention of a people’s existence in “form and spirit” in the context of emigration, Grotius had no stake in what would later become the New World degeneration debates of the eighteenth century.⁵⁸ He was simply according theoretical rights to those Europeans who emigrated as a “people” to become invaders and settlers of non-European lands (*L* 2.9.III). The violent conquests by which Europeans and their descendants acquired new territories, and the concomitant enslaving of Indigenous and African subjects, could be categorized as “just wars”

so long as they were undertaken by those who retained their rights as a people against those who no longer maintained such rights.

Grotius's intricate and strangely circular account of *how* a people lost their rights reads at moments like a primer in the first principles of settler colonialism. Rights become "extinct" when "[a] people becomes extinct," which occurs "when its essential parts are destroyed" (L 2.9). If this emphatically does not happen "by emigration," Grotius maintains that "neither can it be denied that a people may lose its existence in two ways; either by the extinction of all [or nearly all] its members" ("if so few remain that they cannot form a people"), or by "the extinction of its form and spirit"—"when its essential parts, and necessary form of subsistence are destroyed" (L 2.9V). The latter process essentially allows the effects of a war to justify the war retroactively, for "[a] people loses its form ... either when every individual is reduced to slavery ... Or when, though they retain their personal liberty, they are deprived of the rights of sovereignty" (L 2.9V). Grotius thus describes with great clarity what scholars of settler colonialism have called the logic of elimination that is built into the structure of invasion—termed here "emigration"—and can take many different forms, from genocidal war to enslavement to the refusal of political sovereignty.⁵⁹ Even the granting of "personal liberty" comes with an eliminatory cost: that the recipient accept the settler political terms by which it is granted.

If Grotius's rhetoric adumbrates the eliminatory logic of settler colonialism across the centuries to come, his entire theory of just war is rooted in the ancient seismic imaginings of Western imperial identity. When Grotius turns to classical sources to explain the many means of a people's "extinction," his first example is not a conquest or a war but the disappearance of Atlantis as recounted in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*: "the instance of nations swallowed up by the sea, as Plato relates" (L 2.9.IV). Atlantis sank after an earthquake, of course, and this brings Grotius to his second example of extinction: "or if a people should be destroyed by an earthquake, of which there are many instances in history" (L 2.9.IV). Earthquake is exemplary in part because of the perceived totalizing quality of its extinctive powers, greater even than wars in which peoples "destroy themselves" (L 2.9.IV). As Grotius notes, "We are informed by Pliny, that in ancient Latium, fifty-three nations were destroyed without a single trace of them remaining" (L 2.9.IV). Earthquake thus aptly metaphorizes conquest by figuring its death-dealing structure as a single, spectacular, and all-devouring event. Earthquake naturalizes, that is, the all-too-human genocidal process by which "a people may lose its existence."

Grotius's discussion of earthquakes and just war assumes that such events leave behind those survivors who, no longer constituting a people, are then legitimately subject to enslavement. But as Increase Mather well knew, earthquake did not always precede just war and enslavement; neither did it always discriminate between the enslavers and the enslaved when it struck: "And have we forgotten what God did in *Jamacio* Thirteen Years ago, when two Thousand People (*Whites*

& Blacks) perished by the Earthquakes there?" Mather refers here to the great 1692 Port Royal earthquake, which destroyed the wealthiest town in the British colonies and the largest in the Caribbean, as well as its major port in the Atlantic slave trade, when it caused half of the colonial city to sink like Atlantis into the sea.⁶⁰ Commentators were quick to see the hand of an angry God at work, punishing the notoriously debauched tropical city for its corruption and luxury.⁶¹ But Cotton Mather, in the midst of celebrating "Five Witches ... Lately Executed, impudently demanding of God, a miraculous vindication of Their Innocency," had a more complex reaction when he heard about the earthquake in Jamaica.⁶²

In a letter to his uncle, John Cotton, Cotton Mather describes his emotional trajectory in response to the information as a turn from the spiritual jubilation attending the trials and executions—"my Soul ... Refreshed with some Little short of Miraculous Answers to a prayer"—to "liv[ing] in pains" with the news of sudden catastrophe:

When, on a fair Day, the sea suddenly swell'd, and the Earth shook, and broke in many places; and in a minutes time, the Rich Town of Port-Royal, the *Tyrius* of the whole English America, but a very Sodom for Wickedness, was immediately swallow'd up, and the Sea came Rolling over the Town ... Behold, an Accident speaking to all our English America. (CM 143)

Mather's brief narrative of the destruction as a judgment of biblical proportions upon wealth and iniquity is also oddly mixed and self-contradictory. He carefully records all the features of a spectacular wonder—its occurrence in pleasant weather and without warning signs, its suddenness and small-scale timeframe, and its correspondingly outsized qualities requiring metaphor and allusion—but for several reasons they do not cohere into a clear interpretation of the event.

The word "Accident" presents the most immediate ambiguity, for it implies chance and lack of cause altogether, divine or otherwise, in a passage infused with biblical allusion and the implication of punishment delivered to a latter-day Sodom. An accident might be understood as providential, of course, but Mather does not say so here. In the seventeenth century, moreover, the term also had a relevant geological meaning, denoting an undulation in the landscape or an irregularity in the ground—as in this usage in Hakluyt's *The principal navigations, voyages, traffiques and discoveries of the English nation* (1600): "All that whole Bay is more subject to many blooming and smothering heates ... than any other place in all Torrida Zona: and the cause thereof is some accidents in the land."⁶³ The British natural philosopher Robert Hooke, whose scientific contributions were familiar to Cotton Mather, also used the word "accident" to signify a variation in surface when he began delivering his lectures on earthquake to the London Royal Society in 1667.⁶⁴ As Hooke propounded his theory that the earth's topographical features were caused by its earlier movements, he drew upon the evidence of

fossils and shells gathered and sent from around the trembling world, including places such as New England, Virginia, and Jamaica.

Mather's use of the term "accident" thus neatly captures both the terrible randomness of the devastating Port Royal earthquake and its geological effect. And yet this "accident" also speaks—communicates content or emotional significance that Mather appears to view as at least potentially understandable—suggesting that the ground of the earth itself has made its voice heard. Perhaps Mather means this merely in the same sense as when he later calls earthquakes in New England "very moving preachers," but the latent geological meaning of the term "accident" exceeds the metaphor of earthquake as the unambiguous voice of the Euro-Christian God.⁶⁵ The passage's reference to Port Royal as the "Tyrius" for all of English America furthers its sense of cosmological and theological instability. The biblical allusion suggests Port Royal's centrality to trade as well as its geographical status, for Tyre too was an ancient and wealthy destination for merchant ships and slave traders, and it too sits on the coast of a peninsula jutting out into a Mediterranean sea.⁶⁶ But Tyre was not "of" Israel; it was Israel's religious enemy, the home of heathen Baal-worshippers—which raises the question of what Jamaica is to "the whole English America" of which it is a part. Is Jamaica a "very Sodom for wickedness" because it is a "Rich Town," built on slavery, or because it is home to the worshippers of other deities that the African diaspora brought together in profound and powerfully creative communion?

If Mather's ambiguous language throughout the letter betrays a certain theological-philosophical instability in the face of a natural catastrophe that was in some ways the Lisbon earthquake of its moment, it is also true that English colonists and creoles in Jamaica were themselves, as Kelly Wisecup and Toni Wall Jaudon put it, "immersed in worlds with ontologies that did not recognize divisions between natural and supernatural worlds but whose explanations for phenomena extended to include non-human as well as human agents."⁶⁷ Moreover, the personal and intellectual ties and the networks of knowledge binding New England and Jamaica were strong; Mather notes that "Some of our poor N[ew] E[ngland] people are Lost in the Ruines," and that "The N[on]-C[onformist] Minister there, scap'd wonderfully with his Life" (*CM* 143). And as Matthew Mulcahy has shown, Caribbean views of earthquake—rooted in the frequency of the experience and their relation to other elements of the landscape—were quite different from continental British-American ones; settlers in Jamaica necessarily had to alter "some of their ideas about the natural world and the meaning they attached to various natural phenomena."⁶⁸ English settlers did not always learn quickly enough, however. The Taino had avoided settling in the Port Royal area, and so too, following Indigenous practice, had the Spanish.⁶⁹ Perhaps the Taino could read the island's geological features more precisely based on knowledge passed down from their ancestors: perhaps they heard many "accidents" speaking from the sandy ground. And perhaps, on some level, even Cotton Mather apprehended

something like this possibility in the letter about the Port Royal earthquake that he wrote in the midst of the Salem witchcraft crisis.

These small moments bespeak a New World seismic sensibility that binds together disparate places: New England and Jamaica, of course, but also Lima and Mather's own Boston. Disparate cosmological orientations to the earth also arrived with the flow of knowledge and people from elsewhere in the Americas to New England—and vice versa, as the traffic in Indigenous and African captives created entangled forms of new understanding.⁷⁰ When Increase Mather references "*Blacks*" living in Jamaica, for example, he is not just speaking from second-hand experience through letters and reading. There were both "Spanish Indians" and "Spanish Negroes," brought from Jamaica, Barbados, elsewhere in the West Indies, and perhaps even Spanish Florida, enslaved or indentured in the households of his own family.

Indeed, as Gruesz has shown, the Mather household itself connects the history of this famous New England family to a diverse range of potential sites in the Americas, bound together by the Black and Indigenous diasporas resulting from Spanish and English conquest.⁷¹ Increase enslaved (or indentured) a man known simply as "Spaniard"—"bought and ... bestowed" upon him by his son Cotton, who refers to him in his diary as "a Spanish-Indian servant" (CM 22). Later, Cotton Mather would acquire his own "*Spanish Indian for a Servant*" from Sir William Phipps, the first royally appointed governor of Massachusetts Bay, known for the fortune he made from a sunken Spanish treasure-ship, which he then reinvested in the slave trade (CM 203).⁷² Cotton Mather's diary also records a human "gift" offered by some gentlemen from the church: "a very likely *Slave*; a Young Man, who is a Negro, of a Promising Aspect and Temper" (CM 579). The bequest of an enslaved man struck Mather as the sign of "a mighty smile of Heaven upon my Family"; he named the "Young Man" *Onesimus*—or useful (CM 579). But it was an enslaved woman of uncertain Indigenous and possibly also African origins who came to stand enduringly for the problem of alternative cosmologies when she became the first person to be accused in the Salem witch trials and entered the historical record under the name of Tituba. Although we cannot know what Tituba thought about the news of the Port Royal earthquake when she heard of it in Salem, she too contributed to the new seismic sensibility that developed during the witch crisis.

Theodicy's Seismic Specters

Tituba had been traded from the Caribbean, and perhaps before that Colombia, to New England, and she apparently told stories, perhaps drawn from African and/or Indigenous cosmologies, that frightened some English children who then claimed she had beset them with pains and spasms caused by her witchery.⁷³ Tituba was either the first victim of the Salem witchcraft cultural crisis or, with her stories,

its deliberate instigator—but either way she managed to survive it by giving her testimony effectively. She confessed to everything she was accused of and drew upon European topoi of witchcraft in giving evidence (claiming to have ridden “upon sticks” across a forest, for example).⁷⁴ Her confession threw the culture of her enslavers into a violent crisis that ended only after twenty court-sanctioned murders. Crucially, Tituba did not explicitly “boast”—as Anne Hutchinson had after the 1638 earthquake—of bringing on the earthquake that occurred in the midst of the 1692 crisis, three months after she had been accused, interrogated, and finally allowed to live. And yet in her very avoidance of the topic, Tituba helped ensure her own survival in an era obsessed with shifting grounds and the specters often believed to be inhabiting or even controlling the movements of the earth.

The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 evinced the precariously ground of New England settler society as its political and religious foundations were shaken. Indeed, Mary Beth Norton has argued that the witchcraft crisis was the complex product of colonial violence, “of nearly two decades of armed conflict between English settlers and the New England Indians,” and the racial and religious fears introduced by war captivities and redemptions.⁷⁵ At the same time, both Puritan ministers and ruling elites saw their authority disintegrating and struggled to retain it by intensifying their study of the divine in the natural world while also accepting the uncertainty of, and the divine prohibition on, knowing the invisible world. Earthquake, like the arrival of evil spirits in Salem, was a sign of both new heights of demonic power and, paradoxically, the eventual demise of Satan himself. Cotton Mather, for example, understood that the shaking of the ground punctuated a “time, when the Devils with his Witches are engag’d in an actual War upon a people”—and thus New England settlers should expect the “shake which the devil is now giving us” to continue, with earthquake becoming “in these days ... very ordinary.”⁷⁶ Yet if earthquake signals the immediate agency of Satan, this demonic working must be by God’s design: “Deo permittente, Terræ motus causat” (*W* 60).

Mather asserts the omnipotence of God with ease, but he is less clear on how much agency the Devil has grasped and how: whether this “frequent Repetition of Earthquakes is perhaps by the energy of the Divil in the Earth,” for example, or whether the earthquakes are a sign that Satan understands his imminent defeat in the greatest earthquake of all: when the “Divil will be clap’t up, as a Prisoner in or near the Bowels of the earth” (*W* 60). Proceeding as a scholar, Mather can thus point to the classical history of earthquake and assign causality to both satanic and divine agency. Considering the “Reign of Tiberius” in Roman Asia, Mather affirms that the “Devil surely, was a party in the Earthquake” but in the next breath assigns ultimate causality to “the Vengeance of God,” who “in one black Night sunk Twelve considerable Cities” (*M* 61, 60, 61). The good news is that “Great Earthquakes in divers places [are] among the Tokens of the Time approaching, when the Devil shall have no longer Time” (*W* 60). The bad news, for the New England settlers,

is that “we shall now be visited with more Usual, and yet more Fatal Earthquakes, than were our Ancestors” (W 60).

The occurrence of the 1692 Port Royal earthquake in the midst of the witchcraft trials resonates differently in the letter to John Cotton that Mather wrote immediately afterward. What earlier caused him to “live in pains” now seems almost comfortably predictable, a confirmation of his theological pronouncements before the fact: “And behold, This very Morning, when I was intending to utter among you such Things as these [regarding earthquakes], we are cast into an Heartquake by Tidings of an Earthquake that has lately happened at Jamaica” (CM 142–143). As in his letter to Cotton, Mather describes the Port Royal catastrophe as “an horrible Earthquake, whereby the Tyrus of the English America, was at once pull’d into the Jawes of the Gaping and Groaning Earth, and many Hundreds of the Inhabitants buried alive” (W 61). But here he does not represent the event as a divine judgment on Jamaica for its wickedness. Rather, the earthquake is a spectacular emblem for a larger preordained plan for English America: “The Lord sanctifie so dismal a Dispensation of his Providence, unto all the American Plantations!” (W 61). Lest New England listeners find any relief in their geographic distance from Jamaica, Mather warns them to “be assured, my Neighbours, the Earthquakes are not over yet! We have not yet seen the Last” (W 61).

Earthquakes will always return not because they are a geological inevitability, in other words, but because they stand for the enduring theological problem of evil. Mather addresses the problem succinctly and directly throughout *Wonders of the Invisible World*: “What cause have we to bless God, for our preservation from the *Devils Wrath*, in this which may too reasonably be call’d the *Devils World*!” (W 63). How to defend an omnipotent divinity who allows the Devil so much control over the world? What Mather calls the “Devils World” Herman Melville’s Ahab will in the nineteenth century call an “earthquake life”—for earthquake has always represented the subterranean implosion of calamity and suffering.⁷⁷ But if this enduring mystery of evil goes back to the Bible and the classical traditions of the West, it emerges under the new term “theodicy” in a quite specific moment, as I suggested in [Chapter 2](#), and develops in increasingly urgent ways over the centuries of Europe’s global conquests.

Theodicy is a specifically Western formation of the ancient and universal mystery of suffering, conceived in a new age of empire and forged into maturity in the crucible of New World conquest, settler colonialism, and slavery. If the problems theodicy seeks to resolve appear theologically abstract, they are never far from empire on the ground. As Mather puts it, “While we are in this present evil world, we are continually surrounded with swarms of those Devils who make this *present world*, become *so evil*” (W 63). If the formulation is tautological, it is also firmly embedded in the settler colonial “*present world*” from which Mather writes. This is a world in which theodicy is now tasked with explaining the outsized violence

of the settlers themselves in their wars of Indigenous dispossession while also contending with Europe's violent extraction of human lives from Africa—lives, if not first extinguished in the Middle Passage or on West Indian plantations or in the crossing to the mainland, that were then lived out in New England. Just as the African slave trade was increasing, moreover, the authority of this ruling group fell under direct threat when specters began appearing to some viewers but not others throughout the late seventeenth-century Atlantic world. Increase Mather had earlier addressed the problem of specters in his 1684 *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences: Wherein an Account is given of many Remarkable and very Memorable Events, which have happened in this last Age; Especially in NEW-ENGLAND*. He conceded that specters were known to be “frequent ... in dark corners of the Earth” but also claimed that, with a few exceptions, “As yet no place, nor any person in *New-England* ... have been troubled with *Aparitions*.”⁷⁸

Yet the new cosmological pressure presented by the enslavement of Africans is palpably present in *Illustrious Providences*, as is the violent mass movement of peoples by force across the ocean. “They who go down to the Sea in Ships, that do business in great waters, see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep,” Mather contends (*IP* 2). Given that the ships in Mather's seafaring stories are always traveling between New England and Virginia, Barbados, or the West Indies, it is hard not to conclude that the “business in great waters” is the slave trade—and that the “*black Witches*” of New England, who must be distinguished from “*white Witches*,” embody European demonology in newly racialized ways (*IP* 268). When one William Morse of Newberry finds his household beset by demons, for example, he experiences being “discernably beaten by a Fist” and restrained at the wrist just before he sees “the likeness of a *Blackmore* child ... appear from under the Rugg and Blanket, where the Man lay” (*IP* 154). What does the child want? What does he or she signify by appearing in bed with Morse? The apparitional child withholds all meaning: “It would rise up, fall down, nod & slip under the clothes when they endeavored to clasp it, never speaking any thing” (*IP* 154). But Morse and his family hear words during the event: “a Voice, singing *Revenge! Revenge! Sweet is Revenge!*” (*IP* 154). If they know the nature of the alleged retribution—the crime it purports to avenge—they do not say so. They call instead upon God—“the *English-man's God*”—and hear “suddenly with a mournful Note ... six times over uttered such expressions as *Alas! Alas! me knock no more! me knock no more!*” (*IP* 48, 154).

Mather declines to comment further on this dialect-speaking, ghostly “*Blackmore*” child, and he urges readers to resist the “vanity and superstition” of trying to run “Experiments” to determine for themselves the source of witchcraft when they find its evidence in their own lives (*IP* 155). Yet he continues to worry that specters are appearing to Indigenous people—who were “wont to *Powaw* (i.e. invoke the Devil)” (*IP* 32). The various accounts of the taking of English captives and the

murders of English subjects thus form part of Increase Mather's larger 1684 narrative of "the Heathen who rose up against us" and who—like the "*Earthquakes*" that he argues also "deserve to be mentioned amongst *Remarkable Providences*"—were "thinking to swallow us up quick, when their Wrath was kindled against us" (*IP* 359, 322, 359).

By 1692, the figurative earthquake had arrived: specters were wreaking violence throughout New England communities, often bringing with them other beings from the invisible world: "It has been a frequent thing for the Bewitched people, to be entertained with Apparitions of Ghosts of murdered people at the same time that the *Spectres* of the witches trouble them" (*W* 122–123). Mather's record of witches' testimonies gives the name "the *Black Man*" to the Devil; no wonder that the Puritans' Devil "Exhibit[s] himself ordinarily as a small Black man" who also "they generally say ... resembles an *Indian*" (*W* 126). For specters contest theodicy's suppressed *raison d'être*: to explain and rationalize evil in the specific historical context of settler violence, of conquest and slavery. Theodicy's specters are thus the "shadowy twin of Reformation optimism," as Sarah Rivett observes, precisely because this optimism was "purchased" through the invasion of the New World with all the new knowledge—and other material and human commodities—it supplied.⁷⁹

These tensions culminate in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*, which Cotton Mather composed and revised over twelve years, and published in 1701. The *Magnalia* takes as its central theme what Jerome McGann calls "continuing emergency": that is, the constant spiritual and physical precariousness of the New England Calvinist churches and their covenantal communities as they are beset by either Satan or the chastening of an angry God.⁸⁰ Mather defines providences as all events "wherein the existence and agency of the *invisible world*" come to bear on daily life and history as evidenced by apparitions and specters as well as thunder and earthquake.⁸¹ Indians and "*Indian wars*"—like the "fierce monsters of Africa" Mather has read about and the "*Blackmore child*" calling for revenge in New England—are themselves visible registers of this invisible world, and they continually insist that the suffering of the English and the suffering inflicted by the English be justified and explained (*M* 2.344, 2.583). Mather's usual justification for suffering is the conventional recourse to Satan, behind whose evil but ultimately futile work stands the ultimate power of God. But the *Magnalia's* monotheism feels fragile precisely because of its ethno-demonology, to use Bauer's term: its engagement with Native religion understood as the purview of the devil. Satan sometimes recedes in the face of "conversations, and ... confederacies" carried out within other cosmologies (*M* 2.387). We have to be reminded, for example, that the figure whom the "Powaws" call "*Chepian*" is to be understood as "the devil" (*M* 1.563). At another point, we learn of an Indigenous diviner who can "precisely inform" where stolen goods have been taken because he "himself served another God" (2.369). This "*powaw*" can only help Englishmen if—in his own words as

cited in the text—they “*can believe that my God will help you*” (M 2.369). Polytheism allows for great tact; the diviner is happy to call the Englishman’s god superior but also insists that his own “God’s continu’d kindness oblig’d him not to forsake his service” (M 2.369). Moreover, the anecdote itself suggests that the English point of view is nearly monolatrous; this portion of the text is willing to accept the existence of (though not to worship) another god, an Indigenous deity, who is in turn believed to be governed by Satan.

The origins of monotheism as a war of “God against the gods” are too clearly on display for the text’s Euro-American deity to appear fully or stably sovereign.⁸² In the context of this encroaching polytheism, Mather suspects himself and his Englishmen of a propensity not just to Satan but to the Indigenous gods with whom he tries, not always successfully, to align the “Prince of the Power of the Air”: “We have shamefully Indianized,” he warns, “we have too far descended into Indian vices” (M 2.344). He thus summons theodicy to explain the Indian wars as a consequence of the sin of Indianization: “Now the judgments of God have employed *Indian* hatchets to punish us for *Indian* vices” (M 2.344). But the problem is endless, as Mather seems to recognize: he can only repeat, “Our *Indian* wars are not over yet” (M 2.344). Indeed, his urgent need to keep taking up textual space with his relentless citation, his excessive *copia*, mirrors the unending quality of settler colonial war in which he finds himself. Like Garcilaso, he locates the production of his own history in the context of unending violence and of a corresponding historical inability to arrive *al fin*, at the end.⁸³ He aims to produce what he calls the “Epilogue of a long Tragedy” that would complete his account of the Indians wars—but he knows it is only “for the present then the Indians have done murdering; they’ll *do so no more till next time*” (M 2.555).

All he can do in the face of this truth—that settlement is a violent, even earth-shaking structure and not a tragic event with a discrete ending—is announce his intention to lay down the pen: “Let us then have *done* writing, when we have a little informed ourselves what is become of the chief *murderers* among those wretches” (M 2.555). Even his pronounced desire to end lies in deferral to the unending nature of the crisis. Yet the threat of Indigenous cosmology lingers, for here Mather finds that he cannot end on his own words without recalling and ridiculing the spiritual naming practices and language of the “wretches” “for whom, if we could find a *name* of a length like one of their own *Indian* long-winded words, it might be, *Bombardo-gladio-fun-hasti.flammi-loquentes*” (M 2.555).

With this burst into angry textual performance—typeset on the middle of the page—Mather attempts to subordinate Indigenous language to his own parodic Latin. He tries to corrupt what he has learned about Indigenous names and languages by inventing a nonsensical moniker made up of fragments of ideas: of bombardment and routing, of sword and spear, of flaming loquacity. And yet Mather’s taunt falls flat, feels desperate; it works instead to confirm the sense that he has lost control of his own language in the face of the invisible world, its

black and “*Blackmore*” specters, and his ongoing sense of Indianization under the pressure of other cosmologies.

By the time Mather published *The Negro Christianized* in 1706, he had developed a new approach to the spectral revolution: he claimed to speak for the specters as they were embodied, predictably, in the enslaved people of African descent living in Puritan households:

The uninstructed *Negroes* about your houses, appear like so many *Ghosts* and *Spectres*. You may, without being Fanciful, imagine that like so many Murdered *Ghosts*, they look very Ghastly upon you, and summon you to answer before the Tribunal of God, for suffering them to perish in their miserable Circumstances.⁸⁴

As did their invisible counterparts during the witch crisis, these visible “*Ghosts* and *Spectres*,” too, “do with Devilish Rites actually worship *Devils*, or maintain a magical conversation with *Devils*: And all of them are more *Slaves* to *Satan* than they are to *You*” (NC 15). Mather thus envisions slavery as a state of war in which colonial violence is conveniently enacted by Satan alone and visited only upon the enslaved. But the implied danger that such Ghosts and Specters posed to the master class—while floating “about your houses”—was obvious: “*A roaring Lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour*, hath made a seizure of them” (NC 14–15).

In the wake of the witch trials he helped to shape, Mather now proposes a very different kind of intervention into the ongoing spectral crisis of human ownership. He urges his slave-owning readers to rescue their ghostly human property from a “most horrid and cursed *Condition*” of Satanic possession by affording them spiritual education—“until a Faith in the *Son of God* has made them *Free indeed*” (NC 14, 15). This new freedom is of course predicated on the continued unfreedom of the enslaved within human bondage, a condition treated by Mather as a practical and spiritual matter at once. In fact, an enslaver can spiritually “save” an enslaved person—even a “Plantation of many” such people—without losing a valuable source of unpaid labor (NC 29). Even better, spiritual education promises an improved system for the extraction of said labor: “Be assured, Syrs; Your *Servants* will be the *Better Servants*, for being made *Christian Servants*” (NC 21). Properly educated, the enslaved subject is now grateful to and fearful of the enslaver, and is no longer a specter—no longer troubles theodicy by naming the violence of slavery or crying out “like so many Murdered *Ghosts*.”

Nor does the “*Negro Christianized*” act with the specter’s violence, for “*Christian Servants*” have been indoctrinated by catechism to renounce the emotional and physical resistance attending all “magical conversation with *Devils*” (NC 15). “I must not hate nor hurt anyone,” explains the “Larger Catechism, for the *Negroes* of a bigger Capacity,” which for the instruction of the enslaved glosses the biblical commandment “thou shalt not kill” as a positive injunction: “I must use all Good Means to Preserve my own Life, and the Lives of others” (NC 41, 36, 41). Buried in this catechistic script is the unspoken violence of suicide as a historically

widespread response to lifelong capture and to the conditions of slavery. But also embedded here is tantalizing evidence of something else: Mather's understanding that the medical knowledge and abilities of enslaved people may constitute "Good Means" of preserving lives (NC 41). For Mather offered this "larger catechism" in the same year that he acquired Onesimus, who famously bequeathed to Mather the story of African variolation practices for instilling immunity that would eventually lead to the first use of inoculation in North America during the 1721 smallpox epidemic.⁸⁵ This outcome derived precisely from what his 1706 text seems to know but attempts to suppress: that African forms of medical and spiritual knowledge might be powerful enough to save, or to end, English lives.

After all, the deeper problem of "magical conversation" among the enslaved—whether Black or Indigenous—was the potential of what Mather called in *Wonders* the devil's "Horrible PLOT against the country" to extinguish in its infancy "the First-born of our *English Settlements*" (W 14). In other words, Black and Indigenous "Barbarous Impieties, and superstitions" represented a consequence of New World encounters: the continually threatening presence of other cosmological agencies, other gods and other means of divination—and other relations to the earth itself (NC 16). As Mather put it, "First, the Indian Powawes used all their Sorceries to molest the First Planters here; but God said unto them, *Touch them not!*" (W 74). Then comes the "Shake" of Satan himself, and the terrible "energy of the Devil in the *Earth*" (W 60).

A significant number of Mather's ideas about non-European cosmologies and their seismic implications derived from colonial Spanish America.⁸⁶ As he explains in *Wonders*, for example, "The Indians which came from far to settle about *Mexico*, were in their Progress to that Settlement, under a Conduct of the *Devil*, very strangely Emulating what the Blessed God gave to Israel in the Wilderness" (W 160). Relying on Catholic scholarship is not a problem for Mather in his quest to further the aims of demonological inquiry: "*Acosta* is our Author for it, That the Devil in their Idol *Vitzlipultzli*, governed that mighty Nation" (W 160). Mather, citing José de Acosta, refers to the Nahuatl deity Huitzilopochtli, God of War and Sun, and cosmic lord of Tenochtitlan; his worshippers sought to keep the world in balance.⁸⁷ They also believed something Mather may or may not have known: that the world would one day end, swallowed by an earthquake.⁸⁸ Whether or not that earthquake will come—and if it will be a seismic rupture or a revolution of unsettlement—only time can tell. The point, as far as Mather's moment goes, is that specters always had earthquake at their fingertips, for earthquake too straddled the visible and invisible worlds and had effects that could be perceived even as its source and shape and significance eluded certainty.

New England Earthquakes and Settler Enlightenment

With this seismic milieu as its shifting ground, a settler colonial enlightenment unfolded in New England in the first half of the eighteenth century. Although

hardly unified in its orientation, this broad shift in the cultural dynamics of definition and knowledge-making emerged on some level in response to theodicy's destabilizing specters—and it had to contend with the alternative modes of Indigenous and African knowledge production that New Englanders had lived with in intimate ways for over half a century, since the first taking of Native captives as enslaved laborers and since the beginning of an Indigenous-African slave trade with the Caribbean (at least by 1638 when John Winthrop recorded the arrival of “salt, cotton, tobacco, and Negroes” brought from Tortugas in exchange for Pequot captives).⁸⁹ As a broadly defined British Enlightenment set about disciplining its disparate subjects to avoid all mental states that strayed dangerously far from rational self-possession, the settler version of enlightenment in New England took “slavish” as a keyword of critical disparagement.

In his 1706 *Discourse on Earthquakes*, Increase Mather urged his readers to fear earthquake as God's “devouring Judgment,” for example, but “Not with a Slavish but with an Holy Fear” (D 22, 21). He does not explain the difference between “slavish” and “Holy” fear; perhaps he means the difference between horror and awe. Yet if the term's relation to the historical and contemporary institution of slavery is unmistakable, “slavish” was not a mere metaphor or figure—for the wrong kind of religiosity or the wrong posture toward authority—drawn from biblical and classical history as well as contemporary knowledge of chattel slavery in the Americas. On some level, Mather is instructing his readers to distinguish their Anglo-American response to the knowledge and experience of earthquakes quite literally from the response of the enslaved Black and Indigenous people living in their midst.

“Why then should we be *slavishly afraid of thunder*,” asked son Cotton Mather in the *Magnalia*: “As long as the *Almighty thunderer* is our own god we need not fear” (M 2.316, 2.317). The injunction against slavishness represents an attempt to wrest control of the natural world—its thunderings, its mountains quaking—back from other gods, back to monotheism, now reconceived as a religion of reason rather than mystery or wonder. “Slavish,” in the settler enlightenment, was a descriptor that embedded a silent admonishment to Anglo-American colonists to distinguish and protect their own beliefs and comportment from the influence of Indigenous and African forms of knowledge, worship, and ways of knowing the world. To reduce “slavishness,” New England elites and authorities had to transform the wonders of the natural world into rational and orderly systems—and to recognize “Philosophy,” as Cotton Mather put it in *The Christian Philosopher* (1721), as “no enemy, but a mighty and wondrous incentive to religion.”⁹⁰ If Puritan theology and Enlightenment natural philosophy were not opposed or even necessarily easily distinguishable forms of thought, as Rivett and others have persuasively shown, they came together in part to confront the cosmological problems introduced by conquest and slavery.⁹¹

In Mather's *Christian Philosopher*, therefore, gone are the specters and devils and witches. Nature no longer expresses the fury of God but the rational engineering of benevolent design. Volcanoes serve as "vents" for the heat causing earthquakes, and earthquakes serve the function of causing the continents to join.⁹² Asia, Africa, and the Andes have more volcanoes than other places, for there "nature seems to keep house underground."⁹³ Even the irregularities on the surface of the earth must never be seen as flaws—as in the case of those "vain colts of asses who say the earth's mountains are warts"—lest this be taken as evidence "that earth is a heap of rubbish and ruins."⁹⁴ Mather could advise readers that they would experience terror if they could see beneath the earth and know their perennial danger in the face of earthquake. But to see ruination in the natural world would be to admit its fundamental mystery, and thus to open it to "slavish" and other forms of interpretation that no effective settler enlightenment could countenance.

As earthquakes continued in New England during the first half of the eighteenth century, Calvinist ministers differed on whether to interpret the rational speech of God as punitive or merciful, as William Andrews has shown.⁹⁵ But their sermons were unified in their message that earthquake required special attention to the catechizing and spiritual correction of "servants." The potential responses to earthquake of enslaved and other unfree people—and their possible effect on children—were of great concern to ministers, who urged listeners and readers to exercise proper mastery, in the case of enslavers, and proper subordination, in the case of those who were enslaved or underage. As John Cotton put it in his sermon "A Holy Fear of God, and His Judgements," preached to Newton masters after a "Terrible Earthquake" in November 1727, "You that neglect to Instruct, Restrain, and Govern your Children and Servants, endeavor to do your duty faithfully and effectually in the regards for time to come."⁹⁶ He also addressed subordinated but dissident listeners directly: "You that have been *Disobedient to Parents and Masters, Obey them in the Lord; and be obedient to your Masters—with fear, and trembling.*"⁹⁷ And he enjoined those listeners who have "liv'd without Baptism, to this day," urging them to accept the Euro-Christian God and "Arise and be Baptized."⁹⁸ Joseph Sewall, too, took the earthquake as a reminder that "we must take care that our children and servants be not idle at home," and so did James Allin, who complained of "scandalous Neglect of the publick worship ... generally through the land" and pointed out that too many were "late from Home on Saturday-Evenings, who should be with their Families, Reading, Catechising and Instructing their Children and Servants."⁹⁹

This Enlightenment framework for earthquake thus required religious education to exercise careful constraints on subordinates' responses to seismic disruption; as Samuel Wigglesworth reminded listeners in Ipswich in 1727, any "sensitive fear" of earthquake must be tempered by "rational fear" to avoid courting the disaster of inviting among themselves "gods, which are yet no gods."¹⁰⁰ "Let this Fear

of God be of the right kind," he implored: "not a slave-like fear, but filial and reverential. Fear him not only lest he should destroy you, but lest you should injure and dishonor him."¹⁰¹ Earthquake laid bare one obvious truth driving potential resistance of the enslaved: to experience terror of the enslaver's violence is not equivalent to wishing that enslaver well and free of injury or dishonor. As far away as South Carolina, the Boston-educated minister Josiah Smith warned his congregation that "the God who shook New England, can with equal ease make Carolina tremble"—for "philosophy allows, [that earthquakes] may be universal."¹⁰² Smith too used the occasion of the 1727 New England earthquake to imply that natural catastrophe and resistance could easily strike together without proper social control: "Our sabbaths," he warned, are "openly profaned by servants, in the very face of masters and Magistrates, with impunity, and without a verbal reproof."¹⁰³ Just as worrisome for Smith is the looming threat of "our ruin ... from the hands of our Indian enemy."¹⁰⁴ His earthquake sermon is a call to the enslaver class to find "unity among us" in order to stave off these threats, whether from profane "servants" within or Indigenous foes without. But Smith is not optimistic about the settler future in this unstable moment of new philosophical enlightenment: "Our strange Stupidity," he muses, "is our Greatest Danger."¹⁰⁵

Cotton Mather also preached after the 1727 earthquake, addressing the Assembly of Zion in Boston. The published version of his sermon—"The Terror of the Lord"—reminds readers how little time all ministers had to prepare their remarks: "There can be expected none but a mean Preparation, from a few Minutes of a Morning filled with Disturbances."¹⁰⁶ If an earthquake provides powerful content for theological interpretation, it also offers an especially self-evident case for authorial and Christian *apologia*: as Mather puts it, an "Apology for the Deficiencies which a curious Reader may soon discover" in the text (TL 4). Yet Mather also clearly wanted the published version to come as close as possible to the original and oral version of the sermon, which he claimed was "a Discourse which he could have had no Time to Write, before it was delivered" (TL 5). The resulting text could not be "Word for Word," he conceded, but it was nevertheless purportedly without "many material Additions" (TL 5). This is hard to believe given that the sermon is over 9,000 words and includes material on earthquake from his own *Christian Philosopher*, published six years earlier, as well as an appendix on New England earthquake history going back to Samuel Danforth's descriptions of the 1638 earthquake as experienced in Roxbury, Massachusetts and long citations from Increase Mather's *Discourse concerning Earthquakes*. Yet Mather carefully punctuated the text with moments suggesting the oral and performative context of the original sermon: "I see none *Asleep* at this Time," he notes with dry satisfaction. "'Tis a Congregation of *Hearers*, that I am this Time speaking to" (TL 19).

If Mather's sermon described the 1727 earthquake as the "Terror of the Lord" for his parishioners, it also made sure to announce its own enlightened knowledge

of natural philosophy. Mather began with what could be known with certainty—"We have had the repeted, more than three times repeted, *Shocks* of a Formidable EARTHQUAKE"—before turning to what could not: "And GOD knows, whether there are any more to come, or what Execution they may do when they come" (TL 7). He described the earthquake's onset using the terms of daily life; it began with a "horrid rumbling like the Noise of many Coaches together, driving on the paved Stones," and was followed by "a most awful *Trembling of the Earth*, which did heave and shake so as to Rock the Houses" (TL 1). He analyzed the nature of its emotional effects: "And what added unto the Terrors of it were the terrible Flames and Lights in the Atmosphere which accompanied it" (TL 2). With empirical observation shoring up his ensuing claims, Mather informed his listeners that the earthquake's meaning and purpose were unmistakable; the tremors were the very voice of God: "The Glorious GOD has *Roared out of Zion* ... The *Lion hath roared*; *Who will not fear?* We are worse than *Beasts*, if we *tremble* not" (TL 6).

Yet even as Mather described and validated a "general and uncommon Terror" of the earthquake that people felt in their bodies and minds—"An Auguish like that on a Travailing Woman, siezed upon Men as well as Women"—he also directed them toward a less fearful apprehension of the phenomenon (TL 7). "There is the *Voice of the Lord*, in it, when He *shakes* our Territories," he repeats, this time with less exclamation—and then adds, "there may be some *Earthquakes* more *Supernatural* than others" (TL 10). Here Mather introduces a distinction between biblical earthquakes such as "that of Mount *Sinai*" or the one attending "the *Resurrection* of our blessed Jesus," on the one hand, and New England earthquakes, on the other: for, as he next points out, "usually, our *Earthquakes* have *Natural Causes* assigned for them" (TL 32, 10). The voice of God, echoing in his listeners' memories of the earthquake they experienced just the previous night, comes dangerously near to silence here. As if sensing this, Mather walks back from such "*Natural Causes*" and announces that "What they are, 'tis now and here, neither a Time nor Place for Philosophical Disquisitions" (TL 10). And yet Mather cannot quite restrain himself from such disquisition in his sermon, asking

Whether *Colluctations of Minerals* producing Vapours that must have an Explosion, may cause those direful Convulsions in the Bowels of the Earth, which are felt in our *Earthquakes*?—Or, whether the huge quantities of *Waters* running in the Bowels of the Earth may not by Degrees waste away the Bottom of the upper *Strata* here and there, so as to cause their falling?—Or, whether the *Subterraneous Fires*, getting head, may not by their Sulphurous and Bituminous Exhalations in the Bowels of the Earth cause a Combustion that may carry all before it? (TL 10–11)

In the space between God's voice and these natural causes of earthquake emerges an idea Mather finds profoundly disturbing: that earthquakes may be random.

That, as he puts it, “All this is but a *Chance that happens to us* or the mere unguided *Motion of Matter* ... Ah, profane *Philistine!*—’Tis a Language for none but a *Philistine*. A *Christian* cannot speak so” (TL 11). Just as suddenly as the voice of God has receded, it returns: “No, [a Christian] is one that will be sensible of GOD in these things. Verily, In them, *Lo, GOD sends forth His Voice*” (TL 11). As the words “mere” and “unguided” tell us here, Mather recognizes in the Philistine language of “Chance” something potentially worse than the “accident” at Port Royal, Jamaica: a universe, both disenchanted and perennially open to “slavish” interpretation, in which his own power is receding.

Mather thus enjoins his listeners to “Be now at length effectually *Alarmed*, O Inhabitants of BOSTON, yea, and of the whole Country whereof this is the *Metropolis*” (TL 12). All of them stand accused of having “Earthly” hearts that in fact deserve the settler apocalypse for which earthquake always on some level stands: “*Let the Earth swallow them up; It has already swallow’d them up. They have changed their Center; The Earth is become their Center. Let them go down unto their Center!*” (TL 16). The center of the earth is—in Mather’s own language from the previous century and a pre-Enlightenment era—the realm of Black and Indigenous gods, site of the *powaws*’ devils making their unending war on Christians. And although Mather cannot or will not now in 1727 return to his demonology of Indigenous and Black populations in New England, he calls on the “*Rulers of Boston*” to see in the aftermath of the earthquake “a blameable Intermission of the Laudable and Excellent *Zeal*, with which the *Sword* in your Hands, is to be and sometimes has been, a *Terror to Evil-doers*”: “Syr, will you be prevailed withal, to *meet* and consult and contrive, what you may do, for the *Suppression of Disorders?*” (TL 25). Asking for the “*Correction of all Punishable Wickedness*,” Mather singles out especially “the stopping of that *Language of Fiends*, heard so often in our Streets,” and “the discountenancing of *Idleness*” (TL 25). Lest there be any confusion over who speaks this fiendish language and whose “*Idleness*” poses a problem, Mather calls on these Boston rulers to “be the *Phineas*’s, that shall *turn away the wrath of GOD* from the Congregation, and save it from a desolating *Earthquake*, by the *Zeal of GOD boiling* in you, which is now more loudly than ever called for” (TL 25). That is, Mather invokes a biblical hero who purged the Israelites of the contaminating idolatrous practices introduced by the Moabite and Midianite women, living in their midst, who had tempted them with illicit sexual unions and the power of other gods.¹⁰⁷ Desperately seeking to constrain the meanings of the earthquake, Mather rewrites his own predicted punishment of a mass settler devouring by the earth as the hope of a seismic regeneration by violence: “We find People *casting away their Idols*, when they see the *LORD arising to shake terribly the Earth*” (TL 34).

New England earthquakes, then, all along made manifest the possible agency of other gods and other relations to the earth. During the first decades of the eighteenth century, earthquakes also intensified the settler enlightenment propensity

of elites to try to discipline the responses of subordinates into a proper framework of Christian rationality. Soon after the 1727 earthquake, however, the movement of popular religious revivals known as the Great Awakening swept the British colonies and called that proper rational framework into question.¹⁰⁸ These revivals also opened a space, as Joanna Brooks puts it, for “the multiple, unnamed, unspecified indigenous African and indigenous American belief systems that survived in and through Christian practices”—and for Black and Indigenous thinkers and worshippers to speak with authority within various settler colonial public spheres about their experiences and their ways of knowing.¹⁰⁹ These ways of knowing did not assume, as Brooks observes, that “geographical spaces are empty of power, that historical time is empty and homogenous, and that the effects of colonialism are primarily anthropomorphic.”¹¹⁰ In New England as in other areas, enslaved Africans and their descendants often married into Native families, intertwining their own cosmologies and thought-worlds with those of their adopted kin. As Lisa Brooks has shown, these Native communities theorized “a cyclical, spatialized conception of deep time, permeating all spaces and temporalities” and engaged spiritually with an “awesome ‘light’ ... manifest in such forces as ‘Thunder, Earthquakes, Fights in the Aire, blazing stars, etc.,’ all representations of the Sky World” cosmology of the Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Lenape people.¹¹¹ They were not, as Cotton Mather had hoped and predicted, “*casting away their Idols*, when they see the *LORD arising to shake terribly the Earth*” but rather choosing their own new spiritual futures.

*

Perhaps it was inevitable that, by the middle of the century, the Anglo-American Enlightenment figure par excellence, Benjamin Franklin, would become a prime instigator in New England debates about earthquake. Franklin had taken a pointedly blasé attitude to the New England earthquakes as early as 1737, noting that any reader who absorbed the “horrible convulsions” of the 1692 Port Royal event “will have but little curiosity left for the less considerable phenomena” of smaller earthquakes, including the accounts of “those in New-England in 1663 and 1670 by Dr. Mather.”¹¹² If Franklin found Mather’s earthquake discussion on the humdrum side, he greatly enjoyed hearing about “the latest earthquake at Peru as described by a very ingenious Peruvian [he] lately met with in Paris.”¹¹³ But Franklin’s true point of entry into early New England earthquake history came with his invention of the lightning rod in 1752, when he intervened in the working of the natural world and dramatically redirected the luminous signs of the invisible agencies that controlled it. Franklin himself had made a concession to polytheism, the year after the 1727 earthquake as it turns out, in his “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion”: “I conceive then, that the Infinite has created many Beings or Gods, vastly superior to Man, who can better conceive his Perfections than we, and return him a more rational and glorious Praise.”¹¹⁴ Unlike the Sky World of

the Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Lenape, however, this Deist vision is premised on hierarchy rather than balance—and Franklin aimed to make his own “rational and glorious mark” among those “Beings or Gods.”¹¹⁵ Kant would famously call him the “Prometheus of the new era”—the man who stole lightning (and then, two decades later, helped win liberty for a new nation in a new world).¹¹⁶

But when the Cape Anne earthquake struck in 1755, Franklin’s lightning rods became the center of a public debate carried out between a Congregationalist pastor, Thomas Prince of the Old South Church in Boston, and a professor of mathematics and science at Harvard, John Winthrop, the great-great-grandson of the Bay colony founder.¹¹⁷ Like other ministers, Prince rushed to print with his interpretation of the earthquake, but he also had the distinct advantage of having already published an earlier tract on the subject after the New England earthquakes of 1727. The even more powerful 1755 earthquake at Cape Anne offered Prince the perfect opportunity to reprint his earlier work—and to update it with his theory that Franklin’s invention of the lightning rod was in fact “a *principal Instrument* in producing *Earthquakes*.”¹¹⁸ Prince’s theory was geophysical: “The more *Points of Iron* are erected round the *Earth*, to draw the *Electrical Substance* out of the *Air*; the more the *Earth* must needs be charged with it.”¹¹⁹ But it had a deeper theological point easily aligned with the Prometheus myth: “O! there is no getting out of the mighty Hand of GOD! If we think to avoid it in the *Air*, we cannot in the *Earth*: Yea it may grow more fatal; and there is no Safety anywhere.”¹²⁰ Only “by *heartily Repenting of every Sin* and *heartily embracing the Saviour in all his Offices*, and *uprightly Living to HIM*” might earthquake be avoided or at least met without further punishment. Boston had been “more dreadfully shaken” than other areas, Prince charged, because in that city of technological hubris lightning rods had been “more erected than any where else in *New England*.”¹²¹

Winthrop’s response to Prince offered a measured case against the theory, presented as a kind of public service announcement written by a “surprised and concerned” citizen who immediately foresaw its potential detrimental effects in “discourag[ing] the use of [lightning rods] in Boston and elsewhere” and thus leading to “those mischievous and sorrowful accidents, which we have so often seen to follow upon thunderstorms.”¹²² Taking apart Prince’s theory point by point, Winthrop explained first that the effects of an earthquake must be distinguished from its actual force in a given place. In Boston, he noted, “Some of the effects of the earthquake may have been more considerable, for their number, there than elsewhere; but the reason of this is not [lightning rods] but that there are more *brick houses* erected there.”¹²³ This was so, Winthrop argued, because “the effect of a shock is more considerable upon brick-work than upon wood-work,” as evidenced by the “chimneys being everywhere more shattered than anything else.”¹²⁴ Their substance, and “their being the highest parts of buildings,” had made the chimneys vulnerable to earthquake—not the dreaded “Hand of God” smiting down the sinfully erected “*Points of Iron*.”¹²⁵

Winthrop's rational approach and his use of "felt reports" as empirical evidence won him approbation at the time from the leading intellects of his day, including John Adams, and his role in the earthquake discussion has since earned him a reputation as the "father of seismology" and the continued admiration of historians of science.¹²⁶ But for the purposes of this chapter, it is Prince who gets the last word with his postulation that "it seems to be worthy of Consideration, whether *any Part* of the *Earth* being fuller of the terrible *Substance* may not be more exposed [than Boston] to more shocking *Earthquakes*."¹²⁷ This line resonates precisely because it would be impossible to say this in the next century—impossible even within a few weeks of this publication. For by the end of December 1755, the news had reached New England of the earthquake in Lisbon. If that catastrophe helped to rupture the rational optimism of the European Enlightenment, dramatically changing the course of Western philosophy, its effect upon the settler colonial American Enlightenment was markedly different. It would oversimplify to say that the Lisbon earthquake marked the birth of a uniquely American optimism. But it did usher in what Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur would call "a new sort of happiness"—a complex overlapping of metaphysics and psychological affect that would later have profound effects on the nineteenth-century US literary imagination.

Notes

1. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1747*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 2002), 61 (hereafter cited as *P*).
2. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (Moral Epistles to Lucilius), trans. Richard Mott Gummere, Loeb Classical Library, <https://topostext.org/work/736,53.3>.
3. See Ezekiel 38:19; Matthew 27:50–56; and Revelation 16:18.
4. *The Bay Psalm Book, Being a Facsimile Reprint of the First Edition, Printed by Stephen Daye at Cambridge, in New England in 1640*, introduced by Wilberforce Eames (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1905), n.p. (Psalms 67, 97, and 106, respectively).
5. *The Bay Psalm Book*, n.p. (Psalms 119 and 104).
6. Michael Wigglesworth, *The Day of Doom; or, a Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment...* (New York: American News Company, 1867), 25.
7. John Eliot, "A Letter to the Christian Reader," in *The Eliot Tracts: Letters from John Eliot to Thomas Thorowgood and Richard Baxter*, ed. Michael P. Clark (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 321, 324.
8. David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgement: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 71.
9. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 9–10.
10. The Puritan understanding of preternatural events such as earthquakes has been the subject of much historical and literary scholarship since Hall's *Worlds of Wonder*. See especially Ralph Bauer's "Science" on the interest in comets in puritan New England in *A History of American Puritan Literature*, ed. Kristina Bross and Abram Van Engen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 292–309.
11. Charles Morton, *Compendium Physicae* (Boston, MA: The Merrymount Press, 1940), 3.
12. Eliot, *A Brief Narrative of the Progress of the Gospel*, in *The Eliot Tracts*, 404.
13. Eliot, *A Brief Narrative*, 404.
14. Samuel Sewall, *Samuel Sewall's Diary*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York: Macy-Masius, 1927), 19.
15. Sewall, *Diary*, 107–108.
16. *Ibid.*, 108–109.

17. On the “new science–New World” paradigm more broadly, see especially Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1–22, and Bauer, “Science” and *Alchemy of Conquest*.
18. Morton, *Compendium Physicae*, 3.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 99.
22. Drew Lopenzina frames a recent essay around Wôpanâak and gives an essential history of Native Studies and decolonizing approaches to Puritan writings. See Lopenzina, “Native America: Taking a Step Back from Plymouth Rock,” in *A History of American Puritan Literature*, 37–54.
23. Bauer, *The Alchemy of Conquest: Science, Religion, and the Secrets of the New World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019), 41.
24. Sarah Rivett, *Indigenous Languages and the Origins of a Literary Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.
25. Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
26. Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip’s War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 13. Both Brooks’s concepts are also cited by Lopenzina (see note 22).
27. Seneca, *Physical Science in the Time of Nero: Being a Translation of the Quaestiones Naturales of Seneca*, trans. John Clarke, ed. Archibald Geikie (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1910), 225 (hereafter cited as NQ).
28. Rose Maclean, *Freed Slaves and Roman Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 93.
29. On the BCE Sicilian slave revolts, see chapters 1 and 3 of Svi Yavetz, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Rome* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988). On Delos and the slave trade, see Caitlín E. Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos: A Study in Hellenistic Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 7; and on the *latifundia* system in Sicily, see Sarah-Davis Secord, *Where Three Worlds Met* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 13, 14, 69.
30. Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, volume 2 (London: William Heinemann; New York: GP Putnam’s, 1917), 87:2.
31. Andrew J. Bayliss, *The Spartans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 125.
32. On the Pequot War and New England slavery, see Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).
33. John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649*, ed. Richard S. Dunn and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 257–258.
34. Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop*, 258.
35. Ibid.
36. Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Savior in New England*, introduced by William Frederick Poole (Andover: Warren P. Draper, 1867), 131 (hereafter cited as W).
37. Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 74.
38. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).
39. Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Mrs. Hutchinson,” in *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Volume 12*, ed. George Parsons Lathrop and Julian Hawthorne (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 222, 225.
40. Winthrop, “A Short Story of the Rise, reign and ruine of the Antinomians, Familists, and Libertines,” in *The Antinomian Controversy 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, ed. Hall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 307 (hereafter cited as R).
41. See Brooks’s excellent analysis of the Hutchinson family’s history in Rhode Island, recontextualized within a nuanced Native-centered history in *Our Beloved Kin*.
42. Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 85, 47.
43. Ibid., 146.
44. See also Michelle Burnham’s *Folded Selves: Colonial New England Writing in the World System* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014) on the project of placing settler New England writing within the capitalist world-economy that grew out of the European plunder of the Americas in the long sixteenth century.
45. Increase Mather had written briefly about earthquakes before this in his *Kometographia or, a Discourse Concerning Comets* (1682). On the thematic predominance of earthquake in Puritan

- theology see, among others, Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 31–66.
46. Mather, *A Discourse Concerning Earthquakes* (Boston, MA: Timothy Green, 1706), 13 (hereafter cited as D).
 47. Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Cotton Mather's Spanish Lessons: A Story of Language Race and Belonging in the Early Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 53.
 48. Gruesz, *Cotton Mather's Spanish Lessons*, 32–35.
 49. On Queen Anne's War, see Howard H. Peckham, *The Colonial Wars, 1689–1762* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967) and Michael G. Laramie, *The European Invasion of North America: Colonial Conflict along the Hudson-Champlain Corridor, 1609–1760* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012).
 50. Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, *Captors and Captives: The 1704 French and Indian Raid on Deerfield* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 1.
 51. The classic study of an English captive who refused to leave behind her Indigenous life is told in John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Vintage, 1995).
 52. On the intersection of African and Indigenous slavery, see Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016) as well as Gruesz, *Cotton Mather's Spanish Lessons*, discussed earlier in this chapter, 101–120.
 53. Emmanuele Downing to Winthrop, in *Winthrop Papers, 1498–1634*, ed. Allyn B. Forbes et al., 6 vols. (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929–1992), 5:38.
 54. On Grotius's influence on Puritan writers (and their ownership of his works), see Nan Goodman, *The Puritan Cosmopolis: The Law of Nations and the Early American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12–13.
 55. See Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44–45.
 56. Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace* [*De Iure Belli ac Pacis*], 2:9: I–II (hereafter cited as *L* by book, chapter, and section number).
 57. See the compelling argument in Saliha Belmessous, *Empire by Treaty: Negotiating European Expansion, 1600–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 25–29.
 58. On the concept of degeneration, see especially the introduction and the terminological and bibliographic notes in Bauer and José Antonio Mazzotti, *Creole Subjects in the Colonial Americas: Empires, Texts, Identities* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1–60.
 59. See, for example, Stephanie E. Smallwood, “Reflections on Settler Colonialism, the Hemispheric Americas, and Chattel Slavery,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2019): 407–416.
 60. See Ben Hughes, *Apocalypse 1692: Empire, Slavery, and the Great Port Royal Earthquake* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2017).
 61. See Matthew Mulcahey, “The Port Royal Earthquake and the World of Wonders in Seventeenth-Century Jamaica,” *Early American Studies* 6 (2008): 391–421 (esp. 391–393).
 62. Cotton Mather to John Cotton, August 5, 1692, in *Diary of Cotton Mather*, vol. 1, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (Boston, MA: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1911), 142 (hereafter cited as *CM*).
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The Settler Colonial Sublime

After the news of the Lisbon cataclysm of 1755 arrived in the North American colonies, New England's earthquake crises no longer seemed quite so shocking. But Lisbon yielded more than a new standard for making earthquake comparisons. For if this European catastrophe changed the course of Western philosophy, according to that tradition's own grand narrative, the Lisbon earthquake also gave shape to a new national figure across the Atlantic: in Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's memorable words, the "American, this new man."¹ As this chapter will suggest, Crèvecoeur's new "American" emerged out of the very premise that Voltaire had articulated in his own Lisbon writing: that "the north will enrich itself" on the catastrophes of the south. With Voltaire as both his model and his point of departure, Crèvecoeur summoned the Iberian earthquake as the key to his invention of America—as the elsewhere catastrophe that generated the exculpatory moral myth and then the implosive reality of his adopted homeland.

The geographic tradition upon which Crèvecoeur drew to invent his version of America was an old one adapted to new needs. Western culture and philosophy had long presumed the existence of a catastrophic South, a torrid zone uninhabitable by humans, as Aristotle argues, and morally marked by its distance from the philosophical ideal of the temperate.² When Satan falls to the earth in Dante's *Commedia*, it is the northern hemisphere that is raised up by its moral recoil from evil, the southern that sinks like Atlantis into the sea. By the time of the Lisbon earthquake, these understandings had been subsumed into the modern Western phenomenon of "tropicality," as Nicolás Wey Gómez has described it: an obsession with southern regions and a habit of viewing them as the source of endless riches as well as the site of moral and geographic turmoil—a region plagued by the same earthquakes that attract Dante's curiosity in the *Inferno*.³

The Lisbon catastrophe marked the region's southerly moral distance from a European North—and yet the sudden and spectacular earthquake in Portugal, as I suggested in [Chapter 2](#), was always closely tied to the already centuries-long catastrophe of conquest and slavery shaping the modern world. As Voltaire suggested, an underground train of sulfur joined the Lisbon earthquake inexorably to its own prior South in Peru: the Lima–Callao earthquake of 1746. Reprising its earlier Peruvian doppelganger, the Lisbon earthquake came to embody northern, Protestant Europe's moral judgment on the broader Iberian South and its acquisition of imperial wealth from the Americas. In the words of one English minister

after the Lisbon catastrophe, “*Think, O Spain, O Portugal, of the millions of poor Indians that your forefathers butchered for the sake of gold.*”⁴

This foundational elsewhere catastrophe, deeply colonial in its meanings and real-world implications, yielded a philosophical form of predatory optimism in the European North. It also gave rise to a new aesthetic concept that is the focus of this chapter. In the immediate aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake, Edmund Burke was formulating the concept of the sublime in his *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Like the new discourse around Lisbon, Burke’s idea also worked through doubled bearings: by sliding between the realms of art and reality, nature and politics, one place and another, all of which were conjoined, like Lisbon and Lima, by a subterranean, sulfurous train. Nothing sublime—no earthquake—ever exists in isolation and only in itself, for such a phenomenon always hinges on what Burke calls “a sort of substitution,” a sympathetic transfer by which a feeling subject imaginatively emplaces himself in a catastrophic elsewhere in order to envision the suffering of another.⁵

Burke’s now famous question regarding this sublime doubling—*Why does this substitution produce delight?*—was in fact premised on imagining earthquake striking London instead of the Portuguese city to the south: “This noble capital, the pride of England and of Europe, I believe no man is so strangely wicked as to desire to see destroyed by a conflagration or an earthquake” (SB 41). And yet wherever it might occur, as Burke recognizes, such destruction would inevitably draw “numbers from all parts ... crowd[ing] to behold” peril and suffering (SB 41). He surmises therefore that “danger and pain ... at certain distances, and with certain modifications” induce pleasure in the viewer: “they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (SB 41). Burke cannot reach quite the degree of perversity by which a person might *hope* for London’s demolition by an earthquake, but he believes the sight of it would strangely thrill those safe from the danger themselves.

Burke was also writing *An Account of the European Settlement of America* while composing his *Philosophical Enquiry*. In the *Account*, he notes the “lively colors” in which the vast destruction of the 1692 earthquake in Port Royal, Jamaica was described by surviving witnesses.⁶ He also describes the 1746 Lima–Callao earthquake—in which the inhabitants “ran from their houses in terror and confusion ... a cry of *Miserere ris[ing]* from all parts of the city”—as “the most perfect and terrible that may be conceived” (SB 34). The passage suggests that it may even have been Lima rather than Lisbon that provided Burke’s model of an earthquake sublime, occurring as it did at an even greater southerly “distance,” and with even further disidentifying “modification.”

When the French Revolution broke out, Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) called the conflict a “general earthquake in the political world.”⁷ But he found no strange delight in this political version of the sublime with all its

attendant shock and spectacle. Instead, he deployed the same locational substitution upon which the sublime always depends to better condemn the revolution. Forecasting doom and destruction as the only outcome of this European “political earthquake,” Burke reached sublimely southward and compared the French revolutionaries to “a gang of Maroon slaves, suddenly broke loose from the house of bondage” in the colony of Saint Domingue.⁸ Subsequent readers have credited Burke for accurately predicting the Reign of Terror. But despite his logic of southerly geographic doubling, he failed to anticipate a far more radical “political earthquake”: the Haitian Revolution that produced what Kamau Brathwaite once called “the greatest and most successful Maroon polity of them all.”⁹

The twinned American inflections of the Lisbon earthquake and the French Revolution lie at the heart of Burke’s notion of the sublime. As it recrossed the Atlantic, the sublime helped define a broadly American literary history often characterized by critics as a tradition of “more drastic sublimities than Europe”—a tradition virtually made by the so-called American sublime.¹⁰ And how could this not be so? For the Burkean sublime offered a concise and powerful formulation of elsewhere catastrophe—of distant suffering and calamity *there*, which affirms the rightness of *here*—long before it became a national US syndrome facilitating historical forgetting. Indeed, the Burkean sublime was always silently premised on the “more drastic sublimities” of colonialism in the New World and, like the Lisbon-derived narrative of modern Western thought itself, on a broad disavowal of very different meanings and understandings of catastrophe emanating from places such as Haiti or Lima.¹¹

This chapter takes up what I call the settler colonial sublime, an early aesthetic expression of elsewhere catastrophe exemplified in the writings of Crèvecoeur and especially his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782).¹² Recent research has newly illuminated the shape-shifting figure born in France as Michel Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, whose intentions and sympathies were never transparent to anyone. James P. Myers has argued that the debate over his British versus colonial American allegiances during the revolutionary war has distracted us from the more likely possibility that he was serving as a spy for the French all along.¹³ My own view, shaped by Gerald Horne’s revisionist history of the American Revolution, is that Crèvecoeur was driven less by national or political affiliation than by the will to maximize the potential payoffs of, and mitigate the losses incurred by, investment in his chosen identity as a naturalized English settler, planter, and enslaver.¹⁴ Like many in the broader group of merchant class and aristocratic Europeans of his age, he took whatever position he needed to at any given moment to advance his interests in accruing wealth and maintaining his access to land and property. This imperative shaped as well his work as a cartographer, surveyor, and author with a keen interest in describing and classifying disparate parts of the hemisphere while defining the emergent American republic. Crèvecoeur’s future within that republic may have been unclear when he published the first edition of

Letters. But it is hard to disagree with the anonymous eighteenth-century English reader who left a scribbled trace in the margins of his own first edition opining that the whole “design of the book, was principally to encourage Foreigners to emigrate and settle in America.”¹⁵ This is the whole point of the *Letters*—and the point even of the last letter bemoaning the “catastrophe” of the revolution (*L* 203). To further this goal, Crèvecoeur developed a version of the settler sublime founded on the perceived immunity of the “American, this new man” to the world’s literal and metaphoric seismic events.

American Beauty and the “Rock of Lisbon”

In June 1770—long before he published what became his famous third epistle, “What is an American?”—Crèvecoeur penned an odd essay he titled “Rock of Lisbon,” set in the aftermath of the 1755 earthquake. By this point Crèvecoeur had lived in New York for just over a decade, taking colonial English citizenship and adopting the Anglophone form of his name over the French one (John Hector St. John replacing Michel Guillaume). In the same year that he wrote “Rock of Lisbon,” apparently, Crèvecoeur also took a native-born wife from New York and began creating an American-born family.

The unnamed narrator of “Rock of Lisbon” (which remained in manuscript until its publication in 1995 by Dennis Moore) may or may not be aligned with Crèvecoeur himself, but he must certainly be distinguished from the fictional, Anglo-American “Farmer James” who narrates most of *Letters from an American Farmer*, published in London twelve years later, in 1782. James, American-born, never journeys farther from Pennsylvania than Charleston, South Carolina, and then only as an older, established farmer. The narrator of “Rock of Lisbon,” on the other hand, describes a journey to Portugal taken in his youth. Moore takes this and other early manuscript writings as evidence that the young Crèvecoeur had wider and more sophisticated ambitions than the narrowly American sensibility that apparently structures the 1782 *Letters*.¹⁶ But we might just as accurately say that it is this putative cosmopolitan perspective—specifically, a point of view developed in consideration of the Lisbon earthquake—that enables the American account that fictional Farmer James will later narrate.

The narrator of “Rock of Lisbon” locates himself physically in America, where he ascends “one of the highest mountains” near the Hudson and experiences along the way competing and often deceptive views of his surroundings. At the outset of the journey, the mountain appears “smooth and of an easy ascent”; the narrator believes himself to be in the realm of beauty and pleasure (*R* 192). But the ascent soon draws him toward the obscurity of the sublime. The mountain is full of “thick swamps and deep morasses,” while the wild laurels, “by their extreme crooked ramification,” obfuscate the path forward. The narrator moves rapidly from the

mundane to the lofty, from the contemplation of “gloomy shores” to a vertiginous perspective on an entire American hemisphere. Here are the “Endless Mountains in Pennsylvania,” the chain that runs from “the shores of Labrador” in Canada to the “Isthmus of Darien, [and] from thence like a great hoop encircling the continent of South America even to Cape Horn” (R 192-93)—a hemispheric vision that evokes its transatlantic counterpart:

The eye had nothing to contemplate but a huge, rough continent, a wide waste of trees, a perpetual forest. I can't say that from this spot I enjoyed any of those pleasing sensations which richer landscapes usually afford in Europa, where the soil is in full cultivation and where what trees there are appear to have been purposefully planted, either for ornamentation or profit. But if my eyes were not feasted with that luxury of objects, that diversity of imagery, I felt a sudden propensity to musing and to contemplation, which is a sentiment almost new to me. My ideas were vague, but they were of a more elevated kind than any I had felt before. I cannot express, without fear or affectation, the new sort of happiness which this spot afforded me. (R 192-93)

The passage proffers a familiar colonial opposition: New World wilderness versus Old World cultivation, the impoverished visual register of the American continent versus the “richer landscapes” of “Europa,” with its art and commerce. As during the ascent, the contrast hinges on Burke's aesthetic dualism. The remembered European landscape is beautiful, with its variety or “diversity” and its ornamentation; the American view, by contrast, is sublime, with a scale and surface that are huge and rough. But if the narrator follows the familiar outline of an eighteenth-century aesthetic, he also complicates it almost beyond recognition. Relegating Old World beauty to what Burke called “the secondary pleasures of the imagination,” to a realm in his memory, the narrator further associates this secondary pleasure with the inferior mode of viewing arising from thoughts of the value of what is viewed (the remembered landscape's association with “profit” and “luxury”) (*SB* 23). Crèvecoeur thus ensures that the remembered European landscape will offer “nothing of a studious or contemplative kind,” as Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), for example, would define the experience of beauty.¹⁷

The sublimity of the American landscape, then, offers what the memory of European beauty, with its doubly inferior form of pleasure, cannot. But as Crèvecoeur well knew—his narrator's intermittent paraphrase of Burke is unmistakable—the sublime does not excite “any idea of positive pleasure,” as Burke himself would put it (*SB* 30). The sublime famously excites the “passions which belong to self-preservation [and] turn on pain and danger,” producing a “delight” that occurs “when we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances” (*SB* 33). If Burke privileges the delight of the sublime over the pleasure

of the beautiful, Crèvecoeur turns to a third term that finds no place in Burke's aesthetic theory: happiness. If the vast American panorama fails to induce either pleasure or delight, it nevertheless offers something better: an emergent American sentiment yielded by and exceeding sensory experience, and generously "afforded" by the very spot in which he now stands.

What is this "new sort of happiness" rooted in the opposition of European beauty and the American sublime? The opposition is indeed so familiar, so commonsensically linked to enduring ideas about what it means to view uncultivated landscape, that it is easy to miss the complex constituency of elements that make up the new American affect imagined here. Crèvecoeur's essay argues for the distinctiveness of a signal American affect that would have been broadly familiar to eighteenth-century readers. If European intellectuals concerned themselves with the idea of happiness as a new secular and political affect, the era's Anglo-American political writers habitually drew on British moral sense theory and political philosophy to cast America as the emergent site of this new affective ideal in its most realized form: the land of "a fairer opportunity for political happiness, than any other Nation has ever been favored with," as George Washington put it, and where the "pursuit of happiness" would be enshrined in the Declaration of Independence.¹⁸ "Rock of Lisbon" thus offers an early contribution to what John Adams would by 1776 call "the science of social happiness"—and it does so by contemplating a massive earthquake.¹⁹

Crèvecoeur marks the happiness he describes as precisely philosophical: "a sudden propensity to ... contemplation," grounded in a series of vague ideas that are nevertheless "more elevated" than any he has had before. He registers this philosophical position as a possible result of either physiology or geography, or perhaps the interplay between them—"aris[ing] from the extraordinary purity of the air" or "the great peculiarity" of the landscape his eye takes in. The essay ponders even whether this sensory acuteness itself has sharpened as a result of the narrator's new position, producing not New World degeneration but regeneration of the sensory organs themselves: "Perhaps our elevation on those great protuberances of earth improves our faculties as it enlarges our powers of perception" (R 194). This evocation of "imperial eyes," in Mary Louise Pratt's phrase, produces a clear relation of mastery on the part of an idealized "spectator," now summoned into the essay, and the landscape upon which he gazes.²⁰ Yet like the British moral sense philosophers, Crèvecoeur is also trying to understand the physiological constitution of vision and its affective and philosophical import within a larger sensory network.

Unlike his British counterparts, though, Crèvecoeur is describing here a settler colonial visual system embracing the unnamed spectator, the objects he perceives, and the modes of perception themselves. Like all such systems, this "American" one has both hidden and false affordances in addition to its perceptible ones. The essay trains the reader's eye—"Can I tell you what I saw?"—on what the landscape ostensibly offers: "the embryo of nations, containing the habitations of a people

as yet in the infancy of their civil society.” Now the landscape discloses something new, the “wide waste of trees” yielding to “a half-tilled continent.” The panorama of wilderness gives way to a scene of settler population and inhabitation in process for a century and a half and yet still in a state of pastoral nascence. The “perpetual forest” reveals both its true value and its actual limitation; it provides the material for constructing the colonial society that, unlike the finite trees and land, stretches in the narrator’s imagination into endless futurity. The narrator’s particular visual project is thus to manage the various affordances of what is viewed in their relation to what is obscured, and to convert what his putative “spectator” cannot yet see—“the labor of thousands and the toil of ages” that would “regale” him while viewing “Europa”—into a source of new philosophical value. The spectator’s “mind,” the narrator promises, will be “amply remunerated by a variety of the most pleasing thoughts.” But the profitable economic transaction embedded in this visual process produces a heightened philosophical state nevertheless defined by a continual desire for more: by the “wish ... to pervade the works of nature on a more ample scale” and to be “raised still higher in order to view” not just “a considerable part” of the American landscape but “a large part of the world at one glance” (R 194).

The “new sort of happiness” described by the narrator is thus predicated on viewing not just America but an America that is simultaneously and insistently global: America alongside a sublimely catastrophic elsewhere. This inherently comparative geographic structure is central to the settler visual-philosophical system as Crèvecoeur elaborates it; the narrator’s affective claim on a sublime American landscape requires not just the minor foil of European beauty, it turns out, but the stark opposition to a different and more distant sublime in an earthquake-stricken South. For at this point in the essay, the narrator, who cannot achieve a higher spatial location, reaches temporally back to an earlier moment in his memory to juxtapose his mountainous American view with the sightline from another promontory on the westernmost point of Europe, in Lisbon, Portugal: the Cabo da Roca.

This remembered southern landscape initially offers “a collection of beauties” that the narrator finds lacking in his present American location; the Lisbon view offers more to please the eye with its “sumptuous collection of objects”: “a well-cultivated continent, an extensive sea, beautiful promontories, ruins, shades, cascades, salubrity of air” (R 194). Lacking the “pencil of an artist” to draw what may be seen, the narrator takes up the writer’s powers to disclose what is not seen; he mars the beauty of the Lisbon landscape by asserting its invisible origins, its creation by “the enervated sinews of wretches”: the “oppressed Portuguese,” devolved from the “fair race of Man” (R 194-205). If the narrator attributes this unseen tableau of European degeneration to the first cause of bad government—“baleful tyranny” and “mistaken rule”—he also associates Portugal with proximity to Africa. The “old venerable castle” not far from his promontory betrays “the good taste of the African conquerors who founded it”—although the “southern

inhabitants of Europa,” “dwarfed into pygmies,” are not qualified to view it with appreciation (R 205). Directing the reader’s gaze to these layers of Lisbon memory and association, the narrator performs a sleight of hand: his pretense that the sublime American landscape, in sharp contrast to Lisbon’s, has nothing to hide given the “strong hands of Liberty” shaping its history and future (R 194).

Crèvecoeur’s narrator in effect draws on the memory of “seeing” the imperial history of Portugal in Lisbon—and from there “trac[ing] the whole breadth of the kingdom of Spain”—in order to *unsee* the history of conquest across the American landscape in which he is actually located (R 199). With this familiar act of geographic-moral displacement, Crèvecoeur also registers a crucial historical point. “Who would believe,” the narrator asks about the contemporary Portuguese, “that *these* are the descendants of the bold discoverers and navigators of the African coast and of the Indian Ocean, that these are the sons of those who conquered there so many nations and founded so many establishments?” (R 205). The contemptuous question dismisses contemporary “southern ... Europa” while disavowing the history of conquest, colonialism, and slavery underlying Crèvecoeur’s own view of the American continent. Yet it also discloses that transoceanic slavery in the Indian Ocean world preceded the very history of transatlantic slavery that the narrator refuses to acknowledge: that the Portuguese developed the model for the plantation labor used throughout the Americas not in Brazil but in the archipelagic region of Macaronesia bridging Europe and Africa. The Portuguese had become enslavers of Africans by 1441 and—as Tiffany Lethabo King and Hortense Spillers have clarified—virtually handed to Columbus the dream of finding an “Afro-India” for Spain.²¹ By the time Portugal began the large-scale enslavement and mass forced movement of Africans to Brazil, to supplement the practice of Indigenous slavery, it had already developed the Indian Ocean slave trade to Portuguese India or Estado da Índia.²² The emergence of slavery in the Americas was not the terrible byproduct of New World discovery and creation, in other words, but its point.

For Crèvecoeur’s narrator, however, these interlocking histories comprise a representational inheritance within the visual system he elaborates from his American mountain. “Where can human sight be regaled with so splendid a feast,” he asks, as from the Rock of Lisbon overlooking the “Castilian continent” and—beyond that and seen by “the use of telescopes”—“[the Iberian] Calpé and [the North African] Abila?” (R 199). The spectator thus arrives at “the boundaries of the Atlantic, the great gate of the Mediterranean” as if to pass through the famed Pillars of Hercules by visual means alone (R 199). In this weighty entrance, he will receive the inheritance of knowledge promised by the engraved title page of Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* and the noble legacy of English empiricism and Protestant Enlightenment more broadly.

From the heights of the North American mountain, Crèvecoeur’s narrator thereby enacts what Ralph Bauer has called the White Legend of English imperial history and destiny, which depended for coherence upon the corresponding Black

Legend of Iberian colonial cruelty.²³ The narrator claims this legacy of enlightened knowledge as distinct from what he casts as Iberian philosophical stagnation in gloomy superstition and the “national shackles [that] imprison and confine the minds of men” (R 201). But he does so while *also* inheriting the representational spoils of Iberia: “This is the great sea which opens the wide route to the richest parts of the world ... This is the way by which Europa receives the spoils of the Indian shores, the ivory crops of Africa, the bread of America” (R 200). If America has now become a site not of self-owned labor but rather of colonial wealth for importation to Europe, aligned with India and Africa, then the narrator himself is the visual beneficiary, his imperial eye taking in all from his New York mountaintop. He announces himself as a “northern traveler” more suited to the appreciation of this grand inheritance than the degraded people of “southern Europa”: “There I bathed in their sea, I fed on the rarest fruit ... I milked at the door the gentle goat, I ate the sweetest of grapes” (R 203). With this ritual self-anointment to the seat of the Mediterranean world and its ancient philosophical wisdom, the Anglo-American Enlightenment narrator claims the representational wealth of imperial Europe while also exempting Anglo-America from conquest as well as colonialism’s constitutive fragility.

Earthquake is the recurring, disavowed sign of this fragility. And in the visual system that Crèvecoeur elaborates, earthquake figures the inherent instability of imperial power as a seismic catastrophe that defines what America is not by means of the sublime. Looking out from his American mountaintop, the narrator beholds Lisbon and summons the memory of its destruction by earthquake. This remembered Lisbon embodies disaster not in one instance but across time, in perpetuity. His narrator observes the obvious historical referent of the century—“the great convulsion which the earth suffered in 1755 when 60,000 people fell a sacrifice to it”—but also draws our eye to the distant historical past suggested by architectural evidence: “the vestiges of some ancient catastrophe of which no trace remains and no conjecture can be formed” (R 195). And this future is already historically known: “Once the seat of power, pleasure, and pomp,” Lisbon is but the “majestic ruins of a great city” and even “now trembling on its foundations and ready to receive from the first great impulse the last and final overthrow” (R 204). Lisbon’s disaster is both perpetual and recursive.

This is the essence of the settler sublime. The envisioned horrid desolation of earthquake in southerly Lisbon becomes the source of the “northern” spectator’s peculiarly American “new sort of happiness”; Lisbon’s destruction defines America’s imagined immunity from seismic catastrophe. In Lisbon, “everyone is born to pray, to fear, and to tremble at the sight of divine wrath” (R 205). The narrator can contemplate the Lisboans’ ostensible terror of an angry God with anti-Catholic skepticism—even as he also points an accusing finger at the purported source of the divine fury, calling it “a wrath incurred much more by [Portugal’s] perverse masters than by the passive suffering people” (R 205). The

contradiction registers the northern spectator's implied theodicy, his vindication of divine providential oversight despite the ongoing destruction of the innocent. Earthquake is visited upon "masters" and suffering people alike—but visits only in the superstitious South, where men are born without the narrator's self-identified visual-philosophical abilities.

If the lowly Portuguese "tremble at the sight" of the sublime, the northern narrator exercises proper visual detachment: he is a connoisseur of every "superb spectacle such as few men can well enjoy as digest" (R 199). The narrator's salient qualities as a spectator emerge precisely while viewing "*not* a landscape such as we see in common," but the experience of pain and suffering that sets the observer apart from the observed (R 199). Thus the narrator recalls observing the Lisbon harbor from the comfort of his promontory and noting that "the high gale, so dangerous to the ships [below], is to the beholder but a shifting of the scene": the threatened catastrophe borne by the tempest—like the giant earthquake-driven wave that decimated Lisbon in 1755—"rather enhances the spectacle from above" (R 200). Imbued with proper moral sentiments, this "humane spectator" experiences the power of sublime transposition: he is, at least momentarily, "embittered by that sympathy of feelings" that transports him imaginatively onto the deck of the imperiled ship and into the very "breast of the distressed" sailors below (R 200).

But this act of substitution is also what lends the scene of imminent disaster its "enhanced" and globally shifting value: the changing financial fortunes that the scene represents in miniature and that its "northern" and "American" viewer inherits from Lisbon's catastrophe. For before the "humane spectator" has left his imagined spot on the ship's deck and in the breast of the sailor facing death—before the sentence proper has even finished—he has already cast his eye out to the "great sea" and the "wide route to the richest parts of the world" (R 200). The narrator may be located in New York enjoying the humble "bread of America," in other words; but with his mind's eye on the destruction of Lisbon, he develops a philosophical and deeply acquisitive relation to the "spoils of the Indian shores" and the "ivory crops of Africa." It is not just Portugal encapsulated in this remembered view but "the whole breadth of the kingdom of Spain," the "Castilian continent," quickly sketched with a few broad strokes of the Black Legend (R 199). The "enhanced spectacle" offered by Lisbon's earthquake becomes a proxy for the whole Iberian colonial domain, for a disastrous Global South from which the "American, this new man" will inherit his riches.

By the essay's conclusion, the narrator can look from Lisbon back again to America, which has arisen on Iberia's "decay" and left the Iberians themselves "nothing but the musty fame of being first discoverers" (R 205). The "new sort of happiness" can now be claimed as nothing less than "the happiness of human nature" itself—a northern and American universal defined by earthquake-ravaged Lisbon. Bursting into verse as he returns to his New York mountaintop, the narrator leaves behind

the realm of the southern sublime and approaches the traditional aesthetic home of happiness: the American beautiful—"where eternal pleasure in thy presence reigns" (R 205).

Torrid Zones of the Americas

Soon after writing the Lisbon essay, Crèvecoeur turned to his "Sketch of the Contrast Between the Spanish and the English Colonies" and imagined a great Iberian transfer of wealth already underway. The future of the English colonies now rivals "the great Fifth Monarchy" of Portugal: an American destiny rising from the ashes of the Lisbon earthquake.²⁴ But it is Lima rather than Lisbon that provides this later sketch its foundational point of contrast with Anglo-American well-being—the calamitous foil where "hands [are] polluted with crimes, covered with the filth of idleness" while the English colonies emerge in stark opposition as a settler colonial utopia (SC 308). Pennsylvania is the felicitous "Peru of North America," according to this scheme, modeling a beneficent invasion whereby the settler "treats the savages as his brethren and friends" and acquires in equitable trade the "lands they knew not how to cultivate" (SC 305).

The crudeness of the sketch's Black Legend-inspired binaries makes it easy to overlook some of its more telling oddities and contradictions, which disclose the early Crèvecoeur working through the problems he will have to resolve in order to create *Letters from an American Farmer*. One of these is what he calls the "Grand National Problem" of extracting labor—or rather, as he argues, the "hatred" of working and the corresponding "love of idleness" in South America—"from whence flow every subsequent corollary" problem at work in the Spanish colonies. What follows from this claim is an ambiguous and contradictory disquisition on the divergent racial demography of the two Americas:

The mass of their society is composed of the descendants of the ancient conquerors and conquered, of slaves and of such a variety of castes and shades as never before were exhibited on any part of the Earth, which it appears never can live in a sufficient degree of harmony so as to carry on with success extensive schemes of industry. 'Tis here alone that all these tribes by the benignity of the laws would anamalgam themselves together in a few generations and become one people. There, under their present government, 'tis impossible; its malignity would look on it as imprudent and impolitic. (SC 308)

The opposition of Spanish idleness and English industry is familiar enough; so too is the marked attention to the proliferation of racial variety in South America as a feature of natural history to be "exhibited" for a northern spectator. Yet Crèvecoeur offers here a scenario of harmonious racial amalgamation in the North American

colonies that sets it apart from its southern counterpart—at least conditionally. Crèvecoeur does not say that such amalgamation *will* occur, but he proposes it as the racial solution that the English colonies have the political capacity to achieve, and that the Spanish colonies by contrast lack. Only in the new America, and not in the “ancient” Spanish one, can “all these tribes,” including those taken from Africa to constitute an enslaved labor force, “become one people” through generational reproduction. What Crèvecoeur tests out here is the logic of *mestizaje avant la lettre*—a logic that will, ironically, become a nationalizing discourse in the future Iberian-American republics and a collective sign of putative difference from the (Anglo-)American US. To see Crèvecoeur articulate the project of *mestizaje* here as a hypothetical future for the English colonies in opposition to the Spanish ones is to recognize the historical contingency and mutability of all hemispheric discourses that use the two Americas as racialized foils for one another in order to elide a shared history of slavery, dispossession, and racial violence. This insight bears on contemporary scholarly approaches as well: as Kirsten Silva Gruesz puts it, “frameworks based on ... contrasts between the two Americas, ‘North’ and ‘South,’ will miss the most important elements of the hemispheric substrate of colonialism and race.”²⁵

One can surmise from the ambiguous possessive of Crèvecoeur’s last statement in the passage and the odd personification of “malignity” that he himself cannot decide whether his own racial projection is inevitable or “impossible,” progressive or “imprudent and impolitic.” Certainly, by the time he writes his famous description of the “American” in the third of his *Letters* as the product of “all nations ... melted into a new race of men”—“hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country” (L 31)—he has reconsidered his earlier racial vision of precisely how the disparate populations of the English colonies might “an amalgam themselves together ... and become one people.” The language of reproductive novelty and benignity remains much the same, but gone are the “conquered” and the “slaves,” and with them “the variety of castes and shades.” An “American” is “*either* an European or the descendant of a European”—a racial formulation that is not simply a Eurocentric overlooking of the African and Indigenous populations of the English colonies but a self-conscious overwriting of an earlier formulation rooted in the potential mixture of Europeans with these same groups (L 31). In other words, Crèvecoeur’s vision of the American as a “new race” springing up on the ground of the North American colonies is in fact a re-vision: not an originary but an alternative settler discourse that aims to resolve for the English colonies and emergent US nation the “Grand National Problem” of extracting labor, and the corollary problem of taking land, by developing a racial logic that sets apart the Spanish colonies as an even starker foil.

We can see the instability of this foil again in a later moment in “Sketches of the Contrast” in which Crèvecoeur further elaborates the Spanish colonists’ purported tendency to idleness. Here he draws directly on the reputation of the torrid

zone for both riches—"the greatest treasures of nature"—and inhabitants naturally disposed to servitude: for the settlers in the Spanish colonies live "surrounded by so many slaves ... that they naturally must be more effeminate." All these features are familiar staples of Black Legend historiography. What instantly defamiliarizes this passage, however, is Crèvecoeur's summary explanation of how and why these Spanish settlers arrived at their current state of creole degeneration: "They have been so long sheltered from the ravages of war and have enjoyed so interruptedly the sweets of repose that they are no longer Spaniards." In Crèvecoeur's imagination, that is, the Spanish colonists lapse into creole effeminacy once they are no longer engaged in military conquest, no longer putting down slave revolts or attacks on their settler outposts. Standing in unspoken contrast here, the English colonies are "fit to undertake arduous enterprises, commercial schemes, [and] rural improvements" precisely because they are still engaged in their own wars of conquest: honed by ongoing violence into proper colonial masculinity (SC 309).

The difference between Spanish and English colonization, as Crèvecoeur sees it, hinges on the full century separating their inauguration of transatlantic colonial projects. Casting that difference in quite different terms, he ends his sketch with a paean to the historical moment of English imperial consolidation: "How happy for mankind that the era of their different foundations was that of knowledge and science." If imperial belatedness is reformulated here as a fortunate English colonial Enlightenment, this "happy regeneration for mankind" occurs alongside the ongoing violence of settler wars, which keep the Anglo-American from descending into Spanish Creole indolence (SC 309). Crèvecoeur does not mention these Indigenous wars—not until the last of his *Letters from an American Farmer*, and the "Frontier Woman" sketch upon which it is based, when they burst forth in what we now call the American Revolution. But the wars are always there silently shaping his conception of the "American" man against the foil of the Spanish Creole enjoying the "sweets of repose" that attend a long-established colonial rule. Crèvecoeur's apparent belief in the stability of Spanish colonialism, temporally far beyond "the ravages of war," was of course a matter of perspective; an Andean writer such as Guaman Poma or Garcilaso, explored in [Chapter 3](#), might offer a different estimation of the spatiotemporal qualities of colonialism, its *longue durée*, and its exemption from violence, war, and radical change: *pachacuti* or world upside-down. Crèvecoeur would eventually come to question Anglo-American immunity from earthquake, and to acknowledge settler colonialism's constitutive fragility across the globe, as he confronted the convulsions of the American Revolution. But he spent a great deal of authorial effort trying to believe in the inherent solidity of the north American settler colonial world along the way.

Crèvecoeur's 1773 sketch "Jamaica and the Bermudas" offers a case in point. Framed as a sentimental letter to an unnamed friend and moral advisor, this strange text offers a series of English colonial oppositions that trouble the easy foil embodied by the Spanish colonies in "Sketches of the Contrast." The narrator

begins by contrasting Pennsylvania with the “Northern” provinces from which he writes.²⁶ The earlier “Peru of North America” has now become “an American Kashmir”—a putatively exotic site that has captured the attention of the narrator’s “itinerant” friend so much as to form a “predilection,” a kind of geographical weakness that keeps him from returning north. At the same time, the northern narrator suffers from his own locational problems; a recent return from Jamaica and the Bermudas has left him in a moral funk culminating in the “perverse resolution” to be “an honest [man] no longer.” Before detailing the moral geography of the Caribbean, however, the narrator interrogates and taunts his friend regarding Pennsylvania and the possibility that he has become entangled with “some fair Quaker” (JB 206). The narrator seems oddly obsessed with his friend’s potential Quaker romance, and given that it frames the ensuing description of his own visit to Jamaica, it is likely related to the Quaker injunction—promulgated in Philadelphia by 1758—against the buying and selling of human beings. For Crèvecoeur’s narrator returns to his northern province from the Caribbean after having directly participated in the Atlantic slave trade himself—after the purchase, one that he openly acknowledges, of a single enslaved man who stands, perhaps, for unacknowledged others bought on the same trip.

The transaction in human flesh is easy to overlook because it is embedded within a narrative of further colonial opposition: the narrator’s earlier knowingness is now cast as northern naivete and brings into relief the horror of West Indian slavery. The narrator’s confused (North) Americanness is in turn set off by his contrast to an “English-born lady” whose development on the island offers its own contrast between her initial horror at the sounds of slavery (“the lash of blows, the cracks of whips, the howling of slaves”) and her eventual emergence as an innovative torturer herself. With this continual use of juxtaposed opposites, and with the English lady as a sadistic foil, the narrator can quietly enter the market in human flesh in a state of comparative innocence: “I did not live with her long and fortunately bought the poor negro, who is now with me the most grateful of slaves” (JB 209). The narrator thus emerges under the sign of benevolence as a transatlantic trader in human beings: he travels to the Caribbean, buys at least one enslaved man, and returns home to his northern colony on the mainland.

In this sense, the sketch thematizes the problem at the heart of Crèvecoeur’s earlier fantasy of a great transfer of Iberian wealth into English hands. Of course, the history of Jamaica perfectly emblemized the idea of such a transfer, which lay at the heart of Western Design, the military plan by which it became English in the previous century. The island was captured from the Spanish in 1655 and then remade as the central site for a literal transfer of Iberian riches: a port from which English privateers—extracting from the extractors—could steal from captured ships en route to Spain from Mexico and South America. To imagine and celebrate that transfer, as Crèvecoeur did, was to undermine the powerful conceptual foil upon which a settler colonial literary tradition of the sublime depended.

In the absence of a Lisbon or a Lima against which to position his youthful northern narrator, Crèvecoeur turns here to other English colonial foils—those located in Jamaica and the Bermudas—to establish the inherent difference of northern Anglo-America. Against the islands, he can assert the solidity of the settler colonial mainland its supposed immunity to earthquake.

Crèvecoeur doesn't need to mention the massive 1692 Port Royal earthquake in this sketch; it looms in the background of his moral geography of the island with its "horrid climate" and its "great glare of riches," signal features of the torrid zone that signal its modern incarnation as an emblem of tropicality: the extraction of wealth, human and otherwise, is always attended by southern dangers. Religious commentators on the Port Royal earthquake were thus quick to draw moral conclusions via the discourse of tropicality; the eyewitness Reverend Emanuel Heath wrote from his ship in the harbor that "the fairest Town of all the *English* Plantations, the best *Emporium* and Mart of this part of the World, exceeding in its Riches, plentiful of all good things" had been destroyed by a "terrible Judgment of God" upon a "most Ungodly Debauched People."²⁷ Crèvecoeur's cosmopolitan narrator, on the other hand, eschews any account driven unproblematically by divine punishment. As a northern empiricist, he poses tropicality instead as an anthropological conundrum, noting that "dread of Hurricanes and earthquakes" does not lead to better behavior in anyone, nor produce "the most sincere devotees and the greatest saints" of any religion. With this observation, he converts the cosmological mystery of sin's existence into an ethnographic problem he can study among the English in Jamaica: the failure of religion to express its primary value by instilling a "happy system" governing behavior through an appropriate interaction with the region's geographical dangers. Instead of piety, dread of earthquake and storm has produced "perversion of appetites" and "total disregard of humanity" while "urging every passion and desire to some premature extreme." The Jamaican creoles have an unnatural relationship to nature, which is expressed in a "precarious" rather than a stabilizing contractual relation: "For the lease which Nature and her elements hath given them for the period of their existence is but at will" (JB 208).

The geological fragility of the English island-colonies comes into even sharper view when the narrator arrives in Bermuda, which cannot even be called "an island or islands"—"tis paying them too great a compliment"—in their exploded and transient state. The Bermudas embody the vestiges of earthquake, and the evidence of a violent battle between land and ocean: the archipelago is formed by those parts of the earth not quite swallowed by the sea. The ocean has taken its "revenge" and "well nigh rent the whole asunder"; and the submersion of Bermuda during the next seismic event, the next "great convulsion of the surrounding element," is only a matter of time (JB 209). Crèvecoeur's narrator thus contemplates the English Caribbean, just as he gazed out over earthquake-ravaged Lisbon, and experiences the continental American sublime: he feels a sense of terror before "the vast extent

of the watery mass whose percussion seems to shake the very foundation of the Island” and he recognizes himself by contrast as “an imperceptible atom.” But all of this provides a platform of contrasts for the solidity of his own “mainland identity,” as Christopher Iannini terms it: his belief that he belongs to “a securer habitation, on a large continent which nothing can destroy but the bursting of the globe or the general explosion of some part of its superficial shell” (JB 210).²⁸

The entire Bermuda episode, as Timothy Fosbury argues, seems bent on “ceding the new center of settlerism in the hemisphere to North America.”²⁹ And yet how different is this pronouncement from the one that concludes Crèvecoeur’s earlier Lisbon sketch with its ode to the “Eternal Pleasure” of American beauty (R 205). If he now posits the solidity of his own large continent as an antidote to the convulsive fragility of the English Caribbean, he is also already qualifying mainland American permanence with an apocalyptic vision of global destruction in a “general explosion” of the Earth’s crust. Moreover, Crèvecoeur’s narrator comes home to find only the “precious name and delightful idea” of his native country—he does not find a realm of American beauty safely separate from his descent into sublimity in the torrid zone (JB 210). Indeed, he now longs for “the midst of the great storm at Bermudas”—or rather for the sublime effect of “contemplating so grand a scene”—and even for his own annihilation: because it “would have been honorable to have perished there by the hands of nature” (JB 211). For the narrator has apparently met a dishonorable fate, worse than death in a Bermudan storm, on the English mainland—a fate that destroys the wholesome continental identity he believed himself to have in the Caribbean.

The narrator’s account of his own undoing is a bitter caricature of the story Crèvecoeur will tell in the famous third epistle of *Letters from an American Farmer*. Or, perhaps more accurately, the third epistle is a wildly optimistic caricature of this bitter original. Whatever the case, the narrator emerges here—like the future James—as the son of a farmer who carries on the quintessentially American family profession. In this earlier sketch, however, the paternal profession is elaborated more fully—the narrator’s father is “a country merchant, an eminent farmer,” whose production and sale of flour is far-reaching enough to require a “faithful correspondent” acting as an agent in the Caribbean (JB 210, 208). He is also the owner of “a large batting mill,” presumably engaged in the production of wool or perhaps even cotton (JB 210). Moreover, the narrator says that his father “had a secret without which no man can be a country merchant”—and though we never learn its nature, it seems tied to the wealth he accrues in the West Indies. This secret financial buffer allows him to deal honestly on the mainland by offsetting any losses at the hands of those who turns out to be untrustworthy (JB 212). The narrator is mystified and anguished by father’s purported ability to be both honest and successful in a world of trade that has expanded into financial speculation, involving disavowed invoices, canceled bonds, and unpaid interest payments. As he tries to settle the affairs of his father’s business, he regards himself

as a victim of mainland wickedness—and “although an American,” too, he begins to see himself at a distance from his countrymen and the peculiarly innocent style that camouflages their dishonesty (JB 211).

The crux of mainland American identity is this deceptive naïveté. To illustrate how “an apparently simple and ignorant people” turns out to be “matchless for ... cunning and sagacity,” the narrator summons a Gaelic figure, a prototype for the one who plays a key part in the third letter’s comedic sketch of “Andrew, the Hebridean” as he becomes American (JB 211, L 49). Here, however, the transatlantic emigrant figure is unnamed; he is simply “a cooper, a poor man who came from Ireland ... a wretch who seemed to know nothing but his brogue when he arrived” (JB 211). Like the future Andrew, speaking his “broad Scotch,” this cooper arrives as an impoverished laborer and receives what is characterized as American hospitality: “my father had clad and fed [him]” and “built [him] an house, accompanied with a spot of ground” (L 60, JB 211). But where Andrew’s story runs happily from poverty to property ownership via Farmer James’s mentorship, this earlier Gaelic emigrant takes the narrative in another direction as the ungrateful recipient of his employer’s supposed beneficence. The narrator is reticent about what this unnamed Irishman does, but the context suggests that the cooper takes the law into his own hands to negotiate to his advantage his contract of indentured labor—a maneuver that the narrator, as his new employer or rather owner-by-inheritance, sees as “chicanery” (JB 211).

The narrator’s conclusion offers a condensed hemispheric history within its bitter account of his own emergent mainland American identity in its relation to the English Caribbean. The narrator sees himself as a sort of Columbian anti-hero, muddling through the era of heroic discovery and recording in his lender’s logbook a series of “difficulties, soundings, observations, etc.” that “by far exceed those of the boldest navigators who have ventured in quest of the Northwest Passage.” What devastates the narrator is that his worldliness—his having “lived in Jamaica and Bermuda”—means nothing on the mainland, where the Old World colonial tables are turned on him and a primitive Irishman speaking in “brogue” can deploy the law to his advantage over the son of an “eminent” English farmer: “In these contentious matters,” he complains, “this very man has proved himself an overmatch for me, who have read Cicero, Ovid, Sallust, etc., and have seen the great plantations” (JB 211). In this odd outburst, the narrator slides tellingly from the subject of his paternal inheritance—his inheritance of an eminent farmer’s property—to his firsthand knowledge of the architecture and agriculture of slave capitalism on a large scale. A matter of pride, this witnessing of slave capitalism—no less than the supposedly grateful enslaved man whom he traffics to the mainland from the Caribbean—is an experience that defines his cosmopolitanism, his philosophical-classical credentials as a reader of Cicero and Ovid as well as the Roman historian Sallust—a wealthy colonial governor of Africa Nova under Caesar. The narrator

well understands that Western classicism and slavery go hand in hand—but his larger point is that neither brings him advantage as an American.

This is of course the same claim that James will celebrate rather than grouse about in *Letters from an American Farmer*. Crèvecoeur's earlier, embittered narrator thus helps to clarify what is omitted in the latter text: the role of the implusive Caribbean islands in sustaining the mainland American's self-understanding as a land without such earthquakes. For earthquakes were not merely a choice metaphor for slave revolts but also opportunities for pursuing freedom, as English enslavers in Jamaica clearly knew. As one vicar observed after the 1692 earthquake,

Our first fears were concerning our slaves, those irreconcilable and yet intestine enemies of ours, who are no otherwise our subjects than as the whip makes them, who seeing our strongest houses demolisht, our arms broken, and hearing of the destruction of our greatest dependency, the town of Port Royal, might in hopes of liberty be stirred up to rise in rebellion against us.³⁰

No wonder the narrator of "Jamaica and the Bermudas" begs his addressees and youthful doppelganger to leave off with his Pennsylvania Quaker woman. If the inconvenience of abolitionism made such Quakers "difficult to live and to converse with" without "philosophical impunity," their very status as human earthquakes, named for their theological trembling, made them an intractable problem for a philosophical world-system that depended on many different disastrous Souths to ensure the solidity of slavery and settler colonialism on the American mainland (JB 206). Seismicity in the North would mean having to face the unthinkable.

***Letters from an American Farmer* and the "Primary Secrets" of Settler Colonialism**

By the time Crèvecoeur introduced *Letters from an American Farmer* to the public in 1782, he had dispensed with the personas of both the sentimental, aggrieved son of the Pennsylvania mill owner and the jubilant early cosmopolitan who passionately elaborates a settler colonial visual system and its concomitant production of positive affect: a philosophical happiness that is distinctly American. In *Letters*, Crèvecoeur leaves behind both Lisbon and the Caribbean torrid zones to develop a no less earnest and passionate narrator, the "Farmer of Feelings" known as James (L 17). Yet as a number of scholars have observed, Crèvecoeur embeds the letters themselves in a framework of production and reception that widens and complicates the new sort of happiness under consideration.³¹ For if the text frames the letters as the narrative product of a humble Anglo-American farmer, it also introduces them as the property of a sophisticated Englishman, Mr. F.B.,

who once visited the colonies and has now requested that James supply him with information on specific topics. In the first letter, James records his surprise and delight at the first request along with verbatim accounts of his ensuing discussions with his wife and the local minister on the question of whether he, a simple farmer, can comply with F.B.'s wishes by writing him back. Crèvecoeur thus stages the classic trope of authorial apology—not merely rhetorical but also fictitious—through an interplay of different voices: James, his wife, his minister, and even the absent F.B. whose words we hear paraphrased. The disparate and variably English voices appear alternately to ventriloquize and disaggregate the perspective of the author himself: the French-born but naturalized Englishman who has fled his prosperous New York plantation during the American Revolution and published his book in London en route back to France.³² This context of authorial upheaval—shadowed in the traumatized voice of James in the book's last letter—further unsettles the perceived distance between Crèvecoeur and the narrating voice who spends much of the text outlining an American "system of happiness" greater than any other in the world. The unstable distance between author and narrator results in a text full of ironies that never yield coherent satire but magnificently evince the distorted perspective of a settler colonial affective-political project.³³

The first letter of the volume throws a shadow over this project through the voice of James's wife, who discourages him from responding to F.B.'s request for a firsthand account of his "experience and knowledge" of the American provinces (*L* 5). Her initial objection to the proposed project of such letters from an American farmer is that James is incapable of perceiving irony—and her early injunction to her husband stands in as a warning to the reader: "Thee must read this letter over again, paragraph by paragraph, and warily observe whether thee canst perceive some words of jesting, something that hath more than one meaning" (*L* 4). While the minister encourages James to respond to F.B. on the grounds that the "enlightened Englishman" will be "improved" by access to the information provided therein, James's wife worries about what other settlers will think of the farmer's loyalties and his possible alliances with "the king's men" if the neighbors learn about his epistolary plans (*L* 6, 11). In her view, the writing itself seems to spell doom—"some great alterations in the welfare of [a] family" that is thriving before the project begins: revolutions in circumstance that some may "pretend to foresee" in the fact of the writing itself. As she puts it darkly, "Let it be as great a secret as if it were some heinous crime" (*L* 11). Her repeated reference to a "profound secret" and a "great secret" associated with writing, and her admonition to read a text closely and "warily," provide a foil for the minister's ready enthusiasm for the proposed project of the letters (*L* 11, 12, 4). Where the minister sees in the project a significant moral achievement in itself—promoting the colonies and the "humble rudiments of societies spreading everywhere"—James's wife sees only potential danger and shame (*L* 6).

What is it that James's wife apprehends in the proposed letters that he and the minister cannot? Her warnings do more than foreshadow the coming of the American Revolution in the text of *Letters*. In urging James to conceal his taking up the pen against the revelation of a "heinous crime," she gestures at something that might be described as the open secret—in James's words, "the primary secrets"—of settler colonialism. Fittingly, her intervention marks the text's first admission of slavery, itself layered in irony: she notes that in her own interactions with F.B. the Englishman often observed how comparatively hard the "Americans" work given their circumstances: "trees to cut down ... fences to make ... negroes to buy and to clothe" (L 12). The work of the American farmer is first and foremost the work of managing enslaved labor. The problem with James's proposed letters is that they will expose the circumstances of their own production; the leisure and time required to write an extended description of the American farmer's labor reveal the extractive nature of that labor as surely as if the farm were in fact a mine. As James's wife says, "I would not have thee, James, pass for what the world calleth a writer; no, not for a peck of gold" (L 11).

What she grasps better than her husband or the minister, then, is that James's letters threaten to undermine the philosophical foundation undergirding the text's celebration of the structural American "causes which render so many people happy," with "so singular a display of easy subsistence and political felicity." Indeed, the deepest irony besetting a "modern, peaceful, and benign" American landscape that has had "no war to desolate [its] fields" is not the *coming* war—flagged in an editorial footnote, lest readers miss the point, as "the troubles that lately convulsed the American colonies"—but rather the prior and ongoing convulsions of settler colonial conquest. These wars constitute "the unnoticed means by which we daily increase the extent of our settlements"—the term "unnoticed" thus enacting where it purports only to describe a key omission (L 6). For the "means" of settler colonial expansion go largely unspoken and unseen as James presents an illusory impossibility undermined in the text's own language: a "boundless continent" with unending room for the "perpetual accession of newcomers" from a European world already marked by the problem of overpopulation. As James's minister puts it, "The rest of the earth, I am told, is in some places too full" (L 7). That other places are "half depopulated," as he says in the next breath, only points again to the "unnoticed means" by which the settler process achieves its structural mission: eliminating Native population to increase the territorial extent of European settlement.

James thus enfolds the two "primary secrets" of American settler colonialism—enslavement and attempted genocide—into his first letter to F.B.; his wife is in this sense correct to worry that "some heinous crime" will be exposed by his decision to detail his American farmer's life. In James's telling of their conversation, his wife tries to warn him off writing by associating the pen with the practices of British finance capitalism—by which Englishmen "can live upon what they call

bank notes, without working”: “they have gold in abundance, they say, for they rake it and scrape it from all parts far and near.” The British extraction of gold stands in here for the trade in human beings, with which gold went hand in hand during the British colonial rule of the so-called Gold Coast. The practice of extraction *from* the earth—rather than the supposedly benevolent agricultural work *upon* the earth’s surface—is thus precisely what James’s wife wishes to dissociate from herself and her husband, and their innocent American farm, by urging her husband to put down his pen. “I have often heard my grandfather tell how they live [in England] by writing,” she warns. The “goodly country” of America “never would have been tilled and cleared with these notes,” she argues, nor is it “by writing that we shall pay the blacksmith, the minister, the weaver, the tailor, and the English shop.” Writing is un-American, she fears, and suspiciously metropolitan in its proximity to the Gold Coast’s trade: “By writing, they send this cargo unto us, that to the West, and the other to the East Indies” (L 12). As recounted by James, his wife’s extended misapprehension—her ostensibly erroneous conflation of epistolary and financial notes—undermines her supposed innocence of the very thing she describes: a complex and global commercial system sustained by a system of writing that not only creates wealth but also the debt that in turn drives further enslavement to meet the system’s continuing extractive demands.

From the opening of the text, then, James’s wife foregrounds the implication of writing, of *Letters* itself, in this system of catastrophic extraction with all its open but unspoken “primary secrets.” Refusing to heed her warning, James continues to disclose these secrets even as he also lays out a settler colonial aesthetic system and its concomitant production of positive political affect in the ensuing letters. Letter II, “Thoughts, Feelings, Pleasures of an American Farmer,” is devoted, as its title suggests, to the realm of American beauty, to what James can see of the natural world from his location on the ground of his farm, rather than from the sublime heights occupied by the unnamed narrator in “Rock of Lisbon.” Observing his world from the farm, James encounters beauty everywhere, and the enumerated “pleasures” of such viewing in turn induce the philosophical and political elevation promised by moral sense theory: “quite new ideas” about his “freedom of action, freedom of thoughts” and benign “mode of government”—an American “system of felicity” (L 15). But by his own account, this process of achieving happiness finds its initial traction in an act of comparison. Only when James considers his own position relative to a “Russian boor or a Hungarian peasant” does he begin to feel “happier now than I thought myself before.” The happiness is produced not just by viewing his American farm but also by imagining it within a broader geographic frame that encompasses a suffering eastern European counterpart. If James is “far from rejoicing to hear that there are in the world men so thoroughly wretched,” he is just as clear about the nature of American felicity as the narrator in “Rock of Lisbon”: “It is strange that misery, when viewed in others, should become to us a sort of real good” (L 14).

But the suffering of others has no real place in the realm of beauty that is the subject of Letter II and the dominant aesthetic mode of *Letters* more broadly. Operating within this mode, James alludes to slavery—noting that his own “negroes are tolerably faithful and healthy”—but he prefers to relocate the violence of African bondage off to the Slovakian steppe, where the nature of serfdom is “worse,” he claims, than enslavement in America (L 16). So too does James’s appreciation of nature on his farm both invoke and occlude the inherent violence of settlement. No sooner does he enter his own land than he is struck by a signal attribute of the beautiful in the “bright idea of property”—a brightness so powerful that it provokes a sudden apostrophe to the ground itself: “Precious soil, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder?” (L 17). The question in effect denaturalizes its own rhetorical act of legal naturalization. The philosophical affect it expresses thus marks the devolution of happiness as an abstract political feeling with utopian promise in an enlightened age: what we see here is the privatization of happiness as the individual feeling of personal well-being that Farmer James experiences by looking at the bounty of his property.

Vivasvan Soni has argued that the failure of happiness is ensured by the visual terms of its early eighteenth-century formulation in sentimental literature: what he calls the “sadism” and “schadenfreude” of the sentimental gaze as it views, or by viewing recalls, the suffering of another.³⁴ This gaze finds a new geopolitical traction in the theorization of the sublime developed by Burke and elaborated in Crèvecoeur, who narrates schadenfreude on a global scale by imagining America’s relation to the Lisbon earthquake and the hemispheric, a global South colonized by Spain and Portugal. What Crèvecoeur describes in both “Rock of Lisbon” and *Letters* is a structure of feeling crucial to the formation of America as a settler colonial state—a state whose logic of conquest and enslavement is obfuscated by its positive national affect. Indeed, American happiness is defined precisely by its distance from what James’s wife calls “the factory of brimstone at Suvius, the town of Pompey under ground”: that is, from Europe’s sublime seismic landscape, with its ruins and convulsions, its “revolutions, desolations, and plagues” (L 6).

The third and most well-known of James’s letters—the often anthologized “What is an American?”—elaborates the link between seismic convulsion and its avoidance by means of what James calls “one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared” (L 31). The letter famously elaborates and celebrates this system of population or process of becoming “American”: the inculcation of new values and modes of self-identification through the practice of acquiring land and ensuring its productivity with appropriate labor. James famously claims that Europe is crowded and thus convulsed with revolutions waged by the poor and unpropertied; America’s exception is its unending “room for everybody” and its freedom from seismic insurgencies (L 41). At the same time, James claims that this system of population will bring the modernity of European arts and commerce from a place whose “inhabitants ... were once painted like our neighbors”

in America now: he makes the familiar colonial argument that Europe was once as primitive as his Indigenous “neighbors” are in the eighteenth century (L 47).

Yet the settler system of population that James describes begins in Europe, where its racial character first takes form—however much the letter’s framing tries to disguise that fact. James glimpses these beginnings when he attributes the Irish failure to “prosper” in America to “their ancient conquest,” which “has been a detriment to them” (L 45). The colonial system in Europe, which has produced its “criminal” class, now faces overpopulation, which in turn causes “those convulsions which had shook it so long” (L 40). America’s “new sort of happiness” is the fantasy that it has no such earthquakes: that its “boundless continent” will sustain and remake the racialized and colonized classes of Europe into a new breed of American men.

Thomas Malthus will not publish his essay on the population trap for another decade and a half, but even the humble James can understand that land, unlike humanity, does not reproduce itself. Yet land *can* be reimagined as perpetually free of convulsion. The history of race and colonial practice *within* the European land-mass thus helps to produce the idea of American immunity to earthquake, which is itself a denial of the ongoing and convulsive European conquest and dispossession of non-European people. James tutors the reader in this recursive denialism by first detailing settler colonialism’s “perfect state of war”—“man against every wild inhabitant of these venerable woods, of which they are come to dispossess them”—and the “sudden devastations which have so often stained our frontiers, when hundreds of innocent people have been sacrificed” (L 39). From here, however, James envisions an even finer system of population for America: he imagines Europe acquiring the Hebrides as a carceral “colony” for its “wicked sons,” its own dispossessed classes, while the “honest, primitive Hebrideans” would be sent to the New World “as a reward for their virtue and ancient poverty” (L 47). Thus would Europe engage in a double process of elimination, further displacing its own internal colonized classes to the Hebrides while simultaneously creating a new “Indigenous” American—primitive and ancient—whose very existence by definition displaces the Native people from their “boundless” land. In this vision of population, even a European emigrant who is “taken on the frontiers of Canada by the Indians” can enact a quiet Indigenous displacement without fear of a seismic outcome: for he is endowed the “immunities of a freeman” by the “voice” of America herself (L 90). Always verging on tragedy, James’s population narrative forcefully asserts its generic promise to end with happiness.

Fittingly, then, James ends Letter III with an account of a “Hebridean” emigrant—a sketch carefully drawn without a “tragical scene to convulse the heart” (L 49). He sends it to the cosmopolitan F.B. of “academies and great societies” along with some Jeffersonian candlesticks made from giant owl talons (L 51).³⁵ These avian artifacts mock not so much debates about New World degeneration as the self-knowing commercial quality of the sketch of Andrew the Hebridean in which they are embedded. James himself explains one too many times the

satisfaction to be taken from the story and its simple narrative structure: “strangers settling in as new countrymen, struggling with arduous difficulties, overcoming them and becoming happy”—or, even more simply, the “pleasure” in seeing Andrew become “independent and easy” (*L* 50, 64).

As James’s wife observes, the story is too obvious as a would-be crowd-pleaser, an obvious substitute for the experience of “go[ing] to the comedy” to “laugh [one’s] fill” (*L* 51). James begins the comedy by taking up the familiar colonial analogy between the venture of the American “pilgrims” and the holy mission of the ancient Hebrews. When James refers to “the pleasure and wonder of the Jews’ march through the deserts of Africa,” his wife interrupts and undercuts her husband’s piety with a quick rebuke: “By the way, these people were not our countrymen. The deflation doubles as xenophobia even as it sets up the next joke: that “the Englishmen have settled in the wilderness of America and have converted it by their industry into a land of Canaan, without killing so many virgins and people and cattle” (*L* 53). By mocking both the biblical Israelite conquest of Canaan and the English-Israel colonial analogy favored by an earlier generation of settlers, James establishes American conquest as a comedy of peace rather than the endless “state of war” he has earlier admitted it to be.

But James’s Hebridean comedy soon reveals the edge of satire that marked the earlier and bitter account of a Gaelic immigrant in the “Sketches of Jamaica and Bermudas.” While James favorably compares the hard labor of the American settlers to the situation of “these Jews [who] were assisted of God [and] lived without working,” the point of view provided by Andrew the Hebridean upon arrival in Philadelphia discloses the truth as he “gazed with uninterrupted attention on everything he saw: the houses, the inhabitants, the negroes, and carriages” (*L* 56). If the ancient Hebrews had divine assistance in undertaking their errand in the wilderness, the American settlers have slavery upholding theirs. The European emigrant’s first sighting of America in this careful moment of narrative focalization—which showcases the central presence of enslaved people—makes a tacit but forceful argument about the process of becoming colonial that runs counter to the explicit story James has been telling throughout the letter. As James returns to his account of settlement as a happy comedy, he recruits the elements of theater to reinforce the settler innocence that Andrew’s gaze has sullied. When “nine Indians” arrive on the property of Andrew’s Anglo-American host and “suddenly [take] possession of the house,” the account stages a drama of settler colonialism in reverse: the Hebridean assumes his guise as primitive indigene, speaking in “broad Scotch,” furious and helpless as he is displaced by Native men who—like his own Indigenous people, the highlanders—wear “no breeches” (*L* 60).

The scene presents a settler colonial farce of sorts—replete with physical comedy and extravagant misunderstanding—that meets the generic requirement for revelation and reconciliation: Andrew learns that the invading Indians were in fact

“particular friends” and welcome guests of settler hospitality (L 60). The fantasy of settler colonial wholeness is threatened and then restored by a familiar genre that invokes violence only to disarm it. As the letter concludes, Andrew is still learning the nature of his “dominion over this land”—and James can proclaim himself and the other settlers as long-standing initiates in “those mysteries with which *we native Americans* are but too well acquainted” (L 62). The account concludes by glimpsing one of these “mysteries,” as Andrew witnesses but does not participate in the raising of his new house: for, as a symbol of his self-ownership in a society built on slavery, “It would have been sacrilegious of him to have defiled it with menial labour” (L 63). Andrew has thus successfully internalized the “primary secrets” of slavery and dispossession defining his new settler colonial life.

Indigenous Dispossession as Island Satire

As James moves from Andrew the Hebridean on the mainland into narrating the five island-based letters about Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard, *Letters* continues to play slavery and dispossession against each other in a bait and switch that keeps the account focused on one at the expense of the other. To understand why the narrative is so intent on disaggregating these interlocking forms of colonial violence, we might note first that this long section begins and ends with familiar contrasts between American happiness and European lack thereof. Yet as a number of scholars have noted, these chapters, more than others, introduce a smug sense of irony regarding the parochial Quaker islanders—a sense that Crèvecoeur was indeed “laughing in his sleeve,” as Zach Hutchins puts it, and assuming that his more sophisticated readers would, too.³⁶ Praising the islanders’ “freedom ... skill ... probity and perseverance” in arising to “the rank they now hold,” James notes the “disagreeable smell” of their township, the opium addiction of the residents and, perhaps most telling, their pious reading of Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* without realizing that the work is a satire (L 71). In Hutchins’s illuminating reading of *Letters*, Crèvecoeur’s ironic intertextual mode allows him to express his royalism, his hatred of revolution, and above all his growing secularity.

All these ideological positions, though, are rooted in the text’s recognition of the constitutive fragility of settlement, its deep if disavowed understanding that settler colonial claims will always be contested and threatened by enslaved and dispossessed subjects. And this element of structural disavowal—more than Crèvecoeur’s cosmopolitan winking, I think—accounts for the text’s thickness and ambiguity. Consider the blatant double meaning in James’s enthusiastic prediction of future European immigration to, and concomitant prosperity for, the American colonies: “This country, providentially intended for the general asylum of the world, will flourish by the oppression of other people” (L 66). He is referring, of course, to the European tyranny that will drive transatlantic emigration, but the awkwardness of

his phrasing makes a deeper point in this section that is focused so closely on the Indigenous history of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

At the same time, James notably frames this history in part by attempting to disentangle it from African slavery. Although the chapter on the islanders' employment in whaling and shipping traces the central nodes in the triangular slave trade—from Nantucket to the coast of Guinea, London, the West Indian Islands, and the Brazils—James denies the existence of slavery on Nantucket:

But let me not forget another peculiar characteristic of this community: there is not a slave I believe on the whole island, at least among the Friends. Whilst slavery prevails all around them, this Society alone, lamenting that shocking insult offered to humanity, have given the world a singular example of moderation, disinterestedness and Christian charity in emancipating their negroes. (*L* 107)

Here again, Crèvecoeur links Western classicism with slavery, for James explains this settler utopia by noting that its "first founders knew nothing of either Lycurgus or Solon," the Spartan and Athenian lawmakers whose lives and legal ideas were studied in *Plutarch's Lives* by the "eminent men" and "powerful legislators" who constituted the very different "first founders"—particularly Thomas Jefferson who placed a copy in the University of Virginia—on the American continent (*L* 68). To read Plutarch on Solon was to understand the dangers besetting a class of enslavers, as Plutarch put it, "flooded with a multitude of Helots, whom it was better not to leave in idleness, but to keep down by continual hardships and toil."³⁷ But cruelty, especially the selling of children, risked inciting slave revolution: that moment when "the most and sturdiest of them began to band together and exhort one another not to submit to their wrongs."³⁸ To read Plutarch on Lycurgus, moreover, was to understand slavery as a state of war—in which, on the one hand, masters manipulated the law to ensure "slaves might be massacred without breach of religion," and in which, on the other, the enslaved classes "laid the country waste" when they had the opportunity.³⁹ As Plutarch noted, the most famous of those opportunities in the classical era came with seismic rending: "the great earthquake, when the Helots made a general insurrection ... and brought the greatest danger upon the city."⁴⁰

Putatively innocent of Western philosophy, and thus of slavery, Nantucket also presents a supposed exception to the history of violent settler conquest: "This happy settlement was not founded on intrusion, forcible entries or blood, as so many others have been ... all has been a scene of uninterrupted harmony," unmarred by "disputes with the natives" (*L* 68). The ensuing section on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard records but also reframes an entire history of dispossession by converting conquest, according to the terms of the White Legend, into an innocent venture into natural history while offering a detailed account of Native extinction. In his sketch of Nantucket's physical geography and flora and

fauna, James is especially interested in the seismic formation of the land and its “submarine” counterparts, which have prevented the ocean from bringing total destruction to the island by having “ere now ... dissolved its foundations and torn it in pieces” (L 76). This bit of geological luck is quickly linked to a description of Nantucket’s Indigenous people as “an industrious, harmless race” that is “hastening toward a total annihilation”—so quickly, it seems, that James views his own narrative as a kind of graveyard memorial: “the last compliment that will ever be paid them by any traveller.” James testifies unequivocally that this annihilation is innocent: “They were not extirpated by fraud, violence or injustice, as hath been the case in so many provinces; on the contrary, they have been treated by these people as brethren.” Nantucket thus offers the island exception that quickly defines the mainland, too: its Indigenous populations have been decimated, he claims, by “some of those causes which have uninterruptedly produced the same effects from one end of the continent to the other, wherever both nations have been mixed.” These causes include the Natives’ having lived in a state of “perpetual war” that left them almost “totally extinct” before the arrival of European settlers (L 79). If Europeans brought peace to the Natives—and “put a stop to their sanguinary depredations”—the Natives, in a sad twist of fate, “unluckily got the smallpox” (L 79). As so often, the edge of satire intrudes here upon James’s narrative voice, intermittently producing its *Candide*-like effect. As he continues his natural history of Indigenous depopulation—haphazardly listing causes, including the “variety of accidents and misfortunes to which they always fall victim”—James arrives at the all-too-familiar settler colonial conclusion shaping future Anglo-American literature across the nineteenth century: Indigenous Americans are “a race doomed to recede and disappear” (L 80).

Curiously, James refers to this prophecy by the eighteenth-century political term for seismic rending: “It is strange what revolution has happened among them in less than two hundred years!” Like the northern narrator overlooking Lisbon, James scans the “extensive shores of the great bay of Massachusetts” and takes in both the desolation and what it yields to its inheritors. In this spirit, he recites the Native place names alongside their settler replacements: “Numkeag (Salem), Saugus (Lynn), Shawmut (Boston), Patuxet, Napouset (Milton), Matapan (Dorchester), Winèsimèt (Chelsea), Poïasset, Pokànoket (New Plymouth), Suecanosset (Falmouth), Titicut (Chatham), Nobscusset (Yarmouth), Naussit (Eartham), Hyanneès (Barnstable), etc.” (L 80). But as James makes his lofty commemorative pronouncement—“They are gone and every memorial of them is lost; no vestiges whatever are left”—he also undercuts it by making what he calls “a very useless compliment” to the Indigenous inhabitants of “Namset, now Cape Cod” (L 81). The ensuing compliment involves layers of intertwined irony and praise congratulating the Nauset people for their role in the process by which “Indian towns have since been converted into flourishing European settlements.” These “natives were excellent judges of land,” which they “fertilized ... with the shells of their

fish,” ultimately creating an “extraordinary manure” that is used to pay the resident minister of Provincetown for his religious services (L 82). James’s account of this manure—which he refers to as a “digression” that he hopes his reader, Mr. F.B., will pardon—holds a kind of violence beneath its folksy surface (L 82). The Native historical “revolution” James commemorates is indeed a turning and tilling of the earth, one in which the Indigenous inhabitants of the island have been swallowed up and have thereby enriched the soil. James winks while offering this “useless compliment,” but it is a profound one in the sense that it records in miniature the violent history of guano, the traditional fertilizer used by Indigenous populations in Peru that became famous in the nineteenth century after settler populations and Europeans discovered its value. Indeed, James encapsulates here what Eduardo Cadava has called the “guano of history,” the “decomposing trace that, turning into earth at the time of death, gives meaning to the memory, the violence, the wounds, the protests, the cries of anger or suffering, the several death sentences on which a nation—America, for example—has been founded.”⁴¹ As Jennifer James asks in a devastating essay on this colonial-ecological history, “How could we *not* know what guano is made of?”⁴²

In his naturalist mode, Farmer James is thrust deep into, and is yet trying not to know, the guano of history—and this willful ignorance comes to inform a certain canonical version of American literary history. If the spectacular killing of the female whale in the Martha’s Vineyard letter provides a prototype for Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, so too does Crèvecoeur’s unspoken linking of farming and whaling, of land-based forms of extraction and their counterparts at sea. Even in the seemingly neutral parallel between James’s lists of Native names and whale names, Crèvecoeur models a particular mode of irony that will inform Melville’s future meditations on the violence—and, like the ensuing chapters of *Letters*, the theologies—of racial capitalism. At the same time, Farmer James’s ethnography of the European-descended islanders almost parodies the cultural and discursive processes of colonialism by which settlers redefine themselves as natives.

The emergence of settlers as natives begins, fittingly, precisely as James considers the potential of seismic geological violence to Nantucket’s very foundations. As he considers the nature and formation of the Nantucket banks, he suddenly refers to the settlers as the “first inhabitants,” though he has earlier referenced the islands’ Indigenous history and people by the term “natives” (L 76, 74). Immediately, though, James must yield to the fact that the settlers are not of course the “first inhabitants,” whereupon he introduces a new term, “aborigines,” along with his curious word for living Indigenous people: “posterity” (L 78, 81). As the sketch continues, James describes the settlers on both Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard in increasingly indigenized ways. He notes that the community gardens used by the Nantucket settlers “are commonly called Tètoukèmah lots”; and he points out that these settlers speak and understand Nattick and use Nattick words on their

whaling ships, as do the settlers on Martha's Vineyard (*L* 74). They know "the Indian methods of curing simple diseases and practice them with success" (*L* 105).

Such settler acquisition of Indigenous language and ideas—attesting to the multidirectional flow of knowledge in the contact zone—turns out to be but a prelude to Crèvecoeur's deeper irony: settler colonialism has reinvented its invaders as the vulnerable primitives, a new Indigenous population to be studied, written into history, and protected. They "have no annals," as James puts it, "for they are not a race of warriors" (*L* 68). Echoing Raynal's (or rather Diderot's) descriptions of the Arawaks, James praises the settlers for their "primitive society," their "calm of passions," their "virtue and moderation," their "vigor and health"—and thus their probable vanquishing by "luxurious countries" arriving "like an epidemical disorder" (*L* 83). Soon James is directly comparing these settlers to Indigenous people around the globe, North and South—to "the Laplander, the Siberian, the Hottentot"—and expressing hope that they are "beyond the danger of conquest or the wanton desire of extirpation" (*L* 105). Through this satire of Indigenous dispossession, Crèvecoeur also invents a characteristic American discourse of positive absence, exemplified by James's continual observations of what the Nantucket settlers do not have: "neither governors nor any pageantry of state, neither ostentatious magistrates nor any individuals clothed with useless dignity. No artificial phantoms ... either civil or religious; no gibbets ... no soldiers" (*L* 82). The language of American lack will inform writers from Walt Whitman to (less exuberantly) Henry James; it is a staple of national myth across the nineteenth century. But Crèvecoeur's satire reminds us that the age-old American contrast with Europe is essentially a settler colonial trope. Like all comparisons, it depends upon but hides a structuring third term: in this case, the dispossession of Indigenous people that created Americans out of settlers.

As this northern archipelagic section draws to a close, James struggles with all that he must unknow while acting as an innocent naturalist. All the vastly unequal apportionment of violence and suffering that colonialism has produced—throughout the islands as much as his own mainland world—requires a powerful theodicy. The usually inland and landlocked Farmer James therefore turns to the tradition of the oceanic sublime to express those intertwined settler-theological concerns to which he cannot otherwise give voice. How does one reconcile genocide with an omnipotent and benevolent providence? Looking for an analogy in nature, James turns to the "impetuosity" of the ocean, which is sometimes "a destroyer of this poor planet" and sometimes "produces islands and continents fit for men to dwell on" (*L* 116). But in doing so, he fails to separate the history of Indigenous dispossession on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard from the putatively innocent American mainland. For the islands and continents of the settler colonial world face the same predicament—the same seismic possibility of some "impetuosity sufficiently strong even to move the earth"—visited upon all they have wrought (*L* 117).

This recognition necessarily moves James “beyond the sphere of common ideas” to the conceptual realm, in which philosophy can offer him a pat and evasive answer to his colonial concerns, posed as a rhetorical question: “Where is it that mankind will not find safety, peace and abundance, with freedom and civil happiness?” All the destruction, all the violence of empire, must be for a larger good. Temporarily reassured, James glances around the shore, thinks of the “boundless field” on the continent and of his own woods, and pronounces “nothing ... wanting here [by the sea] to make this a most philosophical retreat but a few ancient trees to shelter contemplation in its beloved solitude” (L 117). In the subsequent epistle, the famous ninth letter from Charleston, South Carolina, James will indeed walk in the woods and he will, quite deliberately, find the ancient tree required for such philosophical contemplation. But he will not be able to escape the seismic implications of what he sees there.

The Revolutionary War of Unsettlement

“How diminutive does a man appear to himself ... on the verge of the ocean!” cries James in Nantucket; likewise, in the Caribbean, Crèvecoeur’s earlier narrator exclaims, “How diminutive did this little spot appear...! How much still less did I represent myself...!” (L 117; JB 210). If the oceanic sublime to which James gives voice on Nantucket is essentially the same as that of the West Indian archipelago—a showcase for the presumed solidity of a “large continent which nothing can destroy”—the ensuing letter from Charleston brings the settler colonial sublime to an even more heightened degree. As always, this settler sublime enables a forgetting of earthquake at home via the spectacle of an “elsewhere catastrophe”—the necessary foil for a solid and tremor-free settler American happiness. This is the affective arrangement by which Farmer James’s letters have been trafficking in the primary and quite open secrets of settler colonialism all along: the earlier letters disclose slavery and the endless war of Indigenous dispossession intermittently, but they continually return to an American “system of felicity” that obfuscates what it does not want to see precisely by directing the gaze to an elsewhere catastrophe, never in the heart of home. That James is no longer precisely *in* his American home when he arrives in “Charles Town,” South Carolina, is the point, as Jennifer Greeson has powerfully suggested.⁴³

Letter IX requires the special traction of the sublime, moreover, because James arrives here at his most overtly philosophical and difficult topic: “Thoughts on Slavery; On Physical Evil.” The subtitle gestures at what Susan Neiman calls the central sign of modern political thought in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake: the separation of moral from natural evil, of human wrongdoing from catastrophes in the natural world.⁴⁴ But Crèvecoeur’s subtitle is also ambiguous; does the semicolon contrast slavery with “physical evil” or draw the two together by parallel

construction to suggest an equivalence? Whatever the case, Letter IX introduces theodicy overtly as its central concern; as Hutchins has observed, the whole structure of the *Letters* mirrors Milton's epic justification of the ways of God to men even as it attacks theodicy steadily as the book draws to a close. "Is there, then, no superintending power who conducts the moral operations of the world as well as the physical?" asks James in this letter (*L* 125). He offers a quick cosmological sketch that embeds further questions:

The same sublime hand which guides the planets round the sun with so much exactness, which preserves the arrangement of the whole with such exalted wisdom and paternal care and prevents the vast system from falling into confusion, doth it abandon mankind to all the errors, the follies and the miseries which their most frantic rage and their most dangerous vices and passions can produce? The history of the earth! Doth it present anything but crimes of the most heinous nature, committed from one end of the world to the other? (*L* 125)

James's questions are moral, theological, and philosophical, but they are also fundamentally geological. They are rooted in the relation between the surface of the earth and its interior—in no small part because these ancient and enduring questions came to the foreground in Western philosophy's response to the Lisbon earthquake. No wonder that seismic language predominates in the letter: James himself trembles and finds his body convulsed in South Carolina. His whole orientation to the ground on which he stands seems to shift as he considers the earth's "elementary convulsions" in addition to other causes of human suffering (*L* 127). No longer can he assume that "nothing can destroy" the American continent, for no longer does "the bursting of the globe or the general explosion of some great part of its superficial shell" seem impossible. The earth is now but a "little shell" paradoxically subtended by vast caverns primed to swallow up the inhabitants on its surface: "View this globe," James beseeches the reader, "often convulsed both from within and without, pouring forth from several mouths rivers of boiling matter which are imperceptibly leaving immense subterranean graves wherein millions will one day perish!" (*L* 127).

Letter IX is thus extraordinary because it finds James putatively within a seismic landscape rather than gazing distantly upon one as he looks out on the ocean (or ruminating from acquired knowledge, as when his wife recalls "the town of Pompeii under ground" [*L* 139]). Ian Frederick Finseth refers to Letter IX itself as a "metaphysical earthquake" precisely because it stages what James has called a "philosophical retreat" and then punctuates it with his shattering encounter with unspeakable torture: an enslaved man suspended in a hanging cage from tree branches in the South Carolina woods.⁴⁵ In this moment of philosophical rending, we might even say that Letter IX brings the Lisbon earthquake to the American continent and invites readers to consider its theoretical aftershocks

through the colonial histories of slavery and genocide in the Americas. To put this another way, the strange achievement of Letter IX's "thoughts on slavery" is Crèvecoeur's uncanny refiguration of the Lisbon earthquake as colonial violence itself. Its seemingly abstract metaphysical questions embed a latent recognition: that the ancient mystery of universal human suffering—that "punishments should fall on the innocent," as James puts it—is shadowed by but also gives cover to a central *non*-mystery of the modern world (*L* 127). The open secret of theodicy is that conquest and colonialism have apportioned such a vast amount of the world's suffering along geographic and racial lines.

If Crèvecoeur's seismic Charleston recalls the Lisbon earthquake, the double bearings of the sublime ensure that its Peruvian twin, issuing from a more maligned and still further South, is not far behind. Charleston may be "temperate" with breezes but its fatal surroundings evoke other geographies and particularly the "parched lands of the torrid zone" where the earth—"replete with sulphurous exhalations"—reminds inhabitants that it is waiting to be rent apart (*L* 127). Charleston thus continues Crèvecoeur's extended Spanish American comparison. If Pennsylvania is the innocent "Peru of North America," Charleston is the mainland's guilty colonial city; it is "in the north what Lima is to the south." Signposting the relativity of south and north, James directs the reader's gaze to the hemispheric axis formed by the twinned "capitals of the richest provinces of their respective hemispheres"—an axis that allows Crèvecoeur to align the Charleston and the North American "South" more broadly with the West Indies and the Spanish Americas, including colonial Mexico (*L* 119). Crèvecoeur stages this torrid zone as the emergent nation's closest site of elsewhere catastrophe, nearer than Lisbon or Lima, yet fundamentally like them—and, as Greeson has shown, ostensibly unlike the rest of the American mainland. Letter IX thus enacts a global discourse of settler colonial theodicy, drawing on the Western philosophical world-system in which the enduring problem of evil is solved by recourse to the torrid zone, in this case to the emergent US South. To use Greeson's formulation, Letter IX narratively reframes the slave plantation as "southern" rather than "American," creating a South–nation binary that has never fully disappeared.⁴⁶ Slavery in the "North," in Farmer's James's environs, can thereby be depicted as innocent, modern, proto-national, and almost already eradicated in contrast to its stronghold in the supposedly ancient, colonial, and quasi-Spanish American US South.

Crèvecoeur invites readers to "conjecture" that Charleston is like Lima because "both cities must exhibit the effects necessarily resulting from riches" (*L* 119). What he does not say is that Charleston and Lima shared a history of racial-demographic change that set them apart by reputation in their respective hemispheres. By the late eighteenth century, enslaved and free Black people constituted almost half of Lima's population, while Charleston's enslaved and free Black population vastly outnumbered its European-descended settler population. In both cities, moreover, the vast importations of enslaved Africans to work the coastal

plantations was a direct result of the decimation of Indigenous populations.⁴⁷ If James's account occludes this obvious point about South Carolina, Crèvecoeur's "Contrast Between the Spanish and the English Colonies" makes it quite clearly about Lima: its Creole citizens "have been so long sheltered from the ravages of war"—the frontier violence of Indigenous dispossession—"that they are no longer Spaniards" (SC 309). In truth, however, the settler-colonists of Lima had centuries of experience, ongoing in Crèvecoeur's moment, with the threat of Indigenous attack, African-descended slave revolt, free Black uprising, or some combination of all these. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), moreover, earthquake could serve as both a political metaphor of, and a literal opportunity for, the unsettlement of Peru. As its regional sign, seismicity perfectly expressed the entanglements of colonialism and slavery, and of unending war against both. Crèvecoeur's elaborate Spanish American comparison thus ironically reveals the interlocking of African slavery and Indigenous dispossession that Letter IX works to obfuscate by focusing so intently on the former. His letter also spectacularly adumbrates the "elementary convulsions" that would strike Charleston quite literally in 1886 and the poetic meditation on Charleston's place within Spanish America and the interlocking histories of Black and Indigenous enslavement offered by José Martí in his essay "El terremoto de Chárleston," discussed in [Chapter 8](#).

It is imperative that African slavery and Indigenous dispossession be spatially, temporally, and conceptually separated within James's account so that they may be deployed against each other: their disaggregation is essential to the exoneration of the emergent American and the development of his characteristic national innocence. As many critics have observed, Letter IX constitutes a turning point that clarifies the larger book's dedication, in the 1782 first edition, to the French Enlightenment writer Abbé (Guillaume Thomas François) Raynal—and through which Crèvecoeur, writing under his adopted English name, J. Hector St. John, announces the two "inseparable" sentiments that have supposedly guided his own work. Citing his encounter with the *Political and Philosophical History ... of the East and West Indies* and praising the "genius" therein, Crèvecoeur addresses the Abbé directly: "As an eloquent and powerful advocate, you have pleaded the cause of humanity, in espousing that of the poor Africans: you viewed these provinces of North America in their true light, as the asylum of freedom; as the cradle of future nations, and the refuge of distressed Europeans."⁴⁸ Crucially, Crèvecoeur's dedication not only links anti-slavery "sentiment" to an emergent nationalism defining the future of "North America" but suggests with its very punctuation—its cause-introducing or explanation-bearing colon—that the latter emerges from and is predicated on the former: the "cause ... of the poor Africans" somehow forms the "cradle" of a new country for "distressed Europeans."

To understand the linkage, we need only consider narrator James's transformation into such a distressed figure himself. As we have seen, James occupies the realm of American beauty and its concomitant proto-national

affect—happiness—at the opening of the volume; both of these are always formed by their contrast to a sublime and catastrophic elsewhere, usually to the south. But his confrontation with the horrors of slavery in South Carolina ultimately appears to fail in shoring up his northern sense of the solidity of the world, his distance from seismic rending, his enjoyment of American beauty, and his capacity for pleasure. “My mind is, and always has been, oppressed since I became witness to it,” James confides; at no point in this letter does the sublime do its proper work of providing “a new sort of happiness” in his spectatorial distance from catastrophe (*L* 129). For Greeson, the sudden change in James’s narrative voice marks “characterological suicide,” the death of the American farmer who will degenerate into a self-described “frontiersman” by the book’s final letter.⁴⁹ For Iannini, James’s transformation represents the farmer more broadly “turn[ing] his back on the Atlantic world” and the Caribbean sugar trade at its center—“a commerce which ought to unite, but now convulses the world,” as Crèvecoeur puts it in his dedication to Raynal.⁵⁰ Both of these readings help to clarify how James’s transformation into the very figure he reviled in Letter III—the so-called frontiersman—in fact consolidates his new national Americanness: no longer is he a prosperous, colonial American farmer; indeed, now he is more accurately the “distressed European” seeking “refuge” that he describes in his dedication to Raynal. In Greeson’s apt observation, the final letter allows James to shed his “colonial” past completely.⁵¹ His last act before abandoning his colonial house and farm is to free his own enslaved men, now carefully redescribed as “servants” and “negroes”: “In the name of God, be free, my honest lads. I thank you for your past services. Go from henceforth and work for yourselves ... Be sober, frugal, and industrious, and you need not fear earning a comfortable subsistence” (*L* 165). With these words, James rhetorically transforms himself from an enslaver into “an old friend and fellow-labourer” who takes up Raynal’s “cause ... of the poor Africans”—and he thereby pronounces himself the legitimate inheritor of the new nation: an innocent fugitive flying into the “bosom of that peace” that the future nation will claim as its reality and its creation (*L* 165, 171).

What James does not explain is how these formerly enslaved people are to have a “comfortable subsistence” in England’s North American mainland colonies—now all “convulsed” by the outbreak of revolution—while the distressed narrator must himself run from this violence or face a bloody end. By staging this peculiar moment as the American farmer’s sentimental manumission of his enslaved laborers—when in fact James is fleeing his plantation and will now have no more land to work—the farmer also attempts to bypass key aspects of the revolutionary war that his seismic rhetoric illuminates. As virtually all historical accounts do, James frames “this unfortunate revolution” as a war between the “mother country” of the British Empire and the colonial Englishmen, “the rest of [his] countrymen,” in his “own region” (*L* 152). Yet the very structure of Crèvecoeur’s *Letters* suggests that this conflict between Crown and Euro-American colonists, memorialized as

an American Revolution, in fact emerges from a deeper apprehension at the heart of Letter IX: the recognition that a revolution of the enslaved and a war of unsettlement are inevitable and always impending. Because Letter IX is itself framed as a meditation on the horror and iniquity of southern slavery from a northern and putatively innocent point of view, it is easy to miss this point: that the letter offers what Jared Hickman calls “a classic case of unthinking slave revolt” while being nevertheless haunted by “the specter of slave rebellion.”⁵² The letter formally enacts this unthinking by foregrounding “a dreadful scene of agonizing torture”—and then relegating to the quieter and post-spectacle background a story of Black insurgency so abbreviated as to be almost non-existent, a mere subordinate clause revealing “his having killed the overseer of the plantation” (L 130).

James’s changed view of slavery in this sense broadly reflects the emergent attitude of the British empire itself, which came to recognize what Horne calls the “riotous instability” of enslavement: the always concomitant force of possible revolution of the enslaved.⁵³ James claims to “know little about” the causes of the war between the British empire and the colonies, but the moral horror of slavery that Farmer James suddenly develops in the Carolinas is part of how he registers his supposedly bewildered version of loyalism (L 152). Indeed, his true horror is not of the depredations of slavery but of slave revolt—and, more specifically, of a revolution of the enslaved embedded within and in some ways driving forward a war with the British: as he puts it, “Could the lions of Africa be transported here and let loose, they would no doubt kill us in order to prey upon our carcasses, but their appetites would not require so many victims” (L 156). Indeed, the French word *révolution*, as Crèvecoeur knew from reading Raynal, could also mean slave revolution—and the so-called American Revolution, as James clearly understands on some level, involved, and at the deepest level *was*, both.⁵⁴

At the same time, Letter XII also registers James’s latent recognition that the “unfortunate revolution” subsuming his American utopia is also an Indigenous revolution, and the particularity of his misery in this last epistle is keyed in large part to this aspect of the conflict and his experience of it. “Could not the great nation we belong to have accomplished her designs by means of her numerous armies, by means of those fleets which cover the ocean?” he asks (L 157). For it is neither “mother country” nor “countrymen” that he envisions when he “shudder[s]” at “the end of this catastrophe,” but quite specifically the “scalping knife” and its attendant “barbarities and murders that make human nature tremble” (L 151, 155). It is the vision of Indigenous attack and “[his] children’s brains ... dashed against the walls of the house in which they were reared ... [his] wife ... stabbed and scalped before [his] face,” and himself “either murdered or captivated” (L 155). Indeed, James wishes to correct King George’s and by extension the reader’s misperception of the revolution as a war over “state policy” fought between Europeans and their colonial descendants: “Oh! Did he but know the circumstances of this horrid war, I am sure he would put a stop to that long destruction of parents

and children" (L 155). The specific problem to which James vociferously objects and yet which he can hardly articulate, in other words, is the centrality of Black and Indigenous actors—"lions of Africa" and wielders of the "scalping knife"—to the war engulfing his family. James can only envision these actors as "hired banditti"—"the dupes and the victims of both parties, foolishly arming for our sakes" (L 156). But the hysterical rhetoric in his letter posits the American Revolution as one episode of settler colonial war and one discrete conflict between settler and imperial interests—occurring within and in some ways subordinate to a much larger and longer war of unsettlement: an Indigenous and Black war, undertaken on many different fronts and hardly united, but always fought for freedom from slavery and dispossession.

The last epistle of *Letters* represents James's frantic attempt to manage the seismic philosophical effects of recognizing this war for what it is: a shattering of his very settler ontology, his belief in the stable ground of his American world and its presumed distance from catastrophe. Indeed, if Letter IX finds James within a torrid landscape in which he is confronted with the failures of theodicy and its southernizing discourse of racialized suffering—a place where he apparently fails to achieve the proper American happiness of spectatorial distance from catastrophe—Letter XII brings earthquake's rending to his northern realm and forces him to confront the geographical terms of the sublime through which he has been profiting all along. "I can never leave behind me the remembrance of the dreadful scenes to which I have been witness; therefore, never can I be happy!"; James exclaims before furiously retracting his own language: "*Happy*—why would I mention that sweet, that enchanting word?" (L 149). As Letter XII unfolds the loss of the farmer's affective-political ideal, James tries frantically to find a mode of seeing that will re-establish his philosophical foothold.

If his former happiness has been predicated on continuously seeing "America" alongside and in opposition to another global expanse, here in Letter XII James continues that doubled vision by imagining his New York farm emplaced within "the polar regions":

Oh! Could I remove my plantation to the shores of the Obi, willingly would I dwell in the hut of a Samoyed; with cheerfulness would I go and bury myself in the cavern of a Laplander. Could I but carry my family along with me, I would winter at Pello, or Tobolsky, in order to enjoy the innocence of that country. (L 149)

The country to which James wishes he could flee, that is, lies within the "Russian empire" that the gentleman Mr. Iw-n Al-z has described in the book's previous epistle, and its extended Russian-American comparison contextualizes the new geographical purview of James's opening remarks in Letter XII (L 143). Although Mr. Iw-n Al-z claims to be interested in the "knowledge, arts, and improvements"

of “Americans as the seed of future nations,” James’s remarks here remind us that the institutions of British settler colonialism in the Americas were of at least equal interest to Russian imperialists—and that Crèvecoeur was aware of these larger entanglements when he penned the conversation in which Mr. Iw-n Al-z and the botanist John Bartram explore the differences between slavery and serfdom. So too does James appear to be aware of certain structural parallels, for he imagines himself relocated quite specifically within Indigenous spaces—whether “hut” or “cavern”—of Siberia and Lapland (*L* 139). James envisions himself living, in other words, among the “Indians” of the Russian empire, an imaginative traversal that anticipates the end of Letter XII and the volume as a whole: his famous retreat inland to live in an Indigenous village. When James refers to the “innocence of that country” within the Russian empire, he means its freedom from the revolutionary war sweeping the North American colonies (*L* 149). But the status of Siberia and Lapland as part of a broad colonial territory comparable to the Americas, invaded by Russian forces and subject to military subordination over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, belies the “innocence” of James’s lament itself—a lament that reveals the very global structures of settler colonialism that the sublime production of American happiness works to obscure.

The settler sublime generates James’s American optimism by shoring up his sense of innocence vis-a-vis Lisbon, Lima, Charleston, and other sites of the Black Legend of southern iniquity; the same sublime also sustains his sense of settler stability in contrast to the seismic zones of elsewhere catastrophe more broadly. But in Letter XII James transforms into the object rather than the subject of modern philosophy because he must now himself suffer disaster, the “thousand streams of evil with which I am surrounded” (*L* 157). When faced with his own disastrous center, the margins of elsewhere catastrophe recede from his view, and now James assails the figure he had formerly assumed so easily as a northern viewer of seismic landscapes: “the cool, the distant spectator, placed in safety,” who watches the unfolding of catastrophe from afar and assimilates it via the sublime to a theodicy of necessity or greater good (*L* 154). Now that he is the potential object of someone else’s contemplation of catastrophic spectacle, James questions the fundamental premise of theodicy’s optimism as furiously as any Voltaire:

Must I then, in order to be called a faithful subject, coolly and philosophically say it is necessary for the good of Britain ... or that for greater expedition we should all be locked up and burnt to ashes as the family of the B___n was? ... Must I with meekness wait for that last pitch of desolation and receive with perfect resignation so hard a fate ...? (*L* 155)

But even as James recognizes here that theodicies shore up national identity and naturalize the uneven apportionment of the world’s suffering across disparate geographies, Crèvecoeur is himself, “coolly and philosophically,” writing a key

conceptual shift into the same “system of happiness” that *Letters* has celebrated all along. Without a comparative, disastrous elsewhere, the larger philosophical world-system producing America founders. Crèvecoeur must therefore find another mode of narrating the legitimacy of the settler state and of managing his own recognition of the long war for Black and Indigenous freedom from slavery and dispossession unfolding across the Americas and exploding in a new form in the colonies as the American Revolution.

This “unfortunate revolution,” as James terms it, enacted the shattering possibility of unsettlement that had always beset settler consciousness and would continue to do so across the next centuries. Within this context, James himself is transformed in his own eyes: “I resemble, methinks, one of the stones of a ruined arch, still retaining that pristine form which anciently fitted the place I occupied, but the centre is tumbled down; I can be nothing until I am replaced” (L 158). Crèvecoeur’s solution to this philosophical rending is to have his narrator draw himself out of the earthquake rubble and stake out a new philosophical position, one that claims to abandon Western philosophy altogether in a dramatic turn to Indigenous life. Outlining his plan to withdraw himself and his family from the war zone and to join an unnamed Native community—“the great _____ village of _____”—Farmer James now rejects the “American” happiness or “system of felicity” he had earlier endorsed and praises instead an Indigenous way of life that is “most certainly ... much more closely connected with nature” (L 161-62). The terms of this encomium repeat his earlier praise for the new settler people known as Americans: the Indigenous “inhabitants” have “uncontaminated, simple manners” and “live with more ease, decency, and peace than you can imagine.” The settler American world now becomes “the accursed neighborhood of the Europeans,” and the Indians become James’s new Americans (L 159). Compared to their ways, he asks, “What system of philosophy can give us so many necessary qualifications for happiness?” (L 215).

But James’s apparent rejection of the old system of American happiness is merely a redefinition, of course, just as his earlier repudiation of Western theodicy represents merely a reworking of settler theodicy under altered terms. If Letter IX relies on the US South to begin this reworking, Letter XII relocates the problem besetting theodicy—what James ends the volume by referring to as the “load of physical and moral evil with which we are all oppressed”—according to a new geographic directionality: the east with its morally corrupt and “accursed ... Europeans” (L 173). While James ostensibly rejects theodicy, in other words, Crèvecoeur has merely relocated the space of its jurisdiction in the “true” America that is neither to the south nor to the east, neither colonial Spanish nor European. In this new American purview known as the forest, Crèvecoeur establishes a new iteration of settler theodicy ensuring that even the misfortune of the revolution contributes to the larger beneficent design by which James and his family re-establish their nativity as quasi-indigeneity. In doing so, Crèvecoeur also rewrites the history of settler

colonialism not as a *Candide*-style American garden tilled upon land the savages have left wild but as an outright landgrab legitimated by explicit invitation from an “honest chief” who offers Indian country for the taking: “He will spare us half his wigwam until we have time to erect one. He has sent me word that they have land in plenty ... that we may plant for ourselves” (L 165).

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In a version of this story that we already know, Crèvecoeur stands at the threshold of American Romanticism, ready to subordinate reason to the working of “warnings and sure prognostics” and the “doctrine of omens” (L 203), ready to leave behind home and hearth and embrace the “great forest of nature” (L 211), ready to flee what Emerson would call “the intruding rabble of men ... and institutions” in order to enjoy “an original relation to the universe.”⁵⁵ James is practically feeding Emerson his future lines in self-reliance when he says, “Books tell me so much that they inform me of nothing” (L 204).

Reading Crèvecoeur in light of a genealogy unfolding from Lima and Lisbon, however, we begin to recognize how earthquake-unsettling across the centuries—the earth-rending of Black and Indigenous revolution—shaped the familiar contours and categories of literary and philosophical history, and shaped too what we know as Enlightenment or Romanticism, while also calling into question its presumed origins and directionalities. Long before Emerson, Crèvecoeur found similar appeals to nature, arising from very different contexts, in Raynal, who maintained that “Nature speaks a more powerful language than philosophy, or interests.”⁵⁶ The nature of Raynal’s famous dictum is not the uncultivated woods to which James flees. Nature, in the articulate form proposed by Raynal, is what James is running *from*, a terrifying but glorious slave revolution bearing forth across the hemisphere the “sacred standard of liberty”:

Spaniards, Portugeze, English, French, Dutch, all their tyrants will become the victims of fire and sword. The plains of America will suck up with transport the blood which they have so long expected, and the bones of so many wretches, heaped upon one another, during the course of so many centuries, will bound for joy.⁵⁷

The enslavers, that is, will be swallowed by the earth—a vindication for the long-buried bones of the enslaved across the centuries. In Raynal, earthquake co-articulated with Indigenous revolution, too: in Peru, the “natives of the country, when they saw the foundations dug, and built with mortar” to make houses for the Spanish invaders who settled Lima, “said that their tyrants were digging graves for themselves. Perhaps it was some consolation to the wretchedness of the conquered, to foresee that the earth itself would take its revenge of its depopulators.”⁵⁸

The nascent American Romanticism concluding the text of Crèvecoeur's *Letters*, in other words, is determined by the tempo of Black and Indigenous revolution across the Americas in ways that appear unthinkable to James, who believes he is leaving European philosophy behind for a better "system of happiness." But his creator was merely playing a long metaphysical game as he sent James from his well-tended farm into the dark forest to worship the "Supreme Being [who] does not reside in peculiar churches or communities, [and] is equally the great Manitou of the woods and of the plains" (L 170). Like all versions of the settler sublime, this one too defines his capacity for sentiment and becomes a register of his humanity. It is fitting, then, that in 1789 Crèvecoeur was elected to the American Philosophical Society—the learned society inaugurated a half-century earlier by Benjamin Franklin to mark the supposed end of what he called "the first drudgery of settling the new colonies." With this process "now pretty well over," as Franklin put it in 1743, the new philosophical society would dedicate itself to "promoting useful knowledge."⁵⁹ But the "drudgery" of settlement, and all its attendant violence, had of course hardly begun; it is, by definition, never over. Crèvecoeur's *Letters* simply helped readers learn to see beyond and through it. It showed them how to tell the story of American settlement while hiding its primary secrets in plain sight, and how to make use of a fluctuating philosophical world-system that would continually restructure, across the nineteenth century and beyond, the national US relation to a perceived world of disastrous souths and catastrophic elsewhere. In the next century, US literature would help to shore up this perceived world—but also reveal it as a mirror of the literal earthquakes that were quickly forgotten within national historiography. The next chapter explores this strange earthquake amnesia.

Notes

1. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, ed. Dennis C. Moore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 31 (*Letters* hereafter cited internally as *L*).
2. On Aristotle's "torrid zone" and its later influences, see, among many others, Alister E. McGrath, *Natural Philosophy: On Retrieving a Lost Disciplinary Imaginary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 38–39.
3. Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*, 77.
4. Thomas Hartley, *God's Controversy with the Nations* (London, 1756), 15. Cited in Kendrick, *The Lisbon Earthquake*, 151.
5. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 38 (hereafter cited as *SB*).
6. Burke, *Account of the European Settlements in America* (London: J. Dodsley, 1760), 81.
7. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), 156.
8. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 36.
9. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Daedalus* 103, no. 2 (1974): 88; see also Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

10. Harold Bloom, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.
11. Previous work on the wider implications of the sublime for thinking about race, slavery, and empire includes Matt Clavin, "Race, Revolution, and the Sublime: The Gothicization of the Haitian Revolution in the New Republic and Atlantic World," *Early American Studies* 5 (2007): 1–29 and Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), esp. chapter 1, "The Colonial Pastoral, Abolition, and the Transcendental Sublime."
12. The idea of a settler colonial sublime has also been developed in the context of contemporary Peru by María Elena García, who defines it broadly as "art that conceals and obscures the erasure and appropriation of specific Indigenous peoples and practices"; see *Gastropolitics and the Specter of Race* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 63.
13. See James Myers, "Crèvecoeur: Concealing and Revealing the Secret Self," *Early American Literature* 49, no. 2 (2014): 357–401.
14. Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York: University of New York Press, 2014). See also Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
15. Quoted in Grantland S. Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 111.
16. Crèvecoeur, "Rock of Lisbon," in *Letters*, ed. Moore, ix–xxxi ("Rock of Lisbon" hereafter cited as R). I have standardized spelling and capitalization throughout.
17. Anthony-Ashley Cooper (3rd Earl of Shaftesbury), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 319.
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19. John Adams, *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. George A. Peek (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1954), 84.
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21. See Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 256; Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81; On Columbus's desire to replicate Portuguese slaving practices, see Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*.
22. John M. Monteiro, *Blacks of the Land: Indian Slavery, Settler Society, and the Portuguese Colonial Enterprise in South America*, ed. and trans. James Woodard and Barbara Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), is a foundational study of Indigenous slavery in Brazil; see Purnima Mehta Bhatt, *The African Diaspora in India: Assimilation, Change, and Cultural Survivals* (London: Routledge, 2018), on African slavery in India.
23. Ralph Bauer, *The Alchemy of Conquest*.
24. Crèvecoeur, "Sketch of the Contrast," in *Letters*, ed. Moore, 307 (hereafter cited as SC). I have standardized spelling and capitalization throughout.
25. Gruesz, *Cotton Mather's Spanish Lessons*, 30.
26. Crèvecoeur, "Jamaica and Bermuda," in *Letters*, ed. Moore, 206 (hereafter cited as JB).
27. Emanuel Heath, *A full Account of the Late Dreadful Earthquake at Port Royal in Jamaica; Written in two Letters from the Minister of that Place. From a Board the Granada in Port Royal Harbour, June 22, 1692*, Early English Books Online, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A40532.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
28. Christopher Iannini, "'The Itinerant Man': Crèvecoeur's Caribbean, Raynal's Revolution, and the Fate of Atlantic Cosmopolitanism," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2004): 224.
29. Timothy L. Fosbury, "Bermuda's Persistent Futures," *American Literary History* 32, no. 1 (2020): 1–21. Fosbury's fascinating reading illuminates the special place of Bermuda in English visions of the hemisphere.
30. Cited in Michael Pawson and David Buisseret, *Port Royal, Jamaica* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002), 168.

31. On the relationships among Crèvecoeur, narrator James, and addressee F.B., see especially Annette Kolodny's classic study *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 52–66; Stephen Carl Arch, "The 'Progressive Steps' of the Narrator in Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*," *Studies in American Fiction* 18, no. 2 (1990): 145–158; Grantland S. Rice, *Transformation of Authorship*, 99–123; and Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 200–239.
32. Whether Crèvecoeur or someone else chose the order for the letters is unclear, as is when precisely he wrote the letters that appear to predate the revolution.
33. See Moore's introduction to *Letters* on the question of satire and Crèvecoeur's relation to Voltaire's work as well as other models of philosophical novels (xi–xiii).
34. Vivasan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 299, 298.
35. Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, ed. Moore, 51. "Crèvecoeur reprises this conversation in a portion of Letter III that appears in the 1783 edition of *Letters*" (xxx).
36. Zach Hutchins, "Crèvecoeur's Miltonic Epic: Paradise Lost and the Subversive Structural Poetics of *Letters from an American Farmer*," *The Eighteenth Century* 61, no. 1 (2020): 106.
37. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives: With an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin*, v. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 465.
38. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 437.
39. *Ibid.*, 63.
40. *Ibid.*, 64.
41. See Eduardo Cadava, "The Guano of History," in *Cities without Citizens*, ed. Cadava and Aaron Levy (Philadelphia, PA: Slought Books, 2004), 137.
42. Jennifer C. James, "'Buried in Guano': Race, Labor, and Sustainability," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 120.
43. Jennifer Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 25.
44. See Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*.
45. Ian Frederick Finseth, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770–1860* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 93.
46. Greeson, *Our South*, 25–26.
47. See especially Horne's interpretation in *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*.
48. The epigraph from the 1782 first edition is included in Susan Manning's edition of *Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7. Bauer cautions against taking Crèvecoeur's purported humility toward Raynal at face value; see his foundational reading of *Letters*, alongside Alonso Carrió de la Vandra's *El lazarillo de ciegos caminantes* (1776), as a Creole "dismemberment" of the authority of the European Man of Science. Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures*, 200–240.
49. Greeson, *Our South*, 31.
50. *Letters*, ed. Manning, 7. See Iannini, "'The Itinerant Man,'" 232.
51. Greeson, *Our South*, 25.
52. Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, 311.
53. Horne, *The Counter-Revolution*, 39.
54. See Abbé Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Mundell and Son, 1804), 311.
55. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 272.
56. Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History, Volume 4*, 112.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History, Volume 2* (Dublin: John Exshaw and William Halhead, 1779), 329.
59. Benjamin Franklin, "A Proposal for Promoting Useful Knowledge, 14 May 1743," *Founders Online*, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0092>.

6

Earthquake Amnesia

In the decade following Crèvecoeur's philosophical elaboration of a "new sort of happiness," rooted in immunity to earthquake, Olaudah Equiano published the first self-authored slave narrative of the Atlantic world. The original 1789 edition of his narrative includes all manner of calamity as the formerly enslaved captive narrates his young protagonist self, often in a state of physiological trembling, passing through multiple worlds: from his native birthplace in present-day Nigeria into the horrors of captivity and the Middle Passage and finally through the tumultuous conversion process that renders him a "protestant of the church of England."¹ But the ground itself remains stable through it all.

By the third edition in 1790, however, Equiano had added a new account of two historical earthquakes experienced during the time of his enslavement, both occurring at midnight in the West Indies and placed in a section of the narrative devoted to the horrors of Caribbean slavery. As Douglas Anderson has observed, this is precisely the place in the narrative where Equiano's evangelical faith and his stated belief in the intervention of providence should bear weight: "Few places in Equiano's experience are more suitable candidates for a divine onslaught with fire and brimstone."² And yet in the case of these dual earthquakes, the opposite is the case.

The first earthquake occurs just after Equiano has been unexpectedly sold and sent to Montserrat. On the island, he explores "a celebrated curiosity called Brimstone-Hill": a "high and steep mountain" with "steams of various little ponds ... boiling naturally in the earth" (*IN* 113). There Equiano experiments: the potatoes that he boils in the ponds taste "very sulphurous" and the silver shoe-buckles he submerges turn "black as lead" (*IN* 114). Notably, he never invokes the word "volcano"; he frames his youthful empiricism instead as a kind of African innocence. The paragraphs introducing earthquake—inserted in the third and subsequent editions—thus begin ingenuously: "Whilst I was in the island, one night I felt a strange sensation, on being told that the house where I lived was haunted by spirits!" With this pronouncement of haunting, the passage lapses back into a state he has previously characterized as unenlightened ignorance of white English supremacy: "I no longer looked upon them as spirits," says Equiano earlier of his "new countrymen" in England, "but as men superior to us" (*IN* 78). The epiphany leaves him, he claims, "quite easy" in mind (*IN* 77).

But "spirits" is also the word that Equiano enlists to distinguish between European and Eboe religious beliefs. In contrast to the Christian doctrine of

“transmigration of souls,” he explains, there is a doctrine of immanent spirits, of living-dead ancestors and enemies who remain in the present world: “Those spirits, which are not transmigrated, such as our dear friends or relations, they believe always attend them, and guard them from the bad spirits of their foes” (IN 40). The slippage between “their” and “our” disrupts the narrative’s Euro-Christian secular frame of anthropological distance from its purported past. So too does the earthquake scene that follows Equiano’s “strange sensation” on learning that his house is haunted by spirits:

And once, at midnight, as I was sleeping on a large chest, I felt the whole building shake in an uncommon and astonishing manner; so much so, that it shook me off the chest where I then lay. I was exceedingly frightened and thought it was the visitation of the spirits. It threw me into such a tremor as is not to be described. I instantly covered my head all over as I lay, and did not know what to think or do; and in this consternation, a gentleman, who lay in the room just by me, came out, and I was glad to hear him, and made a sham cough, and he asked me if I felt the earthquake. I told him I was shaken off the chest where I lay, but did not know what occasioned it; and he told me it was an earthquake, and that it shook him out of his bed. On hearing this, I became easy in my mind. (IN 114)

The account traces a familiar trajectory from innocence to experience, as the naïve young Equiano is enlightened by a worldly “gentleman” who disabuses him of the belief that he is being haunted, subject to “visitation by the spirits.” Yet the passage sounds an oddly satirical note in Equiano’s immediate nonchalance about the shaking: once he knows its cause, the narrator is “easy in [his] mind,” as he was after accepting purported English superiority. The scene almost comically plays out the familiar Enlightenment passage from spiritual terror to natural explanation, from religious visitation to geological causation—or, as Cotton Mather put it, from “the terrible Roaring” of God to impious “philosophical disquisitions” on “Sulphurous ... Exhalations in the Bowels of the Earth.”³ For as Equiano moves from a spiritual frame to a natural one, he does so with such Candide-like facility (oh, just an earthquake? No problem!) that he calls into question the very transition from metaphysical to earthly concerns. As Srinivas Aravamudan characterizes the trajectory of the *Interesting Narrative*, “The shell of spiritual autobiography crumbles to reveal a political manifesto beneath the generic structure.”⁴

The second earthquake Equiano recounts—this time on shipboard—produces a similar effect: shaking “in the most unaccountable manner imaginable” that ends “happily,” “with no damage done” (IN 114). There is, though, a kind of rupture made by the addition of both these earthquake passages. As Equiano asks at the end of his narrative, “After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser?” (IN 236). Yet there is no one “better and

wiser” after the earthquakes—and that seems to be the whole point. The earthquakes have been stripped of their terror-inducing capacities even as Equiano’s “spirits” clearly have not. In this sense, the earthquakes register the insistent pressure of African cosmological immanence—here consolidated under the sign of “spirits”—on the narrative’s larger arc of Christian Enlightenment. Equiano does not say who told him that his house was haunted by spirits, or for that matter what kind of spirits they were, “dear friends [and] relations” or the “bad spirits” of “foes.” But with his attested belief that spirits have come to visit and the terror that this idea produces, Equiano interrupts the narrative trajectory of smooth transition to Euro-Protestant religious-secular modernity. This hiccup in the text suggests an alternative version of the story told in his autobiography: a story not of the path from enslavement to freedom but instead of continuing coloniality as an intermittent haunting, whether by kindred spirits or by those spirits of enemies, from whom he can escape only by accepting the doctrine of white supremacy.

The *Interesting Narrative* explores these conditions of Western colonial modernity through Equiano’s overlapping frames for earthquake: empiricist observation followed by the separation of theology from natural philosophy, “visitation of the spirits” displaced by the rational explanation of earthquake. These frames are further destabilized by the latent comedy of the scene, the premise that earthquakes signify not rupture but reassurance. For as we have seen earthquakes do signify rupture throughout the history of the Americas: both the rupture of colonialism and enslavement and the rupture of their overthrow.

It is no accident that Equiano inserts earthquake into his narrative just after his famous citation of Beelzebub’s speech from *Paradise Lost*, with its reminder of the “power, hostility, and hate” that animate the enslaved (IN 112). Slavery is a “state of war,” Equiano declares, taking John Locke’s notorious phrase in the *Two Treatises* to its logical conclusion (IN 111). Locke justifies slavery on the grounds that war exists, arguing that “the perfect condition of slavery ... is nothing else, but the state of war continued.”⁵ The state of war and slavery can end, Locke theorizes, when the enslaved subject enters into a “compact” promising obedience in exchange for “limited power” and security of life from the enslaver, or when the enslaved subject decides, “by resisting the will of his master, to draw on himself the death he desires” over slavery.⁶ Equiano, by contrast, insists that the state of war may unfold quite differently. “Are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment?” he asks, before citing from Beelzebub’s speech promising revenge (IN 112). Although the utopian passage imagines a world in which enslavers treat “slaves as men” and “every cause of fear [is] banished” by “peace, prosperity, and happiness,” the rupture of potential revolution has been invoked (IN 112).⁷

The question that lingers over the *Interesting Narrative*’s earthquake imaginings will be repeated, across the Atlantic, in slumbering volcanoes and their attendant earthquakes throughout the subsequent century of American literature: “Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection?” (IN 112). Yet as Lisa Lowe has observed,

Equiano's complex narrative of his journey from enslavement to free English subjecthood draws upon a particular settler colonial subplot that helps to shore up his authorial position.⁸ Among other narrative requirements—acquiring alphabetic literacy, buying his own freedom, converting to Christianity—Equiano's story also details his structural transformation into a settler through his exercise of mastery over other people of African descent as well as a group of Miskito people in Central America. Part of what allows Equiano to assume the position of metropolitan Afro-British authorship of his larger narrative is this embedded account of becoming a settler subject in the British colonies. In the process, Lowe argues, he must renounce his own status as a Native subject whose African indigeneity was plundered, along with his body, during his capture. Yet the West Indian earthquakes that arrive in the later edition of Equiano's narrative complicate that renunciation, returning the spirits of his childhood cosmology to the storyline and troubling its final arrival in Euro-secular-Christian modernity.

Equiano's seismic spirits throw into strange relief both the earlier earthquake anxieties of New England settlers and a new and peculiar aspect of the corresponding modernity-narrative unfolding in the emergent national US imagination: its strange insistence on an exemption, as per Crèvecoeur, from the cracking open of the earth. For just as in the West Indies, the earth *did* crack open in the new nation, and did so repeatedly, and not only in New England. In 1774, even as Crèvecoeur was composing the text that would introduce "America" to the world, Thomas Jefferson was recording "a shock of an earthquake at Monticello"—one that "shook the houses so insensibly that every body [ran] out of doors."⁹ The next hour brought a new shock, and another came the following afternoon. The event disrupted the labor regime on the plantation—enslaved workers "could scarcely be made to return to work," as one historian puts it—and Jefferson's sister seems to have disappeared during the chaos. Her body washed up from the Rivanna River, which had overflowed during the earthquake, three days later.¹⁰

Yet by the time Jefferson published his *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1785—a text inspired in part by Crèvecoeur's *Letters* and also heavily influenced by Voltaire—earthquakes found no place in the present-day natural history of the state. Instead, Jefferson studied the natural evidence all around him and speculated on the ancient geological past, concluding that "this country must have suffered some violent convulsion, and that the face of it must have been changed from what it probably was some centuries ago."¹¹ Like Crèvecoeur's panoramic vision from the New York mountaintop, Jefferson's geological musings embraced the entire hemisphere: an imagined past in which "some convulsion or shock of nature" had separated North from South America and destroyed whole mountains, allowing the ocean to carry bodies of loam and sand between the "foot of the Andes" and the "banks of Newfoundland." Made of the same soil, the two halves of the hemisphere—at least in his "visions of fancy"—shared a common origin in an ancient rending of the earth.¹²

Across the hemispheric sweep of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson continually hypothesized such convulsions in the past. But he had nothing to say about the earthquake shocks felt at Monticello in his own lifetime. Earthquakes have no place in the pastoral fantasy subtending this vision of Virginia, in which the cultivation of one's own garden is the mark of a truly philosophical gentleman (particularly if the various unnamed "Cacambos" he enslaves are providing the actual labor). If Jefferson absorbed Voltaire's pastoral ideal—along with the most violent of racisms in *Candide*—he inherited none of the novel's satire regarding the Lisbon earthquake. Instead, taking up the strategic convergence of geology and race common among eighteenth-century naturalists, Jefferson conceptually cleared America's garden present by rendering Indigenous people as fossils of the future's past while conceiving of Black, post-slavery futures as geologically apocalyptic: producing "convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."¹³

In this sense, *Notes on the State of Virginia* lays bare the georacial logic of earthquake structuring the invention of US-America. At the same time, by omitting any accounts of the earthquakes he experienced at Monticello, Jefferson models earthquake amnesia: the forgetting of seismic events and the unwillingness to countenance their possibility in the future. Earthquake amnesia marks the development of the settler psyche over time: the earthquakes so feared by New England settlers were by the nineteenth century no longer fully legible as American events, and were thus quickly forgotten, like the earthquake at Monticello, within early national historiography. If all forms of nationalism depend on forgetting, the nature of what is forgotten is straightforwardly antithetical to national mythologies of purity, priority, and virtue. The human violence of state power is what most often goes unremembered—not the natural violence of the ostensibly separate inhuman world. And yet across the nineteenth century, the settler habitus in the US required the continual forgetting of earthquake.

The most striking example is the series of massive New Madrid earthquakes that struck in 1811 and 1812 in what is now Missouri (discussed in [Chapter 1](#)). As Convery Valenčius has shown, these earthquakes—so powerful that they were felt as far away as New Hampshire, Washington, DC, and South Carolina—dramatically altered the physical landscape and human culture of an entire region.¹⁴ And yet despite the massive effects of these cataclysms, the very title of Valenčius's book bears out the premise of US earthquake amnesia. What her important work recovers is *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes*: for these seismic events were entirely forgotten in the succeeding years and decades. As a result, seismologists today know less about them than they might (including why exactly the earthquakes occurred) had their history not been so long forgotten.

In the nineteenth century, however, Indigenous thinkers developed their own frameworks for understanding and responding to such violent rendings of the earth. As Dana Luciano has explained, Creek, Osage, Chickasaw, and Cherokee

interpretations of the New Madrid earthquakes were both anticolonial in character and rooted in “resurgent, relational modes of knowing that Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) terms ‘land as pedagogy.’”¹⁵ Understood as a mode of teaching, the shaking of the land evinced truths about the nature of and proper responses to the “violence of occupation,” including its disruption of “Indigenous relationships to the land.”¹⁶ Like the Andean theory of *pachacuti*, earthquakes materially signaled a temporal return: both an “overturning of the land” and a potential “reasserting [of] interrupted histories” of Indigenous co-action with and relation to the land.¹⁷ In this framework, the earthquakes heralded a spatio-temporal revolution that was also a renovation, a remediating of colonial catastrophe augured by what settler culture took to be geological catastrophe. Across different Indigenous interpretations of the readings, the same ideas prevailed: that the time had come to act *with* the earthquake and that the earth’s rebalancing required the ending of settler relations to the land. The quakes represented the earth’s own agency directed against conquest; they were latent with vital knowledge to be interpreted in the light of earlier Native prophecy, and with the chaos they brought, they also provided a strategic opportunity.

Luciano locates the key evidence of Native responses to the New Madrid earthquakes within the important context of the pan-Indigenous spiritual resistance movement already underway at the time of the events and particularly the earlier anticolonial prophecy of an end to settler rule and a return to proper land relations brought about by and with the movements of earthquake.¹⁸ Importantly, however, she shows that the settler record of this earthquake prophecy distorts its origins, and thereby contains its most powerful potential implications, through a misattribution that continues to this day in the scholarship. Most accounts of the prophecy shaping Indigenous responses to the New Madrid earthquake crisis wrongly attribute it to Tecumseh, the Shawnee leader of the multiracial military confederacy that sided with the British in the War of 1812 in an attempt to halt further US-American settler encroachment into Native lands.¹⁹ In fact, however, the prophecy came from Shawnee religious and political leader Tenskwatawa, Tecumseh’s far less famous brother. The misattribution, as Luciano argues, was hardly neutral, as Tecumseh had already been killed in battle by American forces in 1813, when accounts of his supposed prophecy began to circulate in settler records. If Tecumseh’s death made him a convenient and indeed necessary figure for settler romanticization, the misattribution of the earthquake prophecy also effectively lessened its potential power by rendering it posthumous, attaching it to an historical actor already safely in the grave.²⁰ This substitution of one Shawnee brother for the other also contributed to what I am identifying as a broader earthquake amnesia. For while Tecumseh himself did not fade from American history, there is little corresponding memory of Tenskwatawa or the New Madrid earthquakes.

The remainder of this chapter explores nineteenth-century earthquake amnesia in its fictional register by turning to two novels unusually marked both by their inheritances from Crèvecoeur, Voltaire, and El Inca Garcilaso and by the dramatic movement of the ground itself: Edgar Allan Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Crater* (1847). Across the tradition of "classic American literature" once outlined by D. H. Lawrence, these novels and their earthquakes stand out from the broader swathe of US settler fiction working out its continuing obsession with the displacement—the emplacement elsewhere—of the ongoing catastrophes of colonialism.²¹ The pastoral ideology of American nature writing, as Lawrence Buell notes, was essential to a settler "cultural self-definition" that could simultaneously "underwrite a program of conquest": earthquakes do not happen in a harmonious national Arcadia.²² At the same time, the fictional form of the romance met the settler psyche's requirement for spatio-temporal relocation—for settings, as Nathaniel Hawthorne famously put it in his 1860 definition of the genre—where "actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America": "a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, not anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land."²³ Critics have long remarked on these lines for their disavowal of slavery and Indigenous dispossession—for Hawthorne's refusal of the "shadow" of conquest itself. As Jennifer Greeson puts it, "Hawthorne seemed to flaunt the act of repression in these lines."²⁴ He also tried to predict and control the unfolding of linear history by insisting that any age of American "ruin" must be far in the future—a veritable counterfactual prediction, as Greeson notes, "on the eve of the rending of the republic."²⁵

But if the sundering of the national union was the specific rending that Hawthorne both foresaw and tried to unsee, that looming war was also part of a much older and longer earthquake that had to be continuously forgotten—and that remains forgotten, by reflexive corollary, in the long remembrance of the Civil War. For as both *Pym* and *The Crater* suggest, the history of anticolonial unsettlement is the nation's enduring elsewhere catastrophe: earthquake must be forgotten because it both figures and enacts the unending possibility that the settler colonial state itself may one day be swallowed by the earth.

Poe's *Pym* as a *Conte Philosophique* of the Global South

If Poe wrote *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) primarily to earn money—padding the text liberally with extracts from other authors' travel writings, and even later privately dismissing his only novel as a "very silly work"—he managed nevertheless to create a work about racial terror that remains as profound

as it is ambiguous.²⁶ As Michael Warner once put it, describing the strange hieroglyphs explored at the end of the novel, “Nothing is clearer than that these messages refer to the political crisis of race in the union” and “nothing is less clear than *how* they refer to that crisis.”²⁷ Ishmael Reed approached this problem by interpreting *Pym* as previsionary rather than, or in addition to, being an account of the present, calling Poe the “principal biographer” of the Civil War that would erupt over a decade after his death.²⁸ Adapting Reed, we might even say that Poe foresaw what historians of the twenty-first century have begun to apprehend: that the Civil War was in fact “the greatest slave rebellion in modern history,” as Steven Hanh puts it, and must be understood through the lens of the Haitian Revolution.²⁹ Poe was at once a historian, a commentator on his present, and a prognosticator of future American catastrophe: in Reed’s terms, a “prophet of a civilization buried alive.”³⁰

The mechanism of this live burial is earthquake—a post-Lisbon figure for theoretical rupture that signals the novel’s broad interest in Western philosophy and its inheritances from Voltaire in particular.³¹ Reading *Pym* in the tradition of the eighteenth-century *conte philosophique*—as a nineteenth-century US-American cousin of *Candide*—illuminates Poe’s interest in the centuries-long Western tradition of locating both men-of-ore and evil, and in the Christian tradition Satan himself, within the bowels of the earth. Like Cotton Mather’s devils and specters, the Indigenous islanders who face an invasion in this novel can shake the earth when they wish to—and the philosophical implications of their non-Western science must be read alongside the novel’s interest in providence, theodicy, and the global-colonial geographies of violence and suffering.

The “civilization” buried alive in *Pym* might best be described as Anglo-American, or more accurately both American and British, because it is metaphorized by the overlapping crews of two ships: the “*American brig Grampus*” and the “*British schooner Jane Guy*.”³² In the brief abstract of events that precedes the novel, Poe introduces these two Ships of State, drawing on Plato’s famous political analogy, to suggest the perilous courses on which American and British colonialisms have been and are respectively headed. The abstract is mostly a list of violent episodes: “mutiny and atrocious butchery”; “shipwreck and subsequent horrible sufferings by famine”; “deliverance ... [and] ... massacre” (*P* 1103). The requisite “incredible adventures and discoveries” are tacked on toward the end as promotional material for the ensuing narrative—a recursive story that reprises events from the history of modern colonialism from the first arrival of Portuguese enslavers in Africa in 1444 (*P* 1103). But even this discourse of adventure and discovery is supplanted in the final clause of the abstract by “distressing calamity” as its enduring source: that which “gave rise” to traveling “still further south” (*P* 1103). The history of these various colonialisms—American and European—is a history of catastrophes, all born from the same essential contest to extract from the earth and its Indigenous peoples.

The novel makes clear from the beginning that Pym's "respectable" Nantucket family history and his expected inheritance have emerged from the histories of sea-trade and financial speculation; the third term that silently links these histories, chattel slavery, is omitted (*P* 1009). But the novel's interest in the catastrophic earthquake of racial capitalism as a final stage in a long global-colonial history of modernity quickly emerges when Pym adds to this early biographical sketch a key element: that it is "stories of the natives of the Island of Tsinian" that elicited his "greatest desire to go to sea" (*P* 1109). (Here too we might adapt Reed to call Poe a "prophet": what was in Poe's day a Spanish colonial holding—from which the Indigenous Chamorro population had been brutally relocated, to neighboring island Guam, in 1720—is now an unincorporated territory of the US administrated, along with all Native American programs, by the Department of the Interior.) Pym is ineluctably drawn to sea by this Spanish colonial story of Chamorro devastation—despite all warnings otherwise. His first voyage out with Augustus results in a sense of "hastening the catastrophe" and a near-death experience that reveals to him his first two Ships of State, one steered by a madman and the other by a captain of "heartless atrocity" (*P* 1014). His last sensory impression before losing consciousness is the sound of "a loud and long scream or yell, as if from the throats of a thousand demons" (*P* 1013).

We might say that Pym hears here the reverberating shriek of *fukú*, known to twenty-first-century readers of Junot Díaz as the "nightmare door" first "cracked open in the Antilles" and releasing the ongoing curse of coloniality.³³ And yet even this clear omen cannot deter Pym from proceeding: "It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion ... On the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing" for the sea (*P* 1018). Pym thus casts his own beginning as the inescapable pull of ocean life rather than what it finally is: the repetition compulsion of colonialism as a series of catastrophes, culminating in an earthquake that swallows the would-be colonizers. Pym frames this attraction to catastrophe as an aesthetic sensibility, a sublime-oriented rejection of "the bright side of the painting," for which he has "limited sympathy"—an "oppressor's sublime," as John T. Matthews puts it: a nod to the appetite of Poe's readers for elsewhere catastrophe.³⁴ And like colonial writing throughout the Americas, Pym's own synopsis of what is about to befall him distorts the violence of genocide, enslavement, and dispossession into a spectacle of the endless suffering of the colonial subject: "My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death and captivity among barbarian hordes, of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears" (*P* 1018).

The iterative quality of Pym's personal disaster narrative mirrors the recursion of historical figures and references in a dizzying series suggesting that modern global-colonial history, too, is a loop of repeating catastrophic cycles linking all characters and events: from Augustus's tales of "the natives of the Island of Tsinian" (*P* 1109) to Pym's copy of the Lewis and Clark expedition journal to the emergence

of Dirk Peters from Lewis River; from the “horrible butchery” of the “black cook” (P 1043) who evokes the so-called “horrors of St. Domingo” or the Haitian Revolution to the insurgency of the Indigenous islanders of Tsalal against the crew of the *Jane Guy*, which evokes the insurgencies of Native Hawaiians against Captain Cook and of Indigenous Tainos against Columbus’s settlement at La Navidad; to the Columbus-like logbook we are reading until the final “Note” alerts us to Pym’s death, and which has been publicized at the request of “several gentlemen in Richmond, Va., who felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions [Pym] had visited” (P 1007). The entangled histories of Indigenous slavery and dispossession in Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific Islands—and of unsettlement by Native insurgency—also underwrite the obsessive repetition of colonial landmarks and geographies: Nantucket, New Bedford, the South Pacific, the “burning sand-plains of Sahara” (P 1026); the “Black Hills, near the source of the Missouri” (P 1043); the Bermuda Islands, the “Cape Verd Islands,” “Porto Rico” (P 1113), the West India Islands, Rio (Brazil), Norfolk (Virginia), Liverpool, Boston, Santa Croix, the East Indies, Guinea, “Kerguelen’s Land,” “Cape St. Roque” (P 1114), the Cape of Good Hope, the Prince Edward Islands, “Tristan d’Acunha” (P 1125), Philadelphia, the “Malninas” (P 1123) or Islas Malvinas, the western coast of Georgia, Patagonia, New York.

All these places have histories enmeshed with what Pym calls the “most appalling and unfathomable mystery”—a phrase he uses to describe the Dutch trader ship that he and his fellow castaways encounter at sea only to learn that it cannot rescue them, for it is sailed by a crew of corpses (P 1078). For short-sighted Pym, the “unfathomable” question is how this specific crew and set of passengers has died: by yellow fever or poison? But the true “mystery” of the scene is a deeply philosophical and enduring one regarding the nature of evil and suffering in the modern West. How are these to be explained in a world overseen by divine providence? To what extent are natural evil (yellow fever) and human evil (poison) separate categories? And, as one of Toni Morrison’s memorable characters asks about her own scene of colonial catastrophe, “who is responsible?”³⁵ Poe points to his own philosophical answer by recalling in this scene the legend of the Flying Dutchman, the ghost-ship sailing perpetually in the past, during the so-called Golden Age of the Dutch East India company. In Poe’s hands, however, the romantic Dutch ship registers not a prior age of greatness but instead the era’s broader and untellable history of shipboard death. The scene allows Pym and his companions to witness another iteration of *fukú*: hearing shrieks “closely resembling the scream of a human voice” and seeing “twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females [lying] scattered about ... in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction” (P 1107). In this (un)living tableau of the transatlantic Middle Passage—and of all the middle passages of enslavement across other global waters—readers encounter the “appalling and unfathomable mystery” of coloniality: of the ongoing curse of violence and suffering unevenly afflicting the

global-colonial world. To ask whether yellow fever or poison is responsible, as Pym does in this episode, is to miss the broad geographic and human-driven patterns underpinning all modern Euro-Christian theodicy: all attempts to justify suffering by recourse to providence or God.

In this sense, the scene also offers a subtle reprisal of Crèvecoeur's ninth letter, in which Farmer James convulses as he gazes in horror upon the atrocities of southern slavery, as figured in the sadistic image of an enslaved man suspended in a cage as he is pecked to death by birds. Recast by Poe, the scene on the *Flying Dutchman* offers a single "huge sea-gull, busily gorging itself with the horrible flesh" of a sailor (*P* 1086). But where Crèvecoeur's scene appears to establish, at least in James's view, his narrative innocence as a northern and putatively different kind of slaveowner, *Pym* establishes only a haunting correspondence between the white bird, "its white plumage spattered with blood" as it devours human flesh, and the white narrator who—driven all along by desire for "the natives" on Tsinian—now admits the voracious desire to consume that he has been repressing: "there flashed through my mind a thought, a thought which I will not mention, and I felt myself making a step toward the ensanguined spot" where a "horrid morsel" of human flesh lies in temptation (*P* 1086–1087). That the scene inverts the central cannibal topos of early modern colonial encounter with Indigenous people is obvious. Yet Poe is also recasting the colonial impulse itself as an insatiable desire to consume the body of another, and the modernity of the global-colonial world as a highly rationalized form of cannibalism.

The horror of rationalized cannibalism, of course, is literally what the ensuing chapters explore. As Pym narrates his conflict with Parker over their looming castaway fate—starvation cannibalism—Poe showcases the casuistic reasoning by which the beneficiaries of colonialism's catastrophic modernity may preserve a duplicitous sense of their own innocence. Pym concedes that "before Parker opened his lips my heart told me what he would say"; he has indeed already made "a step toward the ensanguined spot" in his own thinking (*P* 1094). But even as he works closer to accepting "the prospect of our being reduced to this last horrible extremity," Pym must find a modern, secular-Christian language of disavowal (*P* 1094). He sets about "mentally praying to God" and appealing in a "supplicating manner" to Parker regarding "everything which [he] held sacred" while also quite rationally invoking "every species of argument which the extremity of the case suggested," "every argument I could devise, and which I thought likely to have influence with one of his rough nature" (*P* 1095). Key to Pym's self-justification is establishing his own higher status on a hierarchy of sensibility as well as morality.

Pym never mentions ritual human sacrifice as he slides toward the "most horrible alternative which could enter into the mind of man," but it is the ostensibly savage and unspoken backdrop against which he differentiates himself (*P* 1095). Of course, human sacrifice too depends upon the principle that Pym articulates, ventriloquized by Parker, as he explains the actions of the castaways: that "it was

unnecessary for all to perish, when, by the death of one, it was possible, and even probable, that the rest might be finally preserved" (*P* 1095). Lifting the veil on this shared logic, Poe reveals not "primitive" cannibalism but secular-Christian rationality in all its horror. Providence-praising Pym suddenly drops his religiosity and assumes "a different demeanor," threatening to throw Parker overboard to stop his "bloody and cannibal designs" (*P* 1096). The scheme highlights his willingness to murder even as it also introduces new questions about why Pym considers it morally superior to kill a would-be cannibal than to engage in cannibalism to survive.

Only when Pym finally expresses his "deep interest in the preservation of his [own] existence" does his narrative momentarily lose its ring of self-delusion (*P* 1097). "It became absolutely necessary that I should attend to my own safety," he explains as the castaways begin devising a seemingly impartial system for choosing the victim whom the others will cannibalize (*P* 1096). But through Pym's continued reasoning, Poe also reveals in miniature how a "civilized" society consumes some to preserve others and justifies this selection as both unavoidable and fair. Adopting a newly bureaucratic tone, he announces he will "submit to the proposal" and asks for "a delay of about one hour" that resonates prophetically in an era of last-minute death penalty appeals to the state governor (*P* 1096). The stick-drawing is a "terrific lottery in which we were to take each a chance," and all Pym wants is "fair play in the tragedy that I knew would speedily be enacted" (*P* 1097). But he has by this point already used his own "health and strength" (*P* 1096), and his good fortune in having "suffered less" than the others, to ensure that he will not be the sacrificial victim when Parker first broaches the topic—and he now considers "every species of finesse by which I could trick some one of my fellow-sufferers to draw the short straw" (*P* 1098). What Pym envisions here in this starvation cannibalism scene is the rigged game of global-colonial modernity. Indeed, he seems less cruel when he "thinks of suddenly rushing upon them and murdering one" to save himself (*P* 1097).

As the dreaded moment of sacrifice approaches, Pym considers the problem of evil in its modern and separated moral and natural forms: the "silent, definite, and stern nature of the business in which I was engaged" (to call this rational, secular act of cannibalism a "business" is telling) and the very "different ... tumultuous dangers of the storm or the gradually approaching horrors of the famine" (*P* 1097). And yet how different are they? Do the histories of anthropophagic colonialism converge with hurricane and natural disaster more broadly in their continual returns? And is modern famine ever truly natural? Pym calls the fate he is working to avoid the "most appalling of deaths—a death for the most appalling of purposes"; but this purpose is arguably not cannibalism so much as the preservation and survival of others (*P* 1097). Poe describes this "fearful repast" in detail despite Pym's own avowal that he "must not dwell upon" it (*P* 1099). And, lest readers too quickly accept this distorted account of an unavoidable

tragedy, Poe provides Pym with a startling afterthought when the devouring of the body is over: they could have used, and can still use, an axe “to cut through the deck over the store-room, and thus readily supply ourselves with provisions” (P 1099).

But because, like *Candide*, the novel is also about the forgetting of violence and catastrophe, Pym and his companions never realize, or admit that they realize, that Parker need not have been murdered and eaten. Instead, counting their new store of nourishment and “falling on [their] knees with one accord, [they] return ... fervent thanks to God for so seasonable a relief” (P 1102). Among the new provisions, and what brings them the most “delight,” is “a small tortoise of the Gallipago breed”—a creature that Poe takes care to align with the human castaways in ways that again prompt questions about what kinds of life matter, and when (P 1101). Like Parker, the animal does not want to be eaten: “Its struggles [are] fierce” as it tries to make its escape “back into the water” (P 1159). Similarly, the castaways are “anxious to preserve [it] alive” as long as possible—just as, in the ensuing chapter, he and Dirk Peters are suddenly anxious to preserve Augustus, who is dying and “in the last extremity,” keeping him alive as long as they can (P 1103, 1094). Augustus lies dying on his back just as the animal does: “Our tortoise ... we threw on its back and otherwise carefully fastened” (P 1103). Finally, after “killing and cutting up our tortoise”—precisely as they did Parker—Pym and Peters “by common consent” pour into Augustus’s open mouth their entire supply of drinkable rainwater, even though “the sufferer seemed to derive but little benefit from the draught” (P 1105). What point is Poe making with these parallels and repetitions? The needless and irrational prolonging of a dying man’s life, even to their own obvious detriment, only highlights the brutality of swiftly killing and consuming a living man because he drew the short straw in an all-too-rational game.

The excessive lengthening of Augustus’s life and attention to the quality of his death seems almost to be an outcome of the foreshortening, to use a Pym-like euphemism, of Parker’s life and the terror-inducing quality of his death. We might psychologize Pym’s self-endangering care for Augustus as an expression of guilt over the murder of Parker, or we might see Pym as simply narrating his care in this way as an attempt to recivilize and rehumanize himself. But the lingering sense that Augustus receives all the available water because Parker has been murdered also invites a more structural reading. Augustus is the son of a wealthy sea-captain long employed by a firm connected with “the Messieurs Enderby, I believe, of Liverpool”; he is a product of generational wealth that rests upon slavery (P 1129). His life simply matters more than that of a loser, as Parker quite literally is, in the “terrific lottery” that is catastrophic colonial modernity. The alignment of Parker’s murder and dismemberment with the killing and cutting up of the tortoise enlists anthropocentrism as part of the ruse of this modernity: as the scene suggests, the treatment of this particular animal helps Pym to forget the cruelty and violence toward humans in which he has been enmeshed all along. The human–animal

hierarchy itself sustains the world's cruel coloniality (as Melville, discussed in the next chapter, often suggests).

Pym, once initiated into the "business" of colonialism-as-cannibalism, is now ready to reenact on Tsalal the heart of the novel's *conte philosophique*: a strangely theoretical staging of discovery that mirrors Columbus's arrival in the Americas. Like the captain of the new ship, the *Jane Guy*, to which he and Peters have been rescued—and like Columbus himself—Pym is obsessed with "pushing to the southward" (P 1125). If the ensuing narrative borrows liberally from prior nineteenth-century sources, especially Benjamin Morrell's *Voyages*, it also powerfully rewrites early colonial encounter narratives of the Americas, especially Columbus's, as Pym and the ship push toward "a continent [that] had never yet been afforded to man" (P 1134). All the staples are there: the intriguing signs of life as the would-be colonizers arrive; the "surprise and delight" and "extravagant demonstrations of joy" of the "savages"; the "jabbering" of Indigenous language; the Natives' "wonder" at Western technology including the ship, its mirrors, and the guns perceived as idols; and the conflation of the Indigenous population with Africans (P 1136–1137).

Like Columbus, Pym and company look for "articles which might be turned to account in the way of traffic" (P 1138), "making a profitable speculation [of] discovery" (P 1139). And just as Columbus does, Pym insists that the market is established with "every appearance of good faith" even though he also stresses that it is unequal, with his own side giving away nothing of real value and the natives showing the "greatest decorum offering us their commodities, frequently without price" (P 1148). A "perfectly satisfactory bargain [is] struck," and it involves the labor of the "savages" in building a camp for the extraction and preparation of the "chief productions of the country," and their subsequent "exertions" while working this new outfit—for which they will receive "a stipulated quantity of blue beads etc." (P 1145). All of this is achieved despite the language barrier and the fact that Pym and company "f[ind] great difficulty in being comprehended" and, tellingly, "pretend not to understand" when they prefer not to (P 1138). As the obliging chief, Too-Wit, guides "the *Jane* through the reef in safety," just as Guacanagari did for Columbus, anyone who has read the *Four Voyages* knows what is coming next: Pym's revelation that there has been all along a "deeply laid plan for our destruction" (P 1139, 1150). The introduction of naked and "well-formed" women late in this portion of the narrative is timed perfectly to remind readers why the Taino, by their own later account, killed Columbus's men and destroyed his settlement at La Navidad (P 1143).

But if Pym rewrites the story of La Navidad, the originary American event of unsettlement, it does so pressured by the immanent cosmology of the Tsalal Islanders on the seeming transcendence of Western knowledge and progress. Pym of course believes fervently in the latter, "confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify" his "most improbable" narrative, which he believes will

contribute to “opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention” (*P* 1044). That secret is bound up in Hollow Earthism, a contemporaneous theory that promoted a belief in the existence of openings at the poles of the earth into vast subterranean spaces. The theory was propounded in the early nineteenth century by John Cleves Symmes, who urged Congress to fund a voyage to explore and claim the interior of the earth for the US before any other nation could do so. One of Symmes’s followers, Jeremiah Reynolds, made an unsuccessful voyage to find an Antarctic earth opening in 1829, and his journal became one of the sources for *Pym*, a narrative about a knowledge-enhancing journey southward to colonize the Hollow Earth.³⁶

But just as *Candide*’s philosophical optimism founders in the New World, *Pym*’s manifest destiny to dramatically advance Western “progressing science”—along with acquiring new land, new extractable resources, and new laborers—runs aground in Tsalal, where the islanders have a different relationship to the earth and its materials. *Pym* foregrounds this very different orientation to the earth’s matter in a scene that “much amuse[s]” his companions:

The cook was splitting some wood near the galley, and, by accident, struck his axe into the deck, making a gash of considerable depth. The chief immediately ran up, and pushing the cook on one side rather roughly, commenced a half whine, half howl, strongly indicative of sympathy in what he considered the sufferings of the schooner, patting and smoothing the gash with his hand, and washing it from a bucket of seawater which stood by. (*P* 1137)

The account presents a caricature of a colonial topos, depicting a familiar scene of supposed Native misunderstanding of the nature of a given Western object—as when Thomas Hariot of the 1585 Roanoke voyage describes both Powhatan responses to a Bible (“to touch it, to embrace it, to kisse it, to hold it to their breasts and heads, and stroke it over all their bodies”) and his own correction (“I told them the book materially and of itself was not of any such virtue”).³⁷ Just as Hariot believes the material of which the Bible is made is not important—that “only the doctrine contained therein” has significance—*Pym* finds “a degree of ignorance for which we were not prepared” in Chief Too-Wit’s expression of “sympathy” for the wood of the colonizers’ schooner and the deep gash it has sustained (*P* 1137).³⁸ He even suspects “some of it affected,” leaving the reader to choose, ostensibly, between the possibility that the chief is performing “ignorance” and the possibility that he is naturally dimwitted (as his name may or may not suggest) (*P* 1138). *Pym* cannot yet articulate the third possibility: that the Tsalal islanders have developed an object-oriented ontology wholly unlike his own, one in which matter is vibrant and pulses with its own emotion and energy, and in which human and non-human relations are reciprocal rather than purely extractive. But *Pym* will have to reckon with the failures of his own ontology as he proceeds toward catastrophe.

For as Pym makes his way inland on Tsalal, he encounters trees, rocks, and water that he can't make sense of, all part of a "vast chain of apparent miracles," as if he were entering an alternative nature or perhaps a different domain of being (*P* 1141). He also enters or encounters "Klock-klock," a word "frequently repeated" by Too-Wit, "which we supposed to be the name of the village, or perhaps the generic name for villages" (*P* 1141). This is precisely how Peru got its name, according to Garcilaso's famous anecdote about the way colonizers misapprehend Indigenous words "according to their desire" to be understood—and to take what they want.³⁹ Pym may believe Klock-klock is a place, in other words, but Poe's invented words invite us to wonder about time, and the relationship between space, temporality, and inhabitation. For as Pym gazes around the place that he assumes to be called "Klock-klock," he sees "dwellings of the most miserable existence imaginable": habitations—in tree trunks, holes in the ground, and a series of caverns—that horrify his settler sensibility with their impermanence and embeddedness in the earth (*P* 1142). If colonialism is "a process that transforms people of African origin into living *ore* from which *metal* is extracted"—a modern iteration of Socrates's myth of the metals, the noble lie upholding enslavement and exclusion—Pym comes to the literal underground of that history in Tsalal: to a place where potential men-of-ore are living in the earth.⁴⁰

In bringing its protagonist here, the novel begins to reveal Hollow Earthism as a nineteenth-century expression of colonial desire that drew on ancient roots locating men-of-ore as extractable bodies originating in the earth. But in *Pym*, Hollow Earthism also expresses the racial terror attending the idea of bodies that are from the earth, of the earth, and in such kinship with the earth that they control its very movements. As Pym and his companions march into the deep ravine where the unarmed Tsalal islanders have led them, they make themselves vulnerable to a deeper and geological form of weaponry. When the moment of earthquake finally comes, Pym describes it as "a concussion resembling nothing I had ever before experienced, and which impressed me with a vague conception, if indeed I then thought of anything, that the whole foundations of the solid globe were suddenly rent asunder, and that the day of universal dissolution was at hand. (*P* 1152)"

Key to the seismic experience here is that it exceeds characterization, that Pym must grasp vaguely at a biblical apocalypse to narrate what is otherwise unspeakable: a live burial by earthquake. In their state of suffocation and "utter darkness," he and Dirk Peters can only speculate about what has happened, concluding that a fissure in the walls of the deep ravine where the Tsalal islanders have led the ship's company must have "by some convulsion of nature" caused them to be "entombed alive" (*P* 1153). In this state of "living inhumation," Pym and Peters must suffer the "stifling fumes of the damp earth" as well as the knowledge not that they are going to die but that they have nevertheless received "the allotted portion of the dead" (*P* 1153). They have crossed over a threshold into the realm of the unthinkable, "a degree of appalling awe and horror not to be tolerated—never to be conceived"

(*P* 1153). As they struggle out of their entombment and reach the surface of the earth, they must finally confront the simultaneously ontological and racial “blackness of darkness” that this episode of the novel encodes: the “whole dreadful secret of the concussion broke upon us in one moment and at one view” (*P* 1155). What they apprehend is also the dreadful secret at the heart of the settler psyche: that the ground of colonialism and enslavement is never stable—and the exact nature of its instability cannot be fully imagined or understood by settlers or enslavers.

Pym can no longer dismiss the primitive superstitious religiosity—“half whine, half howl”—of the Tsalal islanders by appealing to the transcendence of Western science (*P* 1137). For it turns out that Indigenous science is part and parcel of the Tsalal relation to the earth and the movement of earth they have caused. For the end-of-days earthquake experienced by Pym has a technological source, one that has caused the ravine to be “entirely filled up with the chaotic ruins of more than a million tons of earth that ha[ve] been artificially tumbled within it” (*P* 1155). He can see the “means by which the vast mass ha[s] been precipitated,” with “stakes of wood driven into the earth,” leaving “marks ... in the soil resembling those made by the drill of the rock-blaster” (*P* 1155). In the midst, narrating a story that he cannot know with any clarity, Pym tries nevertheless to speak with certainty:

There can be no doubt that, by the continuous line of stakes, a partial rupture of the soil had been brought about probably to the depth of one or two feet, when by means of a savage pulling at the end of each of the cords (these cords being attached to the tops of the stakes, and extending back from the edge of the cliff), a vast leverage power was obtained, capable of hurling the whole face of the hill, upon a given signal, into the bosom of the abyss below. The fate of our poor companions was no longer a matter of uncertainty. (*P* 1156)

His words strain here to establish mastery over the Tsalals’ technology and to bring what is knowable back into the frame: that the rest of the colonizers have been, as per El Inca Garcilaso, “tragado por la tierra,” that he and Peters have survived an avalanche of Indigenous resistance to colonization and enslavement. This earthquake may be as much cosmological or ontological as it is scientific, an earth-moving response to the extractors who have come to take the islanders and make them into men-of-ore. In the face of a simultaneously Black and Indigenous revolution that is to him unthinkable, all Pym can do is grant a new racial status to the “half-breed” North American Indigenous character, Dirk Peters, and appeal to the whiteness that defines settler humanity: “We were the only living white men upon the island” (*P* 1107, 1156).

As the narrative moves Pym inexorably southward toward the opening into the hollow earth, he appears to have learned nothing at all from his experience on Tsalal. Where Peters recognizes writing on the walls of the Tsalal caverns, Pym remains dogged in his inability to imagine Native literacy, just as he refuses to recognize the obvious pattern in the islanders’ responses to the color white or to

see that it is the anticolonial inverse of his own broadly Western, specifically settler colonial, and racialized ontological orientation to blackness. Readers are left to understand almost as little as Pym. We have the purported name of his Tsalal hostage—Nu-Nu—which echoes with its (possibly) repeated negatives in English as he expires protesting Pym's continuing and willful incomprehension: No, no. Moreover, if the purported Ethiopian and Arabic "verbal root" words suggesting darkness and whiteness confirm an anticolonial black-white ontology broadly organizing Tsalal thought, the editorial note following Pym's narrative offers the possibility that the "Ethiopian characters" in particular may be related to "the appellation of the island of the chasms"—Tsalal—and thus to "some alliance with the chasms themselves" (P 1181).

These chasms—naturally occurring though they would seem to be—thus function as a kind of writing. The reader trained in Western epistemology, the novel suggests, cannot fathom such entanglements of human and earth-made forms of vibrant expression. Perhaps this reader will recur, like the novel's fictional editor, to the voice of biblical monotheism and the injunction against worshipping other gods or attributing divine agency to the earth itself: as per Poe's mysterious final line, "I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock" (P 1182). The line recalls multiple biblical verses, but particularly Isaiah 42:15, in which God announces his power to destroy and transform the natural world—its mountains and hills, herbs, rivers, and pools—and commands his followers not to trust in "graven images" or "say to the molten images, Ye *are* our gods." Reconciling this Biblical truth with what Pym has found on Tsalal, the fictional editor draws sustenance from a belief that God is the ultimate engraver of the hills and will accordingly visit his fury upon the non-Christian natural world, down to the very "dust with the rock."

There is no uncertainty about where this punishment will occur; it will take place not only in Tsalal but also—as spelled out in another cavern hieroglyph in a "full Egyptian word"—in the broader "region of the south" (P 1181). *Pym* is not just a meditation on the South, whether US, hemispheric, or global, but on the southernization of catastrophe. Poe knows and exploits the pleasure of his nineteenth-century readership's interest in the doubled experience of place—the nation vis-a-vis its elsewhere—that is the settler sublime. Yet as he philosophically limns the distance between an "American" location and another geography where catastrophe is destined to occur, he reminds readers then and now that the grounds of ongoing conquest can never be stable and that—as in Tenskwtawá's prophecy—the earth itself rebukes the *longue durée* of colonial extraction.

From North American Providence to South American Guano in Cooper's *The Crater*

If nineteenth-century American literature suffers from earthquake amnesia, then Cooper's *The Crater* (1847) is the great, forgotten seismic novel, its longstanding

marginal status reflecting its marginal geography: not the south seas, or the Pacific, but the volcanic craters of its earthquake-prone setting. It did not matter to literary history that the novel southernized its spectacular catastrophe by placing it “STILL FARTHER SOUTH,” to borrow from the full title of Poe’s novella, in sea islands to the west of the southern cone of South America. The novel populated these islands with US-Americans and then sank them into the sea with a great rending of the earth. The novel was *about* America, as Cooper announced with a stern enjoinder in the preface: that readers “who now live in this republic” should see a “timely warning” in the events of the narrative, thereby increasing the chances that “the mercy of a divine Creator may still preserve that which he has hitherto cherished and protected.”⁴¹ Cooper could have called the novel “Vesuvius at Home” and the message would not have been clearer. Perhaps the insistent geological realities of the novel—the land formations caused by earthquakes and smoke and ashes and lava and all “the pent and dangerous forces that were in the course of a constant accumulation” beneath the surface of the earth—made it untenable for a major place in American literary memory (C 236).

But more than any other nineteenth-century American novel, *The Crater* enters a vision of the long history of the Americas as a history of catastrophe: a story of the New World itself consumed by an earthquake. Both Adamic and Columbian, the novel’s protagonist shuttles between two kinds of theodicy: a story of North American Providence, in which the universe is governed by natural laws attesting to a divine order so perfect it should obviate God’s punitive intervention in response to sin; and a story of South American guano as a chastening, a warning about the perpetual settler colonial misunderstanding of Indigenous language and knowledge. The resulting instability characterizes Cooper’s particular settler theodicy, an effort to vindicate the existence of divine providence in a world marked as much by the evils of colonialism and slavery as it is by shipwreck and earthquake—an effort to defend providence that is also philosophically intertwined with the constant and shattering recognition that the European invasion of the Americas is ongoing rather than historical.

The Crater’s project is to remake ongoing wars of conquest into divinely sanctioned settlements subject to the chastening of a righteous God, and in doing so it produces a series of dissonant entanglements: paradise and cataclysm, Pacific and Atlantic, colonialism and slavery, Black and Indigenous revolutions. Its plotline moves backward in settler colonial time toward its two catastrophic-event topoi, slave revolt and the destruction of settlement by Indigenous forces. *The Crater* is also American literary history’s major novel of unsettlement—an inheritor and repository of the foundational colonial story that, as it does in *Pym*, has continuously resurfaced since the destruction of Columbus’s Villa de la Navidad. The novel’s earthquakes raise searching questions about the nature of empiricism, transferring the locus of meaningful scientific knowledge from its

Baconian-Christian hero to the Indigenous people its hero has, despite strong narrative denials all along, dispossessed and enslaved.

The first half of *The Crater* establishes the working terms of providence governing the experience of its temperate North American hero, Mark Woolston. To do so, the novel must distinguish Woolston's religious modernity from the old-fashioned and passivist piety of his fellow sailor Bob Betts. When they find themselves shipwrecked on a piece of reef in the South Pacific, their reactions are thus markedly different. Woolston is the first mate of the foundered American trading ship, and he is initially amused by the "quaintness" of his subordinate's response: "I see no other hope for us, Mr. Mark," offers Betts, "but to Robinson Crusoe it awhile, until our times come; or till the Lord, in his marcy, shall see fit to have us picked up" (C 54). If the moment signals the novel's self-conscious lineal descent from Defoe—its bid to be "America's only true Robinsinade"—it also introduces a new type of primitive.⁴² As a contemporaneous reviewer writing for *The Athenaeum* in 1847 observed, the American sailor Betts plays the hero's "nautical Friday."⁴³ What separates Woolston and Betts is not so much rank or dialect, the novel suggests, as affective and philosophical orientation: while the first mate studies the qualities of the sunken reefs around them with empirical intensity, experiencing the loss of hope "press more and more painfully on his mind," the provincial Betts has "less feeling on the subject" (C 57). He has "less imagination," and therefore sees his future—spelled out in "consequences and effects"—"less vividly than his officer" (C 57). Betts may know the name "Robinson Crusoe" and understand the novelistic qualities of their situation, but he fails to parse the various "attorneytives" he and Woolston now face, and his calm acceptance of their seeming fate marks him as decidedly primitive in the world of Cooper's text (C 53). As the narrator points out a second time, the humble sailor has already "made up his mind that it is the will of Providence that he and Mark [are] to 'Robinson Crusoe' it a while on 'that bit of reef'" (C 54).

Betts is thus the early foil against which the novel defines Woolston's finer imaginative qualities and, more broadly, his vexed status as a Christian modern in an Anglo-American settler colonial world struggling to define divine providence. The novel's preface notes that "religion failed to bear its proper fruits" in Woolston's historical moment at the turn of the nineteenth century—just as religion had proven "barren, in these, our own times," the moment of the novel's publication in the late 1840s (C 12). The overt problem besetting American religion emerges in the final chapters of the narrative with the arrival of sectarianism in the colony: competing ministers and churches who "substitut[e] the 'subtleties of doctrine' for the worship of God" in a series of bitter confrontations (C 438).⁴⁴ But long before the arrival of this denominational warring, Woolston presents a more complex but no less intractable religious problem for the narrator. His education has molded him for leadership of the colony while also advancing him to religious modernity: his

“three years of college ... had not made him a Newton, or a Bacon,” but they “had done him no harm” (C 11).

The narrator’s light condescension touches not just Woolston but also the larger antebellum American phenomenon that Theodore Dwight Bozeman once called the “beatification of Bacon”: the anointing of Francis Bacon as the father of a specifically Christian history of science in which Isaac Newton could then emerge to reveal the religious secrets of a providential universe.⁴⁵ Woolston is no scientific luminary, the narrator suggests, but he is steeped in the Baconian tradition—one that might very well have “done him ... harm”—and might still, as Cooper’s phrasing suggests. The hallmark empiricism of this tradition allows its inheritors to better understand and praise nature as a grand system of divine organization, so perfectly engineered that it requires no intervention from its maker: the beneficent Nature of North American providence. This version of providence clearly separates sin from the direct hand of divine punishment on earth: human misdeed does not cause earthquake; rather, earthquake is divinely built into a natural scheme that moves the universe according to God’s purpose.

This separation of moral wrongdoing from natural evil characterizes the religious modernity that is Woolston’s privilege but also his peril. The novel elaborates this modernity in its fullness soon after Woolston becomes the sole occupant of the island, when he has scaled the extinct volcano that has produced the novel’s titular crater:

Hours at a time did Mark linger on the Summit, studying the stars in the clear, transparent atmosphere of the tropics, his spirit struggles the while to get into closer communication with that dread Being which has produced all these mighty results; among which the existence of the earth, its revolutions, its heats and colds, its misery and happiness, are but specks in the incidents of a universe. Previously to this period, he had looked on these things from curiosity and a love of science; now, they impressed him with the deepest sense of the power and wisdom of the Deity, and caused him the better to understand his own position in the scale of created beings. (C 141)

While the passage stages this transitional period as a revelation born of Woolston’s solitude and meditation on the divine as a “dread Being,” it is more properly a testament to his solid education: the “outline of what Herschel and his contemporaries were about,” as the narrator puts it, which young Mark earlier received at school (C 140). Adult Woolston’s summit-born epiphany in fact rehearses the basic tenets of a Baconian revivalist: John Herschel, whose *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1830) outlines the place of human reason in apprehending the world as “a system disposed with order and design,” and marked by the “harmony of its parts, the skill and efficiency of its contrivances.”⁴⁶ By contemplating the world, or rather by reading his Herschel, Woolston is “led to a conception of

a Power and Intelligence superior to his own, and adequate to the production and maintenance of all he sees in nature, a Power and Intelligence to which he may well apply the term *infinite*.”⁴⁷

But if Woolston contemplates the crater through the lens of Herschel, Cooper also sounds in this passage the note of another Baconian—Alexander von Humboldt—by reminding readers that this epiphany of natural philosophy occurs only because our hero is in “the clear, transparent atmosphere of the tropics” (C 141). Empirical observation finds its most dazzling explanatory powers in the “torrid zone,” Humboldt believed, for “nowhere else does nature so vividly suggest general ideas on the cause of events, and their mutual interrelationships.”⁴⁸ Woolston thus experiences on the crater’s summit what Humboldt called “the most powerful impressions” yielded by observation of the tropical regions, which “afford the inestimable advantage of revealing to man ... the invariability of the laws that regulate the course of heavenly bodies, reflected as it were in terrestrial phenomena.”⁴⁹ Woolston’s insights here partake of what Ralph Bauer has called the “tropical exceptionalism” thesis laid out by Humboldt, the idea that all of the world’s physical processes can be better understood by observing nature in the tropics—because nature in the torrid zone is not so much different there as it is more itself, and is therefore more apprehensible, at least when viewed by the observer from temperate climates.⁵⁰

At the same time, the passage edges Woolston closer to an articulation of theodicy: a justification of God’s existence and benevolence despite all the suffering and loss Woolston has experienced and witnessed and, the novel soon discloses, inflicted. By combining his reading in science with his present observation, Woolston recognizes the magnitude of the universe and the mere “specks” of human experience within it, a wider field of inquiry in which to understand the meaning of “misery,” and particularly of suffering such as his own in a castaway state (C 141). Apprehending even his own suffering as part of a larger, divinely ordered system marks Woolston’s successful transition into the fullness of the religious modernity he has inhabited all along in his ironic distance from Betts; here he achieves a philosophical position that separates him qualitatively from Betts’s unthinking—unempirical, unscientific—reliance on providence. Woolston was always Betts’s superior in the ship’s hierarchy, but now the young officer is ready for the true role of mastery that awaits him in the novel: ready to assume his rightful place in the settling of a new world with “his own position in the scale of created beings” (C 141).

But if *The Crater* endorses the enlightened modernity of Woolston’s meditation on the universe, it also raises questions about the precise earthly role of the “dread Being” to whom he grows closer on the island. Is the “power and wisdom of the Deity” merely reflected in all the natural features of the universe, including its earthquakes and volcanoes, which must systematically bring greater good out of whatever destruction they wreak? Or does the Deity, after all, intervene at first

hand to create—and destroy—in his wisdom? The novel enacts precisely this tension between Woolston's status as a religious modern—defined by his empiricism, induction, individualism, solitude, and embrace of the sublime—and the narrator's intermittent, glowering insistence that there is a causal link between moral failure and natural catastrophe: that Mark is punished by storm and shipwreck, like Crusoe, for the sin of not honoring the wishes of his parents and in-laws; or perhaps, as Woolston himself later thinks, for the crime of sailing on a vessel that trades in sandalwood, as “no higher offence can be committed by any human being” (C 33). The narrator implies that the “crime” is doctrinal, as trading in sandalwood abets its supposed “burn[ing] as incense before idols” in China, but by the 1840s the sandalwood trade was also known for its implication in colonial atrocities as well as environmental devastation (C 33).

All such remarks about implied punishment remind us that *The Crater* is the literary heir not only of Bacon's *New Atlantis* (and Thomas More's *Utopia*) but also and perhaps more fundamentally of the original myth of Atlantis—and Plato's darkly incoherent but interventionist theodical ending: an angry Zeus punishing the flourishing but decadent island by sinking it into the sea with an earthquake. As we saw in [Chapter 1](#), the story of Plato's Atlantis, as told by Critias, is a tale obsessed with origins, priority, and the question of who has history and who will never have it—because catastrophe will always destroy the would-be historians. The story of Atlantis is also in part about climatological determinism: if Athena selected a particular spot of earth for her Athens “because she saw that the happy temperament of the seasons in that land would produce the wisest of men,” she has also chosen a place subject to destruction: where “those who ... live in cities are carried by the rivers into the sea” each time “the gods purge the earth with a deluge of water.”⁵¹ Thus, in Athens, history and its attendant knowledge forms constantly disappear: “In mind [they] are all young; there is no old opinion handed down among [them] by ancient tradition, nor any science which is hoary with age.”⁵²

Are the world's unevenly distributed catastrophes predetermined by divine will? Do they unfold as punishment for wrongdoing? To put this problem in the novel's terms, those of early nineteenth-century science: was Charles Lyell's uniformitarian view of the earth correct, or was Georges Cuvier's catastrophism? Was Woolston's world a divinely engineered, steady-state system where gradual fluctuations led to earthquakes and volcanoes, which served their purpose in keeping the world essentially the same despite its even surfaces? Or was it a world in which sudden catastrophes punitively extinguished whole landscapes and species, as sacred texts and Greek philosophy had long suggested?

If Woolston never asks these questions precisely, they bear on his conflicted reactions in the early part of the novel in which the temperate northeastern protagonist encounters the vulnerability to sudden, catastrophic change. As a Baconian hero, Woolston marches to the tune of his own North American version

of providence, observing and assuming control of the material facts providentially left before him and assimilating them to his own plans to return home. The narrator both endorses Woolston's nineteenth-century Baconianism and calls it into question—deploying the novel's tropical setting to raise a tangle of questions and inconsistencies regarding the extent and purpose of human responsibility in a providential world.

That these questions are by now centuries old is made clear in the novel's mirroring of episodes that recall Crusoe. One of the most fascinating of these is Cooper's recasting of the scene in which Crusoe realizes that the seeming miracle of barley on his island is owed to his own inadvertent scattering of seed rather than to God—an empirical, seemingly secular revelation followed immediately by a terrifying earthquake. In *The Crater*, Woolston experiences a similarly portentous moment of recognition while looking carefully at an odd piece of wood: "struck with a glimpse ... of its form," he brings it into the light to get a more accurate view and makes an "all-important discovery": it is a component of the materials that turn out to be hidden within the pinnacle and which will enable the prompt construction of a new ship in which to sail home (C 110). But the wonderful revelation wrought by mere observation produces an odd, contradictory reaction. Woolston begins to experience "agitation and revulsion of feeling" great enough to constitute "almost ... an entire change of character"—and not for the better: "a great deal of wholesome philosophy and Christian submission were unsettled" (C 110). The finding of the "blessed materials" is Woolston's undoing: "Mark had never abandoned the thought of constructing a little vessel with materials torn from the ship; but that would have been a most laborious, as well as a doubtful experiment, while here was the problem solved, with a certainty and precision almost equal to one in mathematics! (C 110)"

Although the novel has marked Woolston as Betts's modern superior, it is now Betts who apparently responds to the situation "more philosophically," as the narrator notes with approval, "taking things as they came in humility and cheerfulness" (C 111). And indeed, Betts is soon liberated from the island, while Woolston is punished with storm, solitude, and sickness just as Crusoe is visited by an earthquake. As in Defoe's novel, the narrator implies that Woolston has erred philosophically and religiously by losing his patient acceptance of his sense of "a direct and visible dependence on the Providence of God" after empirical observation yields the discovery of a clear material means not only to survive but also to sail home (C 92). As Cooper's narrator warns, "In the world, men lose sight of this dependence, fancying themselves and their powers of more account than the truth would warrant, and even forgetting whence these very boasted powers are derived" (C 92). By this logic, Woolston must be utterly isolated—lose all human companionship and approach the brink of death—to remember to turn "with humility and hope to the divine hand that upholds him" (C 92).

But another providential finding—this time hailing from South America rather than the northern hemisphere—troubles the narrator's facile chastisement: a finding that derives quite specifically from Defoe's own source in *El Inca Garcilaso*. Not long before Woolston and Betts find the ready-made materials for constructing a new ship, Betts discovers a few rocks near their reef covered with a deposit of guano, or the excrement of aquatic birds. The finding of bird poop seems humble enough, but this specific kind was also a powerful fertilizer and a key commodity of the mid-nineteenth-century imperial era. Peru had vast deposits of it, which introduced the so-called Age of Guano, an era of national wealth and stability founded on the export economy; meanwhile, North America and Europe experienced "guano-mania." As Betts knows from his own experience with South American "Peruvians and Chilians," the miraculous fertilizer is the secret to surviving the shipwreck because the castaways can now grow luxuriant vegetation quickly (C 75). He and Woolston set about using it judiciously to create their Edenic garden.

Why is finding and using guano to survive and flourish permissible, while finding and using materials packed in their own boat—for the explicit purpose of building a ship in the very case of shipwreck they are experiencing—a betrayal of one's dependence on the providential hand? Perhaps the guano is an instance of a small, providential gift, to be used with difficulty and labor, and to make fertility where there is none: to provide means for subsistence and sustainable life according to scriptural injunction. On the other hand, the finding of the "blessed materials" for ship-building represents a huge turn of events, and requires little work from Woolston by comparison (C 110). Or perhaps the very existence of the materials is based on the forethought of other mariners rather than a direct providential hand. But is carrying within one's ship the materials to make a new ship an act of philosophical hubris any more than using prior knowledge of guano to grow a garden? Is human forethought not also providentially dispensed? It is an enduring theological problem: what is the point of free will, of taking any human responsibility for the world, if all is providentially driven?

Such questions are of course as old as Christianity itself, but Cooper's novel develops them relentlessly into the deepest contradictions of settler theodicy. As a Baconian hero, Woolston's very purpose is, as Ralph Bauer has described Bacon's project, to purify scientific discovery of its origins in colonial conquest.⁵³ The North American hero thus arrives on the island to master nature, innocently transforming barrenness into fertility—without simultaneously mastering any prior human population as he goes. But Cooper's novel does more than develop a putatively innocent national type who must cleanse himself, or suffer the divine consequences, of the colonial "sins of the fathers." The novel's theodicy project is overt but always bound up in the latent, disavowed recognition of the ongoing depredations of settler colonialism and slavery—the recognition that colonial conquest is not an event consigned to the past, but rather constitutes a structure across

time. The explicit Adamic fable at the heart of the novel carefully elaborates the sins of the Craterinos as sectarianism, demagoguery, and populism, which lead to the country's ultimate destruction in an earthquake that submerges it beneath the sea: a clear message for the fractious settler society of Cooper's home country.

But if the novel's final earthquake gives voice to an angry God, it also figures the constant instability of the settler colonial project itself: of reconceiving occupied land as the stable ground of enclosure and ownership. For this reason, the figure of earthquake is never very distant from the potential annihilation of settler culture by the Indigenous people it has displaced and enslaved. Both earthquake and Indigenous populations present the existential threat of unsettlement for Cooper's Craterinos; not surprisingly, they stand in for one another throughout the narrative.

The contradictions of theodicy in Cooper's novel emerge through the opposition of grand, providential events—shipwreck, volcano, earthquake—and the lowly but no less influential dispensation that allows its Eden to flourish: the bird excrement, or guano, whose wondrous fertilizing powers Betts has seen at work on the coast of South America. Woolston quickly recognizes its significance in the larger miracle of the islands: that it was “guano that had stimulated the otherwise barren deposit of the volcano,” lending to the growth of plants and “incipient verdure” of nearly biblical proportions, the very “character of a new creation” (C 161). When earthquake and volcano bring forth an extended “new world,” moreover, he finds that “a vast deposit of very ancient guano” has created its greatest features: the beauties, shades, fruits, verdant glades, and glories that make it “a more enchanting rural scene” than any he has ever beheld—one with “an air of cultivation and art” impossible to reconcile with its supposedly uninhabited state (C 183). It appears to Woolston as “a little paradise” born indeed of guano: “a very Elysium of birds” (C 184).

Guano is also the source of the island's fecundity once it has been populated by US settlers; Woolston teaches his fellow Craterinos its potent uses, the “secret” of which he shares with his second officer and colonist Bigelow, who “knew all about it from having lived in Peru” (C 226). We know nothing about this Peruvian past except for its link to the miraculous fertilizer—which Cooper's narrator points out it is “now ... extensively known under the name of guano” in the US (C 75). The novel's “secret” of guano is thus an open one, with the narrator winking at the future of guano-mania in which Cooper himself writes. Yet as Jennifer James has shown, rosy visions of guanotopias like the one offered here as Cooper's island paradise were built upon a very different “‘secret’ life in the Americas”: these “guano-filled futures,” as she aptly describes them, were advertisements that buried an especially brutal history of human and environmental extraction.⁵⁴ Especially in the US South, guano-mania was “a materialization of pro-slavery ideology,” James notes—and it was possible, as in Cooper's novel, for “science, Christianity, capitalism, and white supremacy [to] congeal into a faith in guano.”⁵⁵

Ironically, however, many of the earliest tracts about guano published in English cite the same source for how the fertilizer came to be known outside Peru. As an article in the *Journal of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India* put it in 1844, for example: “The use of guano as a manure was first mentioned by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, a Spaniard who wrote on Peru as early as 1723 in a work entitled ‘Comentarios Reales.’”⁵⁶ Several basic facts here are wrong (Garcilaso was not a Spaniard, and he published the *Comentarios* in 1609)—perhaps because the writer of this widely circulated sentence was taking the information from Humboldt, the first to introduce guano to Europe in 1804, rather than directly from Garcilaso.⁵⁷ But most of the salient facts cited by Humboldt do indeed come from El Inca Garcilaso’s account, which attests to the wisdom of the former Inca leaders, under whom “there was so much vigilance in protecting these birds that during the time of breeding no one was allowed to land on the islands, under penalty of death, so as not to startle them and chase them from their nests.” The guano itself, Garcilaso declares, was such a powerful fertilizer that it was also punishable by death for one neighbor to encroach on the supply of another.⁵⁸

Yet in Garcilaso, guano signifies more than a fertilizer for cultivating agriculture—a natural byproduct that was understood and protected with great wisdom by the Incas. Guano also provides an opportunity for Garcilaso to expand on one of his greatest themes: the Spanish misunderstanding of Indigenous language and philosophy. Thus, Garcilaso writes, “The word *guano*, which means manure ... ought to be written *huano*, for, as we said at the beginning, there is no letter g in the general language of Peru.” From this mistranscription, he extrapolates the more general point: “From this example, and many others we shall point out, it may be shown how badly the Spaniards understand this language.” Embedded in the mistranscription is a loss of associated meaning that far exceeds what may seem at first a pedantic point about spelling. As Garcilaso notes, this misspelled guano “means dung and [yet] *huana* is a verb and means to chasten,” to learn one’s lesson: “and with the final c makes the present participle, and means that which chastens, and both words together mean that which is a lesson to the people”: a chastener of *el gente*.⁵⁹

If earthquake submerges the “new world” settled by the Craterinos, it is perhaps this Indigenous linguistic lesson of guano, or *huana*, that holds for readers the “timely warning” referred to in the novel’s preface: perhaps, as in Garcilaso, to be “swallowed by the earth” in a “land of earthquakes” is to succumb to an unending war against settlement (C 6). Indeed, *The Crater* inherits more from El Inca Garcilaso than the story of a diligent survivor of shipwreck (Pedro Serrano, discussed in chapter 3), a prodigious supply of guano, and the South American experience of a sailor who, by a great turn of providence, happens to know how to use it.⁶⁰ Cooper’s novel also registers the “chastening” of South American guano as a profound alternative to its consideration of Anglo-American providence.

The ostensible ending of *The Crater* posits Woolston's survival, along with his closest kin, while the rest of the Craterinos disappear in an earthquake, along with the corruption of their prosperous society. Woolston and the other innocents avoid this fate because they have not committed the sins of the lawyers and the lenders, the press and the new divisive ministers. But this tidy conclusion distracts readers from another plotline altogether, a nightmarish fable of settler colonial horror masked as the triumph of Woolston's basic decency. This fable is as dream-like as if it had unfolded after Woolston's first solitary descent into the crater, where he lies dreaming in his "South American hammock," virtually unaware of "the violence of the tempest that was raging so near him." In a similar manner, the novel's ensuing dreamwork, with its conflation and displacements, works as a kind of settler literary unconscious. Soon Woolston is both "Adam in the garden of Eden" and the originary Admiral: "Like Columbus, he knelt on the sands, and returned his thanks to God" (C 206). But it quickly becomes unclear who is discovering whom when the nearby Indigenous inhabitants of another island—"like Columbus and his companions, when they drew near to the shores of Guanahani," in Cooper's description—begin making their way toward Woolston's paradise (C 246). The discoverers have become the discovered.

The novel mires itself in the cognitive dissonance of many such entanglements in its futile attempts to stabilize a settler theodicy, a justification of providence in a new world marked by the catastrophe of colonialism and by ongoing wars of conquest. To achieve such a justification, Cooper's settler hero must not only discover an empty Eden, arriving as Columbus and living as Adam, but he must also become native himself, and therefore subject to the possibility of conquest by new and malevolent discoverers. Woolston's settler occupation of an island in the broader Pacific territory thus transmogrifies into his own status as putatively Indigenous, and Native resistance to that occupation is cast as a violent attempt to conquer Woolston's peaceful and uninhabited land. But the novel knows the truth about such delusions of an innocent Eden—one that is corrupted long before the arrival of lawyers and lenders and squabbling ministers. For example, while Woolston forbids slavery on the island to safeguard the "moral condition of his people"—and because it "would certainly bring its own punishment in the end"—the novel discloses slavery's eventual arrival nonetheless, timed to coincide almost precisely with an attack by Indigenous forces (C 336). Three enslaved Black characters—Socrates, Dido, and Juno—quite suddenly enter the narrative with names reflecting the widespread belief of US Southern enslavers in their inheritance of a classical culture of mastery and excellence. No sooner have these characters set foot on land to serve Woolston and his wife than the possibility of an Indigenous invasion enters the narrative for the very first time: as "the certainty that war canoes might come off in quest" (C 203).

Readers of *The Crater* have observed the novel's displacement of Native Americans onto Pacific Islanders and a fictional setting "in which land does not need to

be taken since the colonized reef is uninhabited.”⁶¹ Woolston’s self-congratulating rejection of Indigenous bondage may represent, as Wayne Franklin has suggested, Cooper’s way of “publicly aligning himself with Jacksonian anti-slavery,” introducing the “specter of slavery” without confronting the topic directly.⁶² Yet the novel’s relentless conflation of Blackness and Indigeneity, and of slavery with settler colonialism, suggests an entanglement that undermines Woolston’s repudiation of both forms of conquest. This entanglement begins in fact with Woolston’s misrecognition of Socrates when he first arrives on the island—a moment of racialized anti-anagnorisis that also figures a broader philosophical failure. As Woolston and Betts reunite and discuss the “mighty earthquake” that has created the new land, Socrates hovers in the background—and “as he was of a dark skin, [Woolston] naturally inferred [he] was a native of some neighboring island” (C 188). Only when Socrates speaks in English does Woolston understand that he is gazing at one of “the slaves of Bridget,” his wife, “a part of the estate she had received from her grandmother” (C 286).

Woolston may wish to avoid “punishment” upon his “little colony” for the sin of slavery, but his family has indeed brought enslaved humans to its shores: Bridget is ready to establish order and cleanliness—just “as soon as she could set Dido at work” (C 216). The same point is driven home by the Paulding epigraph to chapter 10:

The earth receives the white man’s yoke,
And pays her willing tax,
Of fruits, and flowers, and golden harvest fields,
And all that nature to blithe labor yields. (C 215)

Nature indeed yields all this and more on the Woolston lands, but if it is the “white man’s yoke” that tills the fields, it is Socrates whose “blithe labor” largely transforms the land, along with “hoe,” “scythe and forks,” while his enslaver simply observes, “struck ... forcibly” by the abundant results (C 223).⁶³ The title of the poem from which these lines are taken is “Ode to Jamestown,” the notorious site of African slavery’s first arrival in the colonies, as Cooper surely knew.

Woolston’s disavowal of his own enslaving practices adds a psychological depth to the growing settler colonial horror story at the novel’s center. When some of the lost sailors from the original shipwreck reappear on the reef, Woolston has hardly greeted them before he asks, “Are there any black fellows with you?” The wording is odd, given the novel’s consistent usage of “the black” for Socrates and “the black women” for Dido and Juno; indeed, Woolston himself seems confused and rushes to clarify: “—Any of the natives?” (C 266). But his repeated racial conflation makes sense in light of the larger entanglement of colonialism and slavery at play in the novel—it is part of the strangely “early modern register,” as Gesa Mackenthun aptly puts it, that overlays its nineteenth-century Pacific setting.⁶⁴ As the novel unfolds,

Woolston and his colonists move back in settler colonial time: from “American” to “white” until finally they are merely “a party of Christians ... to be massacred, or enslaved” (C 266).

In their attempt to avoid this fate, this handful of settlers must avoid succumbing to vast Indigenous forces—or, as Woolston says, to “beat off five hundred natives” (C 221). Here, the novel draws on an old colonial staple, the mystification of literacy, a topos that defines European superiority by showing how the putatively awesome technology of alphabetic writing mystifies or intimidates its non-Western others, often the Indigenous messenger who carries a letter that magically “speaks” to its recipient. Cooper’s novel too introduces an Indigenous messenger, the noble savage Unus, at the first moment of great crisis. Unable to speak English, Unus must swim out to sea carrying a letter he cannot read in a frantic attempt to reach and warn Juno of the impending Indigenous attack—not, primarily, to save the enslaved young woman but to avoid the greater problem of “discovery of the cove and the reef,” which would place “the existence of the whole colony ... in extreme jeopardy” (C 243). Allowing Unus to communicate the message to anglophone Juno, the technology of literacy thwarts the attack and saves the day, true to the history of the topos. But here the showcasing of the technology is almost farcical in its self-conscious conflation of slavery and colonialism. The enslaved Juno is not only literate—because “Bridget herself had taught her slaves to read and write”—but also “a sort of ‘expert,’ in her way”: “She wrote and read half the n——-letters of Bristol, previously to quitting America” (C 244). Literacy is thus triply mystified. It enables the colonists’ triumph over the attacking Indigenous enemies, but it also encodes the very terms of Juno’s enslavement: the narrator takes her literacy, along with that of Bristol’s Black writers, and makes it the tool of colonial victory. When Unus reaches her with the letter, he says the one English word he knows—“Missus”—thereby pronouncing the abiding theme of mastery at the heart of the whole scene (C 247).

But *The Crater* is less about the colonial dream of mastery than its interruption by the corresponding nightmare of slave revolt and colonial annihilation. Published close to a decade before Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855), Cooper’s novel creates in Mark Woolston a settler colonial protagonist as blind as Amasa Delano to his own implication in the violence of the world in which he finds himself. It is no coincidence that both works interpolate the *Amistad* plotline. Delano both does and does not realize that he is encountering the aftermath of a slave revolt; Woolston both does and does not realize that he is encountering the long earthquake of colonial annihilation by Indigenous forces. Indeed, after sailing back to the Craterinos following his first return to the US, Woolston spends three hours trying to sight the colony that is mysteriously not where he remembered it—and the first possibility to cross his mind is another earthquake: “the dreadful apprehension of the group’s having sunk under another convulsion of nature” (C 303). But what he finds instead unfolds like “Benito Cereno” condensed for young readers:

"She behaves very strangely, Betts," Mark, at length, said. "Just take a look at her. She yaws like a galiot in a gale, and takes the whole road like a drunken man ... something dreadful must have happened; that brig is in possession of the savages, who do not know how to handle her!" (C 304)

The effect of this plotline is straightforward but ultimately more misleading than it will be in "Benito Cereno." Woolston retakes the ship, liberates its captain, and benevolently chooses to save from drowning those whom he can. Not only is order restored, but the foundations of a "just war" against his Indigenous neighbors are also duly laid: the colonial conditions for lawful enslavement have been established, despite Woolston's nominal rejection of the institution. And indeed, as the novel nears its conclusion, enslaved Indigenous islanders do join the African-descended ones who have been with the Craterinos all along. These "kanakas" do not "labor like civilized men or use tools," the narrator observes, but they "could be, and were, made to do a vast deal" (C 338). Although they are supposedly paid, the narrator notes that they are "converted into a sort of Irish for [Woolston's] colony," and that by the end the colonists "oppress them," "exact[ing] more work than was usual, and forget[ting] to pay for it"—the structural conditions of slavery (C 458).

If the fragile colony was once subject to massacre by "five hundred natives," it now commands "five hundred men," "a strong body of labourers," to build its new infrastructure—with Woolston in particular showing a "great faculty," despite his qualms over formal slavery, "in the management of those wild beings" (C 342). But while "Benito Cereno" ends with a quelling of the slave revolt that Delano has misrecognized, *The Crater* draws to a close somewhat more uncertainly. At some moments, Woolston dreams of complete mastery, believing that his internal enemies could be vanquished because the "Kannakas [are all] at his command"; at others, he concedes that in any attack by outsiders, "No one could say which side these fellows would take" (C 403). The potential for annihilation of the settlement by Indigenous forces never breaks through to the surface and is also never resolved.

Both *The Crater* and "Benito Cereno" depend on these related turning points near the end: an earthquake sinks an island, and a silent revolution explodes into violence. And each text deploys its reversal to explore the uncertain place of human agency vis-a-vis divine oversight within its respective colonial frame. Melville overtly addresses the problem of providence by having Delano gloss over it so blithely as to point it up:

Yes, all is owing to Providence, I know; but the temper of my mind that morning was more than commonly pleasant, while the sight of so much suffering—more apparent than real—added to my good nature, compassion, and charity, happily

interweaving the three. Had it been otherwise, doubtless, as you hint, some of my interferences with the blacks might have ended unhappily enough.⁶⁵

The “but” signals the conflict: Delano’s belief in a natural connection between virtue and good fortune weakens his attention to providence; he rushes past it in recalling his “interferences with the blacks”—buffoonishly committing the very sin for which Woolston is reprimanded early in Cooper’s novel: “fancying” his own temper, good nature, compassion, and charity “of more account than the truth would warrant, and even forgetting whence these very boasted powers are derived” (C 92). Delano thus projects onto the natural world his own self-described beneficence; his nature holds no earthquakes or volcanoes, but instead unfolds as a series of “warm friends, steadfast friends”: “yon bright sun” and the winds with their “human-like healing” (PT 116).

For his South American counterpart, Benito Cereno, the events of the novella shatter belief in anything other than the certainty of the tomb. But the meaning of a violent slave revolt interrupting a perfectly ordered universe need not trouble Delano; he understands his responsibility for the world to be at once limited to the exercise of his own perceived virtues, and as apparently limitless as these same qualities. And Woolston, for all his gravitas, stumbles over the same problem at the ending of *The Crater* in his repeated meditations, “often [going] over, in his mind, all the events connected with his knowledge of the Reef” (C 458). A believer in providence, Woolston no longer overvalues his own agency in positive outcomes; he understands that he was merely “the instrument in causing vegetation to spring up in barren places,” for example (C 458). But he stills believes, as Delano does, in the natural link between “blessings” and “pursu[ing] the right” and “curses” for “pursu[ing] the wrong” (C 458). Like Delano, Woolston feels no responsibility for the catastrophes that inflict others in a global-colonial world where he is both an outsized beneficiary and active participant in ongoing practices of conquest.

How, then, to read the catastrophic earthquake that ends Cooper’s novel? In sparing Woolston’s life, does it merely reflect authorial belief (whether Cooper’s or God’s) in the protagonist’s essential innocence? The novel never answers this question directly, but it does introduce an alternative plotline that reframes both this question and the meaning of the ending, in the process disclosing the fundamental links between theodicy itself and a latent recognition of ongoing colonial history. This alternative plotline emerges in its fullest form in those moments in the novel that call into question the religious modernity that has defined Woolston from the beginning by his ability to imagine the intricate workings of God’s “mysterious laboratory” (C 459). Woolston believes himself superior to Betts on this front—and, more importantly, superior to the Indigenous people of the islands, “uninstructed children of nature” who understand a volcano to be “to the credit of some god, or some demon, neither of whom would be likely to permit his special domains to be trespassed on with impunity” (C 200). Woolston and his fellow settlers attempt to

exploit what they see as primitive superstition, adding guns to the mix of natural effects, so that “the roar, and the smoke of the volcano, and all the mysteries of the place” will be ascribed by the Native people “to supernatural agencies,” and perhaps even “to some control of the whites over the power of the hills” (C 249). When the report of gunfire raises a cry among the Indigenous leader Waally and his followers, the Craterinos believe they have manipulated gullible Indigenous interlocutors into believing that “the strange rocks were speaking” and that “the Gods of the place were angry” (C 250). But then, of course, the ostensible ending of the novel brings the intervention of precisely such supernatural agencies, moved by a God who is angry indeed, but at the settler-Craterinos. The ostensibly divine rending leaves readers to wonder who better understands the island’s natural forces, Woolston and the crew he sends to take the volcano’s measurements—or the Indigenous people from whom we hear only indirectly.

At the same time, the novel suggestively unravels such facile opposition between post-Enlightenment science and supposed Indigenous beliefs about speaking rocks. For whatever the Craterinos believe about Kannaka beliefs, these Native islanders’ actions speak clearly: they can only be “induced” to work for the settlers in their construction projects by Woolston’s “interesting them” in the use of drilling into the rock to detonate stone for building material (C 343). Woolston thinks they are drawn to “the explosions of the blasts, merely to enjoy the pleasure of seeing a cart-load of rock torn from its bed” (C 343). He marvels that this otherwise difficult and indolent labor force “would work at a drill all day” just to “have his sport in this operation of blasting”: “They never seemed to tire of the fun, and it was greatly questioned if half as much labour could have been got out of them at any other work, as at this” (C 343). It never occurs to Woolston that the Kannakas share his observational powers and his empiricist curiosity about the natural world, “the existence of the earth, its revolutions, its heats and colds” (C 141). Yet the narrator lingers over this scene as if it were a warning: for it suggests, to adapt Humboldt, “general ideas on the cause of events, and their mutual inter-relationship” that the Indigenous observers may well have been forming in their apparent “sport” and “fun.”

Woolston and his settlers would likely not have made the association of drilling with human-induced earthquakes that marks today’s climate of fracking for gas and oil. But perhaps, in the intense laboratory of the novel’s torrid zone, the Kannakas develop their own ideas on the causal chains determining seismic activity. Perhaps their ideas about talking rocks and angry gods function in part as an Indigenous scientific discourse unavailable to the Craterino settlers, and transmitted to readers in fragments of language that are both figurative and literal. After all, the Kannakas have conveniently left the islands before the earthquake submerges the settlement. When Woolston visits their nearby home, they give him essentially the same story that the Tainos gave Columbus when he returned to his beloved Villa de la Navidad, the first settlement in the New World: “Nothing was known

of the fate of the colonists" (C 458). True to its prototype, this story makes glancing mention of mistreatment by settlers who have not abided by the rules while remaining extremely vague on any outcome: the Indigenous interlocutors "can say but little about the condition of the colony" (C 458). But they are clear about the earthquake, which "greatly exceeded in violence anything formerly known in those regions" (C 458).

Is Cooper's novel, like Poe's, suggesting that the Kannaka characters have deliberately engineered the earthquake that swallowed the Craterino settlement? The reading is counterintuitive. Yet with its rhetorical and thematic alignment of earthquake and the end of slavery and Indigenous dispossession, the conclusion locates *The Crater*, like Poe's *Pym*, in the long writing of seismic unsettlement throughout the Americas. Cooper's Columbian plotline tracks less importantly to the trajectory of discovery, that is, than to its implosion at La Navidad—and in doing so the novel plays out a foundational colonial history that has been continuously repressed, and then returned, throughout more than four centuries.

In the hands of Poe and Cooper, this colonial history unfolds as a romance of resistance—as a fictional plot that is inevitably in conflict with the global plantation system out of which the novel was born: a critique from within that cannot escape its own conditions of possibility.⁶⁶ The earthshaking abilities that these novels attribute to their Indigenous characters are mere projections of the genre's necessary resistance to the stability of the settler terms that have given life to the form itself. Yet perhaps we might read these settler projections of seismic human powers proleptically, as adumbrations of what critical geographers and social theorists have repeatedly stressed: that the very concept of "natural" catastrophe distracts from the continually repressed knowledge of human agency in causing its onset and its consequences. In this sense, Poe and Cooper offer previsions of the petrostate and its fracking disasters, which centuries of earthquake amnesia have made possible to accept as a tradeoff for living with first-world levels of energy and comfort. But new possibilities may emerge when we return to the linguistic lesson embedded in El Inca Garcilaso's guano, or *huana*: in the "chastening" or warning that Indigenous science, misunderstood and ignored by those parts of the world that have reaped the wealth of conquest, has always held important answers.

Notes

1. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 220 (hereafter cited as *IN*).
2. Douglas Anderson, "Division below the Surface: Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*," *Studies in Romanticism* 43, no. 3 (2004): 455.
3. Cotton Mather, "The Terror of the Lord" (Boston, MA: Printed by T. Fleet, 1727), 11.
4. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 244.

5. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 284.
6. Locke, *The Second Treatise*, 284.
7. On Equiano's citation of Milton, see Adam Potkay, "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 4 (1994): 686–690; and Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, 102–105. For Hickman, the episode suggests Equiano's "Romantic Satanism *avant la lettre*"—a rhetorical "strategy of non-Euro-Christian resistance ... to inhabit, to perform with brio, this Satanic role in order to confound and terrorize the Euro-Christian interloper" (104).
8. See chapter 2, "Autobiography Out of Empire," in Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 43–72.
9. Thomas Jefferson, *Account Books*, 1771 and 1774, Accession #889, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.
10. Allen Pell Crawford, *Twilight at Monticello: The Final Years of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 2009), 79.
11. Jefferson, *Notes of the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffleton (New York: Penguin, 1999), 205.
12. Jefferson, *Notes of the State of Virginia*, 207.
13. Ibid., 145. On eighteenth-century georacial thought, see Ruth Hill's "The Georacial Past in the New World Present," a fascinating study of Antonio de Ulloa's 1772 *Noticias Americanas*, with which Jefferson is in close dialogue throughout *Notes*, in *The Routledge Companion to the Hispanic Enlightenment*, ed. Elizabeth Franklin Lewis, Mónica Bolufer Peruga, and Catherine M. Jaffe (New York: Routledge, 2019), 30–42.
14. Valenčius, *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes*, 3.
15. Dana Luciano, "Unsettled Ground: Indigenous Prophecy, Geological Fantasy, and the New Madrid Earthquakes," *American Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (2022): 823.
16. Luciano, "Unsettled Ground," 822.
17. Ibid., 825, 823.
18. See especially Todd Hancock, *Convulsed States: Earthquakes, Prophecy, and the Remaking of Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), which emphasizes "Indigenous ways of knowing" and early Native intellectual thought on earthquakes as a manifestation of "impurity and illness" (1–6).
19. See, e.g., Jay Feldman, *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).
20. Luciano, "Unsettled Ground," 828–833.
21. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990 [1923]).
22. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 54.
23. Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun; or, The Romance of Monte Beni*, introduced by Richard Brodhead (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 3.
24. Greeson, *Our South*, 252.
25. Ibid.
26. Poe, *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1:130.
27. Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 116.
28. Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Random House, 1976), 10.
29. Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 55. See also Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
30. Reed, *Flight to Canada*, 10.
31. Poe's engagement with and liberal borrowing from Voltaire have been well documented but little discussed; see Mozelle Scaff Allen, "Poe's Debt to Voltaire," *Studies in English* 15 (1935): 63–75.
32. Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in *Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1103 (hereafter cited as P).
33. Díaz, *The Brief and Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*, 1.
34. John T. Matthews, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Slave Capitalism in Poe, Hawthorne, and Joel Chandler Harris* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 77. See also his incisive reading of the novel alongside Jefferson in *Hidden in Plain Sight: Slave Capitalism in Poe, Hawthorne, and Joel Chandler Harris* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 11–50.
35. Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 3.
36. On Pym, Hollow Earthism, and the environmental humanities more broadly, see especially Elizabeth Hope Chang, "Hollow Earth Fiction and Environmental Form in the Late Nineteenth

- Century," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 38, no. 5 (2016): 387–397; and Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Land of Wondrous Cold: The Race to Discovery Antarctica and Unlock the Secrets of Its Ice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 38–39.
37. Thomas Hariot, *Hariot's Narrative of The First Plantation of Virginia in 1585* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1893), 40.
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. Garcilaso, *Comentarios*, ed. Miró Quesada, vol. 1, 15.
 40. Achilles Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 40.
 41. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Crater; or, Vulcan's Peak*, ed. Thomas Philbrick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 6 (hereafter cited as C).
 42. See Martin Green's *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), which makes what Shawn Thomson describes as "the strongest argument for Cooper's *The Crater* being America's only true Robinsonade" (Thomson, *The Fortress of American Solitude: Robinson Crusoe and Antebellum Culture* [Madison, WI: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009], 224, n. 6).
 43. Anonymous, "Mark's Reef: or, the Crater. A Tale of the Pacific. By the Author of 'The Prairie,' &c. 3 vol. Bentley," *The Athenaeum* no. 1041 (1847): 1047.
 44. See Ryan Cordell's excellent essay on Cooper's critique of "religious modernization" in the novel: "'This Flattering Millennium Theory': Denominationalism against Millennialism in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Crater*," in *Apocalypse and the Millennium in the American Civil War Era*, ed. Ben Wright and Zachary W. Dresser (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 52–71.
 45. Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 72.
 46. John Frederick William Herschel, *Preliminary Discourse on the Story of Natural Philosophy* (London: Longman et al., 1830), 4.
 47. Herschel, *Preliminary Discourse*, 4.
 48. Alexander von Humboldt, *Relation historique du voyage ...*, 13 vols. (Paris, 1816), 1:53–55.
 49. Humboldt, *Relation historique du voyage*, 1:53–55.
 50. Bauer, "The Crucible of the Tropics: Alexander von Humboldt's Hermeneutics of Discovery," *The Eighteenth Century* 59, no. 2 (2018): 247. See also Edward Sugden's illuminating reading of this scene as part of the genre he terms the "Pacific elegy" in *Emergent Worlds: Alternative States in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 71–85.
 51. Plato, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, 24d.
 52. *Ibid.*, 24c.
 53. Bauer, *The Alchemy of Conquest*.
 54. James, "Buried in Guano," 118.
 55. *Ibid.*, 122.
 56. Carl Alexander von Martius, "Notices Regarding the Nature, History, and Utility of Guano as a Manure, with General Direction for Its Application," *Journal of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society*, vol. 3 (Calcutta: Bishop's College Press, 1844), 147.
 57. On Humboldt's introduction of guano to Europe, see Cushman, *Guano and the Opening of the Pacific World*, 23–26.
 58. Garcilaso, *Comentarios*, ed. Miró Quesada, vol. 5, 220.
 59. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, 64.
 60. *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 21.
 61. Paul Lyons, *American Pacifism: Oceania in the U.S. Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 67.
 62. Wayne Franklin, *James Fenimore Cooper: The Later Years* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 419.
 63. As Greeson has put it: "The act of plowing remained a constant, but whose hand was on the plow made all the difference" (*Our South*, 252).
 64. Gesa Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic in American Foundational Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 148.
 65. Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougal, G. Thomas Tanselle, et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern-Newberry, 1996), 115 (*Piazza Tales* hereafter cited as *PT*).
 66. On colonial history as romance, see Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (1971): 95–102.

The Undeceiving Earth

At the end of *The Crater* (1847), Cooper's Mark Woolston watches his Pacific island-colony sink into the sea—swallowed by an earthquake. The same year that apocalyptic novel came out, Herman Melville was in a far sunnier authorial state of mind; he had published *Omoo* (1847), the second of his successful South Sea novels and a sequel to *Typee* (1846). He also wrote that year to send a word of encouragement to his ailing second cousin Augustus Van Schaick, who had taken up temporary residence in Rio de Janeiro in hopes of regaining good health. Melville had heard his cousin's letters read aloud, and the descriptions and names of Brazilian places were "quite familiar to him," especially Rio Harbor, which he remembered fondly as "the most glorious sheet of water in the universe." "What think you of tropical climes, My Dear Augustus?" he asks, before qualifying his own question: "But you are a little too far South (on the very border indeed of the South Temperate Zone) to feel the full genial warmth of the Torrid Zone."¹ There is no mistaking the kindness of the letter, or its intent to forge intimacy through shared experiences of a geography far from the northeastern coast of the United States.

Yet there is a lingering irony in this innocuous question about "genial" tropical climes, which, Melville implies, his cousin has not fully experienced in Rio, at the border of the temperate zone in the south of the American hemisphere. While Melville sometimes uses the word straightforwardly as a synonym for pleasant or enjoyable—as when Ishmael and Queequeg commune over a genial smoke—the term accrues the irony of competing perspectives as his writing career continues; by the time he writes *The Confidence-Man* (1857), "genial" is a virtual keyword.² Melville's attribution of "genial warmth" to the torrid zone marks nineteenth-century geography's inheritance from the ancient geographic formation, with all its contradictions and ambivalence—the same formation that Crèvecoeur had explored in developing the settler colonial sublime out of his own seismic imaginings. For Melville, and in its modern guise, the torrid zone is a site of moral declension and potential evil, as well as a source of boundless riches and pleasure.

To link "geniality" to the torrid zone, as Melville does, is to wink at an oxymoron—and to make a small philosophical joke about Western modes of southernizing: about how the syndrome of "tropicality," in Nicolás Wey Gómez's term, silently inherits from the ancient geographic category it displaces.³ As the narrator asks in *Pierre*, "Why round her middle wears this world so rich a zone of torrid verdure, if she be not dressing for the final rites?"⁴ Tropical climes mark

the site of abundance—and the zone of endless potential extraction by northern explorers—but they also bear the signs of death and decay. The torrid zone is both the funeral and the gravesite of “this world”—a place of sin, sorrow, and mortality—that enables the denizens of the temperate zones to live morally apart from the purported space of evil and to enjoy their predatory optimism by avoiding a full grappling with the Pauline mysteries of iniquity: with the question of why an omnipotent deity allows evil and suffering to exist. Visitors from the temperate North can thus enjoy the pleasures and riches of tropical climes without facing the attendant questions raised by the ongoing southern state of final rites.

With this early reference to the torrid zone, Melville signals a set of questions that he will take up in his work to come. The narrator of his first novel can declare playfully that “the penalty of the Fall presses very lightly upon the valley of Typee”; he can joke that the Taipee, taken on their own supposed theological terms, are “sunk in religious sloth, and require a spiritual revival.”⁵ In *Omoo* (1847), the same narrator can spoof religious imperialism by describing the “mickonaree” work he undertakes with his comic sidekicks.⁶ But by the time Melville wrote *Mardi* (1849), his torrid zone settings offered spaces of philosophical rupture—and sites in which he could also explore what he hints at with his wink at cousin Augustus: the southernizing geographies of Western theology and philosophy, and the overlap of these with the psychology of bourgeois geniality or predatory optimism.

Melville was in this sense an inheritor of Voltaire’s insight about the North enriching itself upon the South. He was also an indirect heir of El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, who influenced Voltaire in part by rebuking the “temperate” world from the perspective of “la zona torrida.” As we have seen, Garcilaso was born in the sixteenth century in Cuzco, in a country he called “a land of earthquakes”; Melville, born in nineteenth-century New York City, is now famous most of all for a book that was originally titled in the London edition of 1851 simply “The Whale.” Garcilaso, describing Indigenous cultures in colonial Peru, tells us they “fish with harpoons and contrive to catch fish as large as a man”; indeed, their harpoon fishing resembles “the Basque whale fishery” (RC 173). These pre-Columbian Indians “worshipped the whale on account of its monstrous greatness” (RC 132). Melville, on the other hand, famously meditated on what he called the “earthquake life” of his monomaniacal whale-hunter (MD 507). For Melville, earthquake and whale shadow and double one another philosophically but also materially, making them sometimes hard to distinguish.

There is a moment in *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael cites the early seventeenth-century account of physician Lionel Wafer, whose privateering ship experienced a jolt that knocked sleeping sailors from their hammocks off the main of South America. A man of science, Wafer in his account makes a number of germane observations: the sea, “which ordinarily looks Green, seemed then of a Whitish Colour”; testing the water, he finds it mixed with sand and hypothesizes an earthquake (MD 170). Afterwards, he learns that on the same night in October 1687 an

earthquake had struck Peru. His “Opinion of the Earthquake” now “confirmed,” he sails onward to discover and observe more in what he calls “the Interest of England to make an Establishment upon that Continent” (*MD* 170, preface). As so often, scientific and imperial interests here go hand in hand. But in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael insists that Wafer, in his empiricist account, is wrong “to impute the shock [felt by his ship] to an earthquake” (*MD* 209). And though Ishmael concedes the existence of the quake, he speculates darkly that the true source of the violence felt by the ship was not an earthquake “after all” but “an unseen whale vertically bumping the hull from underneath” (*MD* 209).

Nor is Ishmael alone in associating earthquakes with whales as twinned adumbrations of either divine or scientific import. Early American interpretations of the biblical story of Jonah often juxtaposed the two. Charles Chauncy’s mid-eighteenth-century sermon “Earthquakes a Token of the Righteous Anger of God” concludes with the image of “three large whales on the top of the water ... continuing perfectly still ... frightened as it was tho’t from the bottom” of the sea by the earthquake.⁷ Thomas Scott’s influential biblical commentary of 1805 associates Jonah’s ordeal inside the whale with the possibility that sinful Nineveh may be struck by earthquake.⁸ In the European tradition, this catastrophic doubling is at least as old as the Renaissance, on display for example in an image from the mid-sixteenth-century Augsburg *Book of Miracles*, which depicts a 1531 earthquake in Lisbon with an ominous whale in the foreground. But as Marina Warner has noted, the inscription below the image is unusual because it fails to interpret the meaning of the dual portent; it offers no warning about God’s judgment, only a record of observation, almost as if this were a proto-Enlightenment scientific treatise.⁹

Today we know that whales do respond to the detrimental effects of seismic activity. But during and long before Melville’s time, Pacific cultures, from Cascadia to the Philippines to Japan, conjoined whale and earthquake in their understanding of catastrophe—of events that can destroy and remake human and natural worlds alike. Whether Melville, in his extensive travels, ever knew these Pacific traditions is uncertain. Still, as twinned sources of shock, earthquake and whale converge uncannily in his writing, as when Israel Potter and the band led by John Paul Jones, intending to burn down the English coastal town of Whitehaven during the Revolutionary War, glide “through the stillness and the darkness ... like two mysterious whales from the Arctic Sea”; they are approaching a place built on mines that sometimes swallow up the houses in what Melville calls “an earthquake ... like that of Lisbon.”¹⁰

Earthquake and whale yield connections wide and deep, bringing together mines in England and the mining of New World riches to create the Iberian wealth for which Lisbon was blamed after the earthquake. In *Moby-Dick*, whalers are trawling the Pacific because the Atlantic had, by 1850, been largely emptied of its whales in the drive to bring oil to US machinery and lamps. The catastrophe looming at the center of *Moby-Dick* is in part a disaster of extraction, in which

Melville imagines whaling as ecologically proximate to mining, part of a genealogy of critical thought on catastrophe that has an important point of origin in the writings of Garcilaso. While Garcilaso had imagined the phenomenon of earthquake as both event and figuration in a country whose Indigenous people were devastated by the European project of extracting Peru's mineral wealth, Melville throughout his career continually explores the torrid zone as an inherited geography of catastrophe—and, being Melville, bumps it from beneath with his own whale-earthquake style of critical thought.

To read Melville as a theorist of catastrophe, as this chapter does, is to home in on a particular version of the author among the many who constitute our critical moment's "Fluid Melville."¹¹ This version is in some ways an old-fashioned one: Melville the tragedian, drawn increasingly to a tragic view of life over the course of his own, while obsessively interested in the philosophical resources of early modern and ancient tragedy as a lens on the present. Tragedy, as David Scott has memorably argued, remediates the essential teleological problem attending the romance of revolutionary overcoming; it also affords space for acknowledging that some questions are enduring because they must be continually reformulated to meet the demands of new historical eras.¹²

If Melville's earthquake-ridden tragedies can feel relentless and overwhelmingly bleak, this is not because he viewed the world's history as nothing more than one violent catastrophe after another. Instead Melville's philosophical oeuvre returns again and again to a problem in continual need of reframing: how to understand the universal and yet geographically determined nature of suffering without recourse to the certainty of atheism. If Ahab's ship represented an "Anacharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth" (*MD* 121)—a globalized world spoken for and defended by a revolutionary monomaniac bent on abolishing Christianity and all other religions—Melville's own writing would never settle for an answer to the problems of a global-colonial world that dispensed with theist terms altogether.¹³ Instead, he kept searching through the earthquakes of modernity and the uncertainties of his own cosmology to find a moral-political vision that was not at root self-serving.

***Mardi* and the Seismic Global-Colonial World**

"To the people of the archipelago, the map of *Mardi* was the map of the world"—and so too for readers of the novel, in which fictional Polynesian islands stand in for real nations and continents.¹⁴ Why locate the vast nineteenth-century "world" in an archipelago of the torrid zone? To do so is to make a familiar argument about the world's fallenness or, in historical terms, about the moral declension of modernity. But Melville explores something more specific in *Mardi*, limning a

philosophy of history that locates the European conquest of the American hemisphere within the emergence of a modern global condition. “America” and “the world” are persistently linked in the novel—as are “Arkansas’ boundless prairies” to “the ocean moors of the Pacific” (M 39). This is not a simplistic national solipsism, though, by which the US stands in for the wider world. Rather, it is the varied colonial conditions of the hemisphere, and the foundational (and yet partial) Columbian story out of which they have emerged, that provide the ground for understanding the symbolic world of *Mardi* and the global-colonial world it shadows forth. “Though America be discovered, the Cathays of the deep are unknown,” argues the adventurer narrator (M 39). He believes he is the protagonist of a great discovery narrative; instead, he is playing out the ongoing nightmare-underside of the story he wants to tell.

As in *Pym* and *The Crater*, that dark story is essentially the narrative of La Navidad, the originary southern gothic tale of anticolonial revolution, which is by the nineteenth century replete with ghosts and goblins. Once the unnamed narrator has escaped from his fate as a ship’s hand, he and companion Jarl make their way by boat over the ocean until they encounter a strange vessel “in a state of unaccountable disarray” (M 57). The ship is a forerunner of the *San Dominick* in “Benito Cereno”; nothing makes sense about her outward appearance, from her “much tattered” foresail to the fact that “only the foresail, mainsail, and jib [are] set,” with the “jib ... hoisted but half way up the stay” (M 57). Unlike Amasa Delano, who will epitomize a habit of racial unknowing that defines his American innocence, this early Melville protagonist imagines right away that “Lascars, or Manilla-men [have] murdered the Europeans of the crew,” taken control of the ship, and therefore “might not be willing to let strangers depart unmolested” (M 58). The plotline reprises what Columbus discovered on his second voyage—his men and his colony destroyed by the “timorous” Tainos whom he had already begun enslaving—and that repeats endlessly across the globe from the late fifteenth century on, reaching a famous apex in the historical events of the Haitian Revolution (M 314). That war for freedom from slavery was undertaken, in a terrible irony of history and geography, on the same island where the “Discoverer” planted the first European colony in the New World. Melville famously fuses the two foundational moments—the destruction of La Navidad and the Haitian Revolution—in “Benito Cereno,” in which a Columbian figurehead adorns the slave ship named for Saint Domingue.

As *Mardi*’s narrator continues, he drops eighteenth-century references to the “epic age,” with portentous allusions to Burke and Franklin (M 79). These conventional signposts of the Age of Reason are but part of the superficial veneer overlaying a vast enlightenment moment of another kind, one that we can only glimpse in the actions undertaken and the partial stories told by the enslaved and dispossessed minor characters of the novel. When Samoa and Anattoo appear before the narrator and Jarl, revealed as the Indigenous Polynesian occupants of the mysterious ship yawing on the “moors of the Pacific,” they offer up the first

of these partial stories (M 39). The narrator demands to know “what disaster” has “befallen” their craft; he is suddenly apprehensive to the point of resorting to Delano-like euphemisms, remarking that he is “certain” that “something unto-ward” has happened (M 66). The story that Samoa tells reprises the revolutionary gothic tale that the narrator already on some level knows: the “four whites” overseeing a “native crew” have been captured on an island where they had attempted to set up a pearl-diving operation manned by Indigenous laborers (M 68). Samoa’s adaptation of this foundational anticolonial tale recruits “a couple of Cholos, or half-breed Spaniards, from the Main”—racially mixed figures whose “half Spanish” part is offset by “the other half quartered between the wild Indian and the devil” (M 69). Whether this description comes from Samoa or the novel’s narrator, who is paraphrasing what he calls “the mixed phraseology of a Polynesian sailor,” the term “Cholo” accomplishes its intended work within the tale: to designate a set of worthy opponents and devious masterminds who by definition establish a rationale for the ensuing revolutionary acts that is racial-characterological—“a race, that from Baldivia to Panama are notorious for their unscrupulous villainy”—rather than political and theorized (M 67, 69). In this moment of vast global enlightenment among the world’s enslaved and dispossessed peoples, Samoa understands how the tale must be told if he is to increase his own and Anatoo’s chances of survival. He casts himself apart from the other Polynesian bid for freedom—a successful effort that he claims to be fleeing—while creating a story that explains and ensures his own.

While the narrator knows that there is more to Samoa’s story than he is being told, he is busy self-fashioning his own origin story. His plotline is explicitly colonial, albeit set on a ship of state rather than on bounded land. First, to these Polynesians who are already occupying the ship, the narrator announces, *requerimiento*-style, that “neither the vessel nor aught therein” belongs to them because “every thing belonged to the owners in Lahina” (M 92). Next, he promotes himself, by virtue of his whiteness, from a laborer to a master; he speaks in “the mild, firm tone of a superior; being anxious, at once to assume unquestioned supremacy” (M 96). Now he can drop the ostensible obligation to return the craft to its purported original owners—his *requerimiento*, too, is merely rhetorical—and conclude the ruse of proprietorship. He basks in “the consideration, that to all purposes, I was owner, as well as commander of the craft I sailed” (M 97). But these rituals of possession do not change the essential fragility of the colonial condition; even out at sea, the narrator is haunted by the sounds of Anatoo’s “dismal chant,” which he interprets as “an invocation to the Cholos to rise and dispatch us” (M 92).

As the narrator continues to sail the ship he has designated as his private property, and to command the labor of its prior occupants, he finds himself drawn into another foundational colonial narrative, in this case about the second “primal crime” of the New World.¹⁵ After the first taking of enslaved Tainos to serve as translators, Columbus’s men at La Navidad began raping Indigenous

women—which is why, Columbus is later told, the Tainos have destroyed the colony by the time he returns. Even out on the waters of the Pacific, the narrator of *Mardi* seems ineluctably drawn to repeat this crime. When a new ship materializes at sea carrying a community of Polynesian worshippers, the narrator finds an opportunity for his own *raptus*: the ancient seizing of a “beautiful maiden” as a sexual prize and confirmation of his conquistador status (*M* 131). All of this he dissimulates as a story of heroic rescue based on the idea that the maiden, whom he has never seen, is an “invisible victim” who will be sacrificed upon arrival at the Polynesians’ intended island destination (*M* 131). But Melville’s narrator is tellingly vague about how he arrives at this conclusion. While he says clearly that the priest “gave us to know, that it would be a profanation to enter” a particular tent on board the ship—and while the narrator is equally clear that this demurral “rouse[s his] curiosity to unravel the wonder” of the forbidden entry—he never directly says how he learns the purported truth that the maiden is intended for a sacrifice (*M* 131). “At last I succeeded” is all he tells the reader about the abrupt and violent episode that results in his capture of this Indigenous woman (*M* 131). Lest the reader miss the degree to which the narrator has mystified his will to violence, Melville has him recognize, after the murder and kidnapping that ensue, that he is not a rescuer but instead the cause of the “shrill wails” of the maiden: “Remorse smote me hard; and like lightning I asked myself, whether the death-deed I had done was sprung of a virtuous motive, the rescuing of a captive from thrall; or whether beneath that pretense [were] some other, and selfish purpose”—a purpose he euphemizes as simply “the companionship of a beautiful maid” (*M* 135).

To escape the harrowing recognition of his actions and their underlying motives, the narrator must draw further on the originary plotlines of Columbian encounter. Suddenly, he is able to understand the maiden’s Polynesian language to such a degree that the woman he comes to know as Yillah can confirm and even describe and explain her status as a victim; meanwhile, he uses this moment of supposedly transparent communication to introduce himself as a “gentle demigod” (*M* 140). The myth of conquest as actual rescue and perceived apotheosis is thereby achieved. But because the narrator continues to be pursued by Yillah’s people and thoughts of his own guilt, a new colonial story is required—one establishing Yillah as the lost white daughter of former settlers on the island of Amma. If the story offers a kind of racializing alibi for the narrator’s kidnapping, it also introduces a new tale of unsettlement, as Yillah’s settler parents and community have all been destroyed by the islanders—a nightmarish game of Russian nesting dolls: inside each tale of “La Navidad,” a new story with the same outcome.

Part of this nightmare is the narrator’s theological predicament as a Euro-Christian believer in the “well-ordered dispensations of Providence” who also continually assumes that he has been or will be received as a god or demigod by those whom he seeks to dispossess and master (*M* 35). Yet if the narrator believes he is in control of his own colonial apotheosis—his embodiment of divinity before

those whom he has colonized—he learns otherwise upon landing in the world of *Mardi*. Here Samoa becomes both his translator and his religious puppet-master, explaining to the narrator who he is in the pantheon of gods and how to introduce himself. Only under Samoa's control does the narrator achieve, finally, a name; he becomes "white Taji, a sort of half-and-half deity ... ranking among their inferior ex-officio demi-gods" (M 164). Samoa promises Taji "unbounded hospitality" as a divine, but the narrator finds himself treated instead in a "familiar manner" that makes him apprehensive: "I mourned that I had not previously studied better my part, and learned the precise nature of my previous existence in the land" (M 164, 166). There is apparently nothing so special about being one of the "immortals" in *Mardi*; even his host seems also to be a god (M 487). As Taji recognizes, with a sly nod to Captain Cook, being "celestial visitants" does not shape all colonial outcomes: some would-be colonizers "have been slain outright, and while full faith in their divinity had in no wise abated" (M 164). Yet the narrator enters his new identity—even as "it seemed preposterous, to assume a divine dignity"—quite willingly: "Taji seemed oozing from my fingers' ends" (M 165).

What *Mardi* illustrates in these darkly comic scenes is a process of theological adaptation to the settler colonial condition: faced with the immanence of other gods in a world he does not understand, the Euro-Christian colonizer relocates divinity and cosmology within the great drama of his own internal consciousness. His representative spokesperson in the nineteenth century will be Melville's contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson. But where Emerson envisions the internally divine and "imperial self" in a state of transcendence to become "part or particle of God," Melville suggests at the end of *Mardi* that the figure of the transcendent settler has been on a route to nihilistic self-destruction all along.¹⁶ Taji's purported rescue of Yillah sets him on a course to meet the very fate from which he imagines that he has liberated her: "plunging into a vortex ... round and round, descending into depths unknown" (M 138). This is also, of course, Pym's fate—and like Pym, Taji is drawn to the vortex because it is a portal to another world, to the hollow earth that has yet to be claimed and colonized by the imperial powers competing across the globe. Taji imagines this unconquered territory as a utopia, the vortex as an ocean whirlpool that promises "at last to well up in an inland fountain of Oroolia" (M 138). Rather than saving Yillah, then, Taji has found a way to usurp her place on a path of subterranean "New World" discovery: "Let me, then, be the unreturning wanderer," he says in the final passages of the novel, as he makes his way on the ocean toward the "deep beyond" (M 654). The ending provides less a critique of the frantic and limitless aspirations of nineteenth-century US expansionism—driven by the oddball theories of John Cleves Symmes and Jeremiah Reynolds to find polar entrances to a new world beneath the world—than a philosophical recognition that the modern global condition is self-annihilating for the colonizers and their literal and intellectual descendants and beneficiaries.

In exploring the relation between the discovery of the American hemisphere and the state of global modernity, *Mardi* introduces a kind of seismic thinking

that Melville will return to again and again over the course of his career. This earthquake mode of thought is fundamentally geological, rooted in the fleeting recognition that “it is not the Pyramids that are ancient, but the eternal granite whereof they are made; which had been equally ancient though yet in the quarry” (*M* 228). *Mardi* scales the human world—from “Nero’s House of Gold” to the “Mexican House of the Sun,” from the Alhambra to the “Illinois Mounds” and “Kentucky’s Mammoth Cave”—to its small place in a vast geological time (*M* 229). But the point is not to diminish the importance or meaning of human history, to which the novel remains committed. Instead, *Mardi* invites readers to consider how the problems of Western “snivelization,” as it is dubbed in a Montaigne-like passage of *Redburn*, can be most radically addressed by rejecting the anthropocentric and vitalist premise that “there is no sensation in being a rock”: for the earth’s “rivers are its veins; when agonized, earthquakes are its throes; it shouts in the thunder, and weeps in the shower” (*M* 458).¹⁷

“Mountains are sturdy foes,” Taji proclaims during a visit to Vivenza, and the country’s “aboriginal people, a race of wild Nimrods and hunters,” is “not yet wholly extinct” (*M* 468). The observation registers the anthropocentrism at the heart of Indigenous dispossession, and indeed *Mardi* insists that recognizing the interwovenness of the two is key to any alternative to either. As the anonymous scroll read aloud in Vivenza puts it, “And should Mardi endure till mountain melt into mountain, and all isles form one table-land; yet, would it but expand the old battle-plain” (*M* 529). Or, to paraphrase Garcilaso: the earthquake of unceasing settler colonial war will never end. For nothing will change, Melville suggests, without acknowledgment of the human–earth relations that render settler history one small part of a much greater drama. Chronological history is a mere distraction, in this view, and it sustains belief in the elsewhere catastrophes of earlier times: “Students of history are horror-struck at the massacres of old; but in the shambles, men are being murdered today. Could time be reversed, and the future change places with the past, the past would cry out against us, and our future, full as loudly, as we against the ages foregone” (*M* 529). Melville’s reader in the present has a responsibility to act in the name of “All the Ages” precisely because past, present, and future bear on each other; separating the past from the present determines one possible future, but so too can recognizing the past *as* the present determine another (*M* 529).

In the terms of Melville’s seismic thought, geological and human history converge in *Mardi* to redefine what counts as triumph or failure, virtue or crime—and to explore whether “the catastrophe you believe to be at hand [is] a universal and permanent republic” or an earthquake that topples one (*M* 525). The novel understands that these questions are perpetually evaded and displaced by locating disaster conceptually in the South. As Taji travels from Vivenza to the rich lands in the Latin American part of the hemisphere, known in the novel as Kolumbo, he sees the potential for extraction everywhere—but he also imagines the potential for catastrophe as he rounds the continent’s southern extremity: “In their earthquakes

Lisbon and Lima never saw the like" (*M* 543). There is always a South beyond the South—and the philosophy-rending earthquake in Lisbon begins to assume new shapes and meanings when the philosopher writers from Peru, as Melville suggests in *Moby-Dick*.

Lima Style: *Moby-Dick* and the Earthquake Foundations of Modern Western Philosophy

In Melville's great novel of catastrophe, Peru serves as the staging ground for the act of narration that will eventually become *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael recalls telling the story of the ill-fated whaling ship *Town-Ho* in a Lima tavern. Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is exquisitely attuned to what he calls that "strangest, saddest city" of "cathedral-toppling earthquakes" (*MD* 193), a city that emblemizes the novel's larger concerns with the southernizing of catastrophe and the problem of optimism. By the time we get to "The Town-Ho's Story" (ch. 54), Ishmael has already explored the largely North–South geographical axes of catastrophe upon which his whaling novel is built. In "The Affidavit" (ch. 45), for example, he enlists the historical accounts of southering whales: an unnamed killer off the coasts of Africa; "Timor Jack ... oft seen from the palmy beach of Ombay"; the "Chilian whale" known as Don Miguel; and so on (*MD* 205). These creatures establish, Ishmael asserts, "in printed form ... the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale [and] more especially the catastrophe" (*MD* 205). But Ishmael also seeks to map out a larger geography for what he calls "the scene of the catastrophe" involving ships attacked by whales (*MD* 206). He concerns himself with "the authentic particulars of this catastrophe" as a genre (*MD* 207). And this genre almost always unfolds in the south: between South America and the Marquesas, off the Azores, on the way to Valparaiso.

"The Town-Ho's Story" is narrated out of the time of the rest of the novel, its telling following the novel's catastrophic events but occurring before Ishmael converts his survival into the larger narrative of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael translates the story to its proper sequence, in other words, and returns it to the Cape of Good Hope where the story first reached the ears of the sailors on board the *Pequod*—but he is clear both that this is his *second* telling of the tale *and* that he is going to mark this narration as different because he has already told it once: "I shall preserve the style in which I once narrated it at Lima to a lounging circle of my Spanish friends" (*MD* 243). Melville prods the reader to wonder why, or to what end, Ishmael tells it this way, given that the story embeds a miniature version of the larger novel and its culminating catastrophe: a relentless drive for revenge followed by a fatal whale attack.

Ishmael tells readers that he preserves this Lima style "for [his] humor's sake"—and the setup is indeed comic: the American narrator giving a geography lesson to the "lounging circle of ... Spanish friends," including the two "young Dons,"

Pedro and Sebastian, who interject questions from their perspective at the very heart of Spanish Creole sophistication: “‘Lakeman! Buffalo! Pray what is a Lakeman and where is Buffalo?’” (*MD* 243–244). Seeing North America through their eyes, readers are reminded that distance is not always geographic; as Humboldt once said, “Lima is more remote from [the rest of] Peru than from London,” and, in Ishmael’s telling, apparently also more remote from Buffalo than London.¹⁸ But Ishmael speaks as well in a non-comic mode, reverting to the Lima style to help himself perhaps in the “humoral” sense: to drive off the spleen and regulate the circulation, as he says in the novel’s opening lines, as if to draw himself out of the black bile of depression that the story’s content—what he calls “the darker thread” of the narrative—might otherwise introduce (*MD* 243). The Lima style, in other words, allows for the combination of this darker narrative thread with the humor created in the interaction with the South American audience to whom the tale is told. As Wyn Kelley trenchantly observes, moreover, the style of Lima registers a compromise between colonial power and Indigenous “topography and urban form”; it registers “challenges to imperial power from below.”¹⁹ It is for these very reasons also Garcilaso’s aesthetic style of earthquake: the registering of critical shocks, the skewing of perspectives and geographies, the colliding of disparate histories and philosophies.

The story takes on an oddly mixed quality, for those who know Melville’s career, as a narrative mash-up of *Moby-Dick*’s larger plot with concerns that he will take up in both *Billy Budd* and “Benito Cereno.” “The Town-Ho’s Story” anticipates *Billy Budd*’s tale of masculine beauty defiled by misused authority and craven envy (the mate Radney, “ugly as a mule,” punishes his subordinate Steelkilt because the latter is “a tall and noble animal with a head like a Roman,” but then swerves to prefigure the action of “Benito Cereno” when Steelkilt, a sailor deprived by Radney of “the meanest slave’s right,” leads an armed mutiny of seamen [*MD* 246])). But unlike *Billy Budd*, Steelkilt is no angel—he more or less starts the fight—and unlike Babo or Atufal, he is not legally enslaved but a contracted seaman. And *Moby-Dick*’s appearance at the story’s climax in fact undermines the story of divine intervention that Ishmael tries to tell: all it accomplishes is to enact the murder that Steelkilt intended on carrying out himself. As Ishmael explains, the *Town-Ho*’s story “seemed obscurely to involve with the whale a certain wondrous, inverted visitation by one of those so-called judgments of God” (*MD* 242).

But if the story’s framing calls theodicy into question, that framing also places the narrative’s philosophical import within a context of legal copyright that racializes the quandary of providentialism. The “darker thread” of the tale has not heretofore been known publicly, Ishmael explains, because it was “the private property of three confederate white seamen of that ship” (*MD* 242). The phrasing here is odd, and it implicates what Ishmael calls the “lasting record” (*MD* 243) of the tale (as the published “Town-Ho’s Story”) in questions of copyright that have their foundations in settler colonialism and that depend on a racialized

Lockean theory of property as a relation of enclosure. If the tale is private property, it is so because of the seamen's labor in telling and guarding it, until they prove themselves unworthy Catholic owners by relinquishing it to Tashtego with their "Romish injunctions of secrecy" (*MD* 242). Tashtego, as a literal Lockean "wild Indian," has of course no capacity for enclosure, according to this property theory, and can only live as natural man rather than laboring to secure or improve his narrative ownership (*MD* 120). Tashtego quite emphatically does not labor in telling the tale; rather, he "ramble[s] in his sleep" and cannot "withhold" the rest under questioning the next day (*MD* 242–243). The private property of the three "white seamen" on the *Town-Ho* thus becomes the private property of the white narrator Ishmael and—metafictionally—the copyrighted literary property of author Melville, who sells the story to *Harper's* as a promotion for the novel. (The "Town-Ho's Story" was published separately in the October 1851 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*; it was the only portion of *Moby-Dick* to appear before the book's publication.)

"The Town-Ho's Story" thus unfolds as newly occupied literary terrain, extracted from Catholic and indolent Spanish-American possessors of the narrative via a Native American character in whom the tale dwells and is exhaled almost as a bodily function in unwilling sleep talk. This seemingly smooth enclosure of literary property by our narrator Ishmael is troubled by the story's actual narrative content, which delivers a series of shocks to Lockean theory. The narrative's undermining of Locke begins humorously enough with Steerkilt and his fellow seamen pumping out the water from a leak in the hold and ribbing Radney for his "solicitude" regarding a perilous situation, which they attribute not to his concern for human safety in the event of a sinking ship but to the fact that he is a part-owner or investor in the vessel (*MD* 245). Knowing that property, not human life, is the mate's chief concern, Steerkilt taunts him, predicting that "old Rad's investment" can only be saved if he were to "cut away his part of the hull and tow it home" (*MD* 246). Radney's investment is on the brink of becoming worthless, Steerkilt teases, not so much because of a random leak as because of some industrious fish cutting into the hull of the vessel: a swordfish who "with a gang of ship-carpenters, saw-fish, and file-fish and whatnot ... the whole posse of them ... now hard at work cutting and slashing" (*MD* 246). These professional fish are "playing the devil with [Radney's] estate" by the fact of their labor; as Steerkilt says, they are "making improvements": changing the original nature of the property and thereby claiming ownership according to the Lockean labor theory of appropriation and entitlement (*MD* 246). Steerkilt's comic concern here is not so much with undermining the likelihood of saving the ship, that is, as with destabilizing the property theory underpinning its ownership.

The antagonistic fish in this scenario are meant to be funny, but they also prefigure a whale of a threat to settler colonial ideology writ large. Like its earthquake twin in Garcilaso, the whale in *Moby-Dick* portends an assault on settler colonial

foundations. Ishmael has been hinting at this aspect of the whale—more consequential than the mangled swallowing of Radney—as the conflict reaches its first climax, with Radney sprawled on the deck “spouting blood like a whale,” his “lower jaw ... stove in his head” (*MD* 248). Ishmael makes clear that this violence, provoked in and by Steelkilt, could happen anywhere. But if Steelkilt and the “sea-Parisians” fighting with him remind readers of the failed Paris working-class revolution of 1848, the subsequent events in the story confirm that its deepest meaning is specifically colonial, linking metropolitan Peru to the far-flung shores of Lake Erie: as Ishmael informs his Limeño audience, “There’s your true Ashantee, gentleman, there howl your pagans” (*MD* 250, 249). This continued skewing of North American geography from a Limeño point of view is also key to the story’s Lima style. The dons themselves comically invoke and thereby undermine the North–South axis of the Black Legend: “Señor, hereabouts in this dull, warm, most lazy, and hereditary land, we know but little of your vigorous North,” “your temperate North” (*MD* 248, 250). They establish their own worldly status as enlightened men through their disruptive laughter, their urbane reception of the geography lesson proffered by Ishmael. As Don Pedro exclaims, clinking a glass of *chicha*, “No need to travel. The world’s one Lima” (*MD* 250). Only an Anglo-American, he seems to be suggesting, can miss the point that the colonial world is now global reality.

But Ishmael’s tale leaves the worldly Limeño audience quiet and grave. After all the drinking and joking, Don Sebastian can only respond by asking quietly, “Are you through?” (*MD* 258). Ishmael never explains what has finally shocked these jovial listeners into silence; he leaves the sudden shift in tone as mysterious as Steelkilt’s whispered, unknown words to Radney and the captain: a “threat,” Ishmael tells us, “whatever that might have been” (*MD* 254). And clearly that threat is something more than insurrection, for the tale by this point has already invoked “murderous mutiny” as an explicit possibility (*MD* 250). Whatever Steelkilt’s words bespeak, the larger narrative shatters the breezy rationalism of the drinking Limeños with what Ishmael calls the “strange fatality [that] pervades the whole career of these events” (*MD* 256). In Ishmael’s telling, Radney is from the outset a “predestinated mate ... branded for slaughter by the gods” (*MD* 248). But these portents have no effect on the confident laughter of the Limeños. Their mood alters only when Ishmael turns at his story’s end to a specifically geographic form of predestination in which events unfold, as he puts it, “as if verily mapped out before the world itself was charted”—a language of global topography that evokes New World discovery while also disclosing the deep structural links between colonialism and modern theodicy (*MD* 256).

Ishmael’s geographically determined fable of predestination also complicates the novel’s southernization of catastrophe. When Radney meets his predestined fate, he does so as a northerner: a Nantucket man, a stockholder, an investor in the ship. But his status as beneficiary of an extraction project in the hemispheric South

is upended by the predestination of a specific geographic plotline. This trajectory emerges only after Radney's death, when the ship arrives at a "savage, solitary place" where Steelkilt leads all but five of the crew in an act more threatening even than mutiny (*MD* 257). They "deliberately desert ... among the palms," take up "a large double war-canoe of the savages," and reduce the ship's company to a newly racialized group: "a small band of whites" now suffering from racial fragility (*MD* 257). The captain, setting out in a single boat to seek reinforcements, finds that even at sea he cannot avoid his own destiny of precarious whiteness when he meets the "savage craft" led by Steelkilt (*MD* 257).

The end of "The Town-Ho's Story" thus stages a theatrical reversal of power anticipating "Benito Cereno": Steelkilt demands that his former superior "repeat after [him]" like a student or a parishioner and request his own death by natural catastrophe ("may lightnings strike me!") if he does not follow the Lakeman's instructions to the letter (*MD* 258). Or, in the parlance of the *San Dominick*, "Seguid vuestro jefe" (*PT* 49). Steelkilt, too, suddenly breaks out in Spanish at the scene's end, shouting "Adios, Señor!" He takes up his own Lima style, formally evoking the earthquake aesthetic of this story and its rending of the geography of optimism—just as "Benito Cereno" will undercut Delano's satirical geography of optimism with the final spectacle of Babo's decapitated head staring across the *plaza mayor* of Lima (*MD* 258). The conclusion of "The Town-Ho's Story" underscores this skewing of the philosophical world-system even more powerfully, corroding the authority of optimism by employing its own idiom: "luck befriend[s]" Steelkilt so that he and his savage crew are "providentially" delivered to France, leaving the captain of the *Town-Ho* "forced to enlist some of the more civilized Tahitians" as his new crew (*MD* 258). The line recalls the story's once neutral opening descriptor of the ship—"manned almost wholly by Polynesians"—which now reads as the dark sign of a very different kind of predestination, marking a continued state of racial fragility not only for the captain but also for the beneficiaries of settler colonialism from South to North, from Lima to the Great Lakes (*MD* 242). "The Town-Ho's Story," as "the private property of three confederate white seamen," thus bears a "Romish" warning from the South: that all New World theodicy—including versions inherited from Protestant predestination in the temperate North—grows out of deep colonial roots.

The Piazza Tales and the Cruel Coloniality of Theodicy

As a collection, *The Piazza Tales* is about narrators who are blind to their own narrative cruelty—blind to the process by which they shore up their own well-being vis-a-vis the mystery of evil: the inexplicable existence of profound suffering throughout the world. Part of that process is making the problem of evil, and of vastly disproportionate kinds of suffering, abstract and universal, an old and

useful performance of wisdom that sidesteps human responsibility to the world. "Ah humanity!" cries the narrator of "Bartleby" to distract himself from his own implication in the "Story of Wall Street" so openly recognized by the title (*PT* 54). More subtle is the knowing "mountaineer" narrator of "The Lightning Rod Man" who appears to expose a traveling salesman as a charlatan (*PT* 122). The seller of lightning rods appears on the narrator's doorstep like an embodiment of evil, a satanic "stranger" carrying "a strange-looking walking stick," as if he had stepped off the pages of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (*PT* 119). Whether that evil is quack science or science more broadly is unclear; whatever the case, unlike Hawthorne's young protagonist, this sardonic narrator claims never to waver from his religious certainty: "In thunder as in sunshine, I stand at ease in the hands of my God" (*PT* 124). But who is the true confidence man in this sketch? Perhaps not just the lightning rod salesman, who "drives a brave trade with the fears of man," but also the worldly narrator, who cites an "event at Montreal last year"—"A servant-girl struck at her bedside with a rosary in her hand; the beads being metal"—while also taking the fact that his own house has remained unharmed by lightning as a sign, like the rainbow, "that the Deity will not, of purpose, make war on man's earth" (*PT* 124). He can be satisfied with the work of "his" personal God because he is not the Catholic servant-girl or the "boy" (presumably also a servant or enslaved man) whom he calls to fetch a wooden bar for the window during a storm so powerful that "the hooded mountains seemed closing and tumbling into the cottage" (*PT* 123).

But it is of course the elusive narrator of "Benito Cereno" who shines the clearest light on the cruelty and latent coloniality of theodicy by refracting the perspective of Amasa Delano. Delano's minute, empiricist attention to the direction and quality of the winds conceals his larger refusal to see what Christina Sharpe calls the "*total climate*" of slavery and white supremacy or to imagine the fatal consequences of that racial weather for the enslaved as much as for their former enslavers after the successful revolt on the San Dominick.²⁰ Delano's relentless belief that he is favored by providence emerges with special clarity in the novella's final scene when the American captain advises Benito Cereno to "forget" what has happened and embrace the blank and ostensibly beneficent page of sun, sea, sky, and leaves (*PT* 116). These elements are beneficent, Benito Cereno responds, "because they have no memory ... because they are not human" (*PT* 116). He is ostensibly talking about nature's lack of memory by defining what it is to be human by contrast. But what Benito Cereno really means is that *Delano* is inhuman: that Delano's willful forgetting of even the most immediate violent past betrays his essential inhumanity as the text's representative American. The unforgettable moment also suggests that Delano's understanding that his relation to nature is fully intertwined with—even an effect of—his own production of the racial weather. For the scene reveals Delano paternally endowing the elements of nature with human status as his "warm friends, steadfast friends"—just as he has done with Babo: "a friend;

slave I cannot call him" (PT 57). The humanizing gesture is itself extractive; it only reinforces the human/non-human division from which Delano is continually profiting.

How different would the collection known as *The Piazza Tales* be had the book been published, as originally planned, as "Benito Cereno and Other Tales." The substitution of "The Piazza" as the lead story and the inspiration for the book's title makes all the difference; with this extraordinary revision, the radical revolution-as-catastrophe story of "Benito Cereno"—and with it the "hive of subtlety" that stands in for Babo's inaccessible but determining point of view—is subordinated to the unapologetically bourgeois register of a tale that is essentially about the limits of home improvement in satisfying the needs of the soul (PT 116). If it is hard to imagine that a story about investing in the construction of a patio could dazzle with the cruelty of its narrative perspective, one need only compare "The Piazza" to the novella it displaced to understand. Dispensing with the South American setting allows for a tale that is "American" without seeming so obviously to have a representative American as its subject. "The Piazza" is home-like, literally about the making of home, and it invites the reader to be at home, perhaps on a well-appointed patio, and have a sense of the "Teatro di San Carlo" without having to travel at all.

And yet both tales concern the unveiling of the truth: the hidden slave revolt in the former yields to a white and disappointingly homely mountain girl in the latter. The mountain girl shatters the narrator's dreams of romance because she is not desirable enough to court or racially exotic enough to kidnap; most cruelly of all, her impoverished existence makes her apparently not even worth embracing as an isolated neighbor in need of recognition and care. But when she startles "like some Tahiti girl, secreted for a sacrifice, first catching sight, through the palms, of Captain Cook," we see the specter of Yillah across the years—and we are reminded that our home-improving narrator, no less than Taji or James Cook, has a colonial relation to the land (PT 9). If "Benito Cereno" reveals the "slumbering volcano" of slavery as a state of war—a state from which the enslaved may erupt at any time in revolution—"The Piazza" features a different geological metaphor for settler colonial history: "a long land-slide of sleeping meadow" underlying the narrator's property and "sloping away off from [his] poppy-bed" (PT 1). This landslide is the remnant of an earlier catastrophe—a war of "both spade and axe, fighting the Troglodytes of those subterranean parts"—that was inevitable in laying the foundation for the narrator's house some seventy years earlier (PT 1). The landslide and the war against "sturdy roots of a sturdy wood" are metaphors for the literal process of construction, but they also embed the violence of colonial settlement as dispossession of the land's prior inhabitants, who once threatened subterranean revolution as surely as any slumbering volcano (PT 1). The perspective of the narrator as he sits on his patio is that he is living in the safety of post-genocidal settler life: the "knit wood" of Indigenous dwelling is long gone and "but one survivor

stands—an elm, lonely through steadfastness” (*PT* 1). To the US narrator at home in “America,” this history appears ancient, buried in the density of his metaphors. Melville would need a narrative return to the torrid zone in *The Piazza Tales* to explore what the narrator of his opening tale refuses to see.

It is in “The Encantadas,” his sketches from the equatorial Galápagos islands, that Melville most fully explores the philosophical-geographic category that sustains the world’s disproportionate allotments of suffering based on Western geography and the concomitant history of racialization. There is little geniality to be found on the islands themselves, but the sketches register early on their interest in exposing the geography of philosophy and the contradictions of US-American happiness or well-being in the Global North. In Sketch First, the narrator locates his tropical thinking quite precisely; he is a New Yorker, “leaving the crowded city to wander out July and August among the Adirondack Mountains,” and he is familiar with “scenes of social merriment” and “revels held by candlelight in old-fashioned mansions” (*PT* 129). Whether these mansions are in Manhattan or in the Hudson River Valley—not far perhaps from Pierre’s ancestral home at Saddle Meadows—the narrator finds himself perpetually in the same “spacious room” of temperate affluence and enjoyment (*PT* 129). There he is haunted by the torrid zone: in the twinning of the Adirondacks with its “blasted pines” and the Galápagos with its “baked heart,” the narrator experiences a troubling indistinction between ostensibly separate geographies, crystallized in a vision of uncanny inscription: “Heavily crawling along the floor the ghost of a gigantic tortoise, with ‘Memento ****’ burning in live letters upon his back” (*PT* 129).²¹

The excised word calls attention to its own absent presence, of course, and its origins are ambiguous. Does the narrator himself dare not speak it? Or perhaps he censors his own tale so as not to subject his audience, or his readership, to the Latin declaration, *mori*, that is also an injunction: *You must die*. Or are the burning live letters themselves under theological or perhaps divine erasure? Remember *what*? Whatever the case, this fragmented injunctive signals the metaphysical imposition of the torrid zone into the theological questions attending the Christian figure of the *memento mori*. For the back of a turtle is hardly the usual site for such a figure—as least not in Western cosmology. On the other hand, in the various Indigenous religions of “Turtle Island,” the name given by early Native people of North America to the Earth, the tortoise holds profound cosmological significance, as does the world-bearing turtle of Hinduism and various other Eastern belief systems. Does the tortoise bring a non-Western theological message by intruding into the “old-fashioned mansions” of US-American literature, and of Western philosophy more broadly? If so, our narrator quite literally never spells it out. And yet Melville’s South American sketches dwell in the torrid zone as a space of seismic philosophical rupture, a vantage point for meditation on the West: its enduring problem of evil, its invention of the human, and its perpetual creation of theodicies that justify the world’s racial and geographical apportionment of suffering.

"The Encantadas" repeatedly alludes to nineteenth-century Spanish-American contexts: the independence movements, the fallen dictators, the voyages of Humboldt and Darwin, the myth of political backwardness vis-a-vis a shining US democratic modernity, all of which the narrator ironizes throughout the text.²² But Melville takes the collection's many epigraphs from a much earlier work: Edmund Spenser's *Fairie Queene* (1590), enlisted here to signal the historical moment of English rather than Spanish belatedness in the hemisphere. Spenser's narrator casts the European race for American empire as if were equally run—a tie between Spain and England—with a series of rhetorical questions about limited geographical knowledge prior to the "late Age" of Discovery:

Who ever heard of th' Indian Peru?
Or who in venturous Vessel measured
The Amazons huge River now found true?
Or fruitfulest Virginia who did ever view?²³

The adjectives aim to separate the northern colony's supposed agricultural abundance from the southern colony's Indians and Amazons, but the real difference between Peru and Virginia in this moment was the success of European colonization in the former and its failure in the latter: by 1590 there was no colony in Virginia except, of course, the famously lost one. A more accurate if still uneven colonial comparison in the late sixteenth century would have been the continuous insurgence of "Indian Peru" and the Indigenous Irish against the settler classes—a comparison that Melville could easily have effected by taking his epigraph from, say, Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland*. But as the verses from *The Faerie Queene* suggest, it was precisely the English anxiety of belatedness in the hemisphere that made Spain such a potent foe in the religious partition of Europe.

Melville frames the sketches of "The Encantadas," then, with epigraphs from a deep epic background—a satanic epic featuring multiple religious battles against the figures of a Spanish antichrist: Philip II, the Spanish Armada, the Roman Catholic Church, and a racialized and vaguely Islamic Spain.²⁴ *The Fairie Queene* never explicitly alludes to the concept of the torrid zone, but Spenser designed the entire poem, by his own description, around "the twelve private morall vertues as Aristotle hath devised."²⁵ Chief among Aristotle's virtues was temperance, the source of the golden mean, through which all other ethical virtues emerge as a mediate state between extremes. Temperance was both moral and climatological, according to Aristotle; the distance of temperate climates from extreme ones—especially from the supposedly uninhabitable scorching of the torrid zone—was both sign and source of virtue. By the time Spenser was writing, of course,

sixteenth-century Spanish historians and naturalists had long ago corrected Aristotle's theories regarding the torrid zone and its habitability with empirical observation. But this hardly mattered to a learned English culture bent on broadly re-envisioning England and often its colonies as the new, non-Mediterranean seat of the temperate, while the New World's Iberian holdings—Brazil and the Spanish-American colonies—came to represent the extremity of the torrid zone, regardless of proximity to the equator.²⁶ The emergent English heroes were ostensibly paragons of temperance and, like Spenser's Guyon, they were horrified by the moral and physical geography of the torrid zone.

This geography of extremity is precisely what Guyon encounters on his watery journey in Book 2 when his vessel draws near the "*wandering Islands*," which Melville invokes as an analogue for the South American Encantadas in his first epigraph.²⁷ If Guyon is undertaking a Christianized Homeric voyage, in an ocean replete with enchantment and magical creatures, he also appears to be sailing through waters populated by animals new and unfamiliar to European viewers. As the speaker lists the frightening animals of this intemperate ocean world, the languages of myth and Renaissance reworkings of classical science become entangled: alongside the "grisly Wasserman," "horrible Sea-satyre," and "Spring-headed *Hydraes*" appear "dreadfull Fish" from natural history: the "Huge Ziffius" or swordfish; the "greedy Rosmarines" (walruses), "sea-shouldring Whales," Bright Scolopendraes, arm'd with siluer scales" (centipedes) and "Mighty *Monoceros*, with immeasured tayles" (narwhal). All these creatures "hath deseru'd the name / Of Death"; they inspire horror in Spenser's speaker in part because they exist where they should not, because they inhabit a zone of apparent uninhabitability.²⁸ The speaker need only drop a few allusions to the Orinoco, Peru, or to "Fethers bloody dide, / Such as the Indians in their quivers hide" to remind readers that the concept of the torrid zone provides climatological antagonists—racial monsters and other figures redefining the boundaries of the human—for temperate heroes of all kinds.²⁹

Melville offers a similar series of distorted reflections in "The Encantadas," which begins by invoking Spenser's "*wandering Islands*" and then relocating them back to their original geographical-philosophical home in the torrid zone. From the outset of Sketch First, the narrator addresses an urban reader in the temperate zone—the kind who can picture "an outside city lot" but not the equatorial Galápagos islands—and begins to parse the case made by Aristotle for "emphatic uninhabitableness" (PT 126). This fundamental attribute has the same moral meaning that Christianity drew from Aristotle's geographic theory: the uninhabitable Encantadas embody either diabolical agency—"evilly enchanted ground"—or its divine punishment: a land under "special curse" of biblical proportions that seems to cry out, "for I am tormented in this flame" (PT 126). But if the first sketch lays out the hellish landscape of the Encantadas—"an archipelago of aridities, without inhabitant, history, or hope of either in all time to come"—the

subsequent sketches provide this very account of past human affairs, telling tales of human visitors and residents, in some cases whole settlements, that call Aristotle into question as surely as Acosta and El Inca Garcilaso did (*PT* 142). Over the course of the sketches, the islands become the temporary and sometimes final home to whalers and buccaneers; a Creole adventurer from Cuba and his Peruvian penal colony; a Peruvian “half-breed Indian” widow, her “Indian brother,” and her husband of “pure Castilian blood” (*PT* 152); a “European” hermit and the collection of “humble slaves” he acquires when seamen come ashore (*PT* 166); and a host of unnamed “Runaways, Castaways, and Solitaries” (*PT* 170). The sketches may describe, in a narrow and quite specific sense, the actual geography of the Galápagos islands. But they also register the uncertain status of South-America-as-torrid-zone more broadly, from the Renaissance moment of New World invention in which Spenser wrote to Melville’s own nineteenth century.

Throughout “The Encantadas,” the torrid zone functions as a site for exploring both the enduring Western problem of evil and the violence and hypocrisy of the various solutions proposed to address this problem across time. The narrator shifts rapidly between Aristotle’s theory of uninhabitability and an uneasy Christian frame, in which the islands exist as an expansive sign of original sin: “In no world but a fallen one could such lands exist” (*PT* 127). In this sense, Melville explores here the flip side of tropicality and what Rodrigo Lazo calls its “discourse of enchantment,” which treats the geography of the torrid zone as “simultaneously frightening and alluring.”³⁰ On the enchanted islands, as María Teresa Gramuglio notes, “Plutonic and infernal visions of a ‘fallen world’ displace the known utopias of tropical island paradises with a ‘landscape of calamity.’”³¹ Indeed, the narrator’s commentary on the islands toggles between a specific South American geography and its “enchanted” and purportedly universal meaning as a symbol of “the world at large ... after a penal conflagration”—as a stand-in for the mystery of humanity as divinely created and yet prone to sin and destined to suffer (*PT* 126). The narrator recruits the equatorial tortoises to tell the story of humanity’s leading role in the drama of nature’s fallenness: their “strangely self-condemned” nature, their “lasting sorrow and penal hopelessness,” their “hopeless toil,” “their journeyings,” “their crowning curse,” “their drudging impulse,” their “ram[ming] themselves heroically against [the] rocks” of inevitable pain and death (*PT* 129, 132).

Of course, Melville’s point is not to justify the ways of God to man, to defend a benevolent and all-powerful divinity in the face of suffering and evil. Rather, he draws on the torrid zone to show readers the inverted image of Western theodicy in its changing guises, from divine judgments on “weedy Babylon” to distinctly modern justifications for the suffering of unchosen nations and peoples (*PT* 127). Indeed, at one point “The Encantadas” appears to summon the ghost of the eighteenth-century inaugurator of the term theodicy itself, Gottfried

Wilhelm Leibniz, who defended God by appealing to what the narrator calls “miser’s mathematics” (*PT* 157). More explicit, though, is Melville’s interest in the secular theodicies of civilization and progress emblemized in the sketches by natural science.³² The sketches juxtapose the emergent Darwinian science of natural hierarchies underpinning species survival and that of an “antiquary of a geologist” such as Georges Cuvier, whose catastrophist reading of old rocks posited a whole world destroyed long before “Adam and his billions of posterity” (*PT* 132, 141). But such references reveal neither the chronology nor the progress of natural historical thinking; rather, their placement within the sketches emphasizes that natural history uses its methods to rationalize and justify rather than rage against what Melville in *Moby-Dick* calls “the horrible vulturism of the earth” itself—as per his Spenserian epigraph: “Darke, dolefull, dreary, like a greedy grave / That still for carrion carcasses doth crave” (*MD* 308). In Spenser’s moment no less than in Melville’s, the world’s fallenness and its globality were articulated together as an indisputably and increasingly unequal apportionment of suffering along geographic and racial lines. Jared Hickman goes so far as to put it this way: “Theodicy is a quintessentially global discourse.”³³ The suffering it justifies is quintessentially represented in Melville’s text by the endless, hypostatized agony of the Indigenous Peruvian woman called Hunilla.

The title of the sketch introduces Hunilla as a “chola,” a term that recalls Garcilaso’s commentary on the proliferating racial language that structured emergent knowledge of the torrid zone as it began to define by opposition the parameters of the Western human (*PT* 152). As Lazo has argued, moreover, “Melville’s deployment of the term ... is no less than an engagement with South American Spanish-language usage,” marking a person as “part of a racialized lower class.”³⁴ As Lazo shows, “the word ‘cholo’ is not a fixed category as much as a malleable label”: just as Garcilaso’s Serrano returns to Europe Indianized by his New World experience, so does Melville’s Felipe, “of pure Castilian blood,” become one of the *cholos* living upon the island by virtue of his proximity to Indigenous characters.³⁵ At the same time, Melville updates Garcilaso’s taxonomic commentary for the nineteenth century: as science continues to generate theories about the non-Western world within a larger theodicy of civilization, new forms of euphemism and disavowal work to justify suffering, as the Norfolk Isle sketch makes clear. In the first sentence, the narrator announces “sympathy” as its key term for the various theodicies it explores; thus sympathy is the engine driving the narrator’s memory of Norfolk Isle, “a spot made sacred [to him] by the strangest trials of humanity” (*PT* 151). If the violence latent in that very category—humanity—is precisely what the sketches collectively call into question, this sketch in particular, with its echoes of “Benito Cereno,” asks readers to focus less on the ostensible protagonist of the story—the titular “chola widow” who is supposedly “herself the heroine” of the tale—than on the perspective of its Delano-like, humanitarian narrator: “Humanity, thou strong thing, I worship thee” (*PT* 157). The sketch is

finally about the skewed perspective of its narrator, who cannot know what its first epigraph, from Spenser, announces: that the “great sorrow and sad agony” of the “seemly woman” in need of rescue is in fact a “Forgery” (PT 151).³⁶ Is Hunilla in this sense a wicked femme fatale, as the third epigraph, from *Cymbeline*, suggests? If so, she represents the fatal violence of the sympathy she elicits in those who hear and tell her story.

For sympathy lies at the heart of the nineteenth century’s theodicies. If Christianity justifies suffering in this world as a matter of deserved fallenness from which we are saved by the ultimate suffering and death of Jesus—a justification that Marx called “the heart of a heartless world ... the opium of the people”—Melville might cast theodicy a bit like the “dram of Peruvian pisco” that leaves the narrator’s fellow crew member “unwontedly exhilarated,” “his eye bent in cheery animation upon the receding shore,” allowing him, against all odds, to catch sight of Hunilla’s white turban waving in the air (PT 151).³⁷ When the narrator directly poses the central question requiring a theodicy—“Ah, heaven, when man thus keeps his faith, wilt thou be faithless who created the faithful one?”—his own reflexive answer offers a technical defense rather than an argument for divine omnipotence or benevolence: “But they cannot break faith who never plighted it ... feline Fate will sometimes dally with a human soul” (PT 156). In the place of God, heaven, or a dram of pisco, the sketch explores what we might call the theodicy of sentimental art, whereby a sentimental story about “rescuing a human being from the most dreadful fate” generically and aesthetically justifies not only the suffering incurred along the way but also all the other suffering that one individual rescue obscures (PT 152).

The narrator protests against the possibility of “artistic heartlessness” even while relying on an aesthetic conceit of his own. The sketch is an experiment in a kind of failed ekphrasis: “I wish I could but draw in crayons ... tracing softly melancholy lines” the “touching sight” of Hunilla’s grief that he is bent on achieving in telling the story (PT 152). Where does art draw the line between testifying to the existence of suffering and justifying it as a source of aesthetic power and pleasure? The narrator skims past the difficult question, eager to sketch the sentimental contours of Hunilla’s story—so trite in its basic racial structure that it might otherwise belong in the category of Latin America’s “foundational fictions”: the tragic tale of a “half-breed Indian woman” who loses both “her young new-wedded husband Felipe, of pure Castilian blood” and her “one only Indian brother, Truxill” (PT 152).³⁸ Were we to encounter it as the basic plot of a nineteenth-century Latin American novel, in other words, Hunilla’s story might be a nation-consolidating romance, allowing readers to celebrate her survival and mourn her losses as stand-ins for the disparate ethno-social groups that she, Felipe, and Truxill represent. Melville’s sketches, however, expose the processes of framing and viewing upon which such sentimental fictions depend for success. We do not witness only Hunilla experiencing the loss of her beloved ones; we view her viewing through “an oval frame”

an unfolding of events “as some sham tragedy on the stage”—“trancelike [in] its mild pictorial effect” (*PT* 154). We do not see merely the represented scene but a kind of anti-representationalism, an implied argument that representation itself falsely subdues and tranquilizes rather than awakens the beholder. The theodicy of sentimental art is a sham, Melville suggests, for theodicy’s global discourse justifies the geographic and racial apportionment of the world’s suffering, represented here in Hunilla, as a source of affective experience for others: her story does not, as the narrator puts it, “defraud us of our tears” so much as the larger sketch teaches us to see that the ways we appear to care are connected to the ways we exploit (*PT* 155).

The sketch discloses this sham—the ruse of Hunilla’s story—in part by disrupting the sentimental animal hierarchies that uphold nineteenth-century humanism and its corollaries in anthropomorphism and white supremacy. The narrator first compares Hunilla’s isolation with that of “poor Crusoe in the selfsame sea,” with his “chanticleer” and his “lowing herds”—and of course, though left unspoken here, the symbolically enslaved Indigenous subject who learns to call him master (*PT* 155). But if Crusoe’s humanity is unproblematically defined by a great chain of (less-than-human) being approaching his station as Man, Hunilla’s humanness seems to require the narrator’s bolstering, his insistence that hers is the version of “humanity” he wishes to endorse. Her experience of pain is not universal but rather “a Spanish and an Indian grief”: a bit further from the humanness of Man, Hunilla’s endurance of human suffering is, in the narrator’s eyes, “nature’s pride subduing nature’s torture” (*PT* 161). Again, Melville tells us less about Hunilla here than about the narrator who, like Delano gazing at the “negresses” on the San Dominick, sees “naked nature” and is “well pleased” (*PT* 73).

Hunilla’s dogs—whose cries are “human, or humanized by sweet fellowship with man”—provide the sentimental figures interlinking anthropomorphism and white supremacy (*PT* 155). The anthropomorphism of “The Encantadas” reflects back the inverted image of the zoomorphism of “Benito Cereno.” Despite the island’s “prolonged and utter droughts,” Hunilla shares with the approximately ten dogs her scarce supply of fresh water, gathered from “the dew of her calabash” as if she held them alongside herself in the same “republican impartiality” with which Delano apportions a scarce supply of fresh water, “serving the oldest white no better than the youngest black” (*PT* 60, 80). Delano’s supposed impartiality is betrayed by an exception in which his humanitarian and his hierarchical instincts are fused: “poor Don Benito, whose condition, if not rank, demanded an extra allowance” (*PT* 80). In “The Encantadas,” the narrator imagines that Hunilla does not even make an exception for herself—recall here that *chola* also means dog—among all the other canine inhabitants of the island. The more crudely the narrator spells out the project of anthropomorphizing the dogs—“They did not howl, or whine; they all but spoke ... had they been human beings, hardly would

they have more vividly inspired the sense of desolation”—the more embedded in racial thinking he reveals himself to be (*PT* 161). He sees in the dogs “the sagacity of their race,” just as Delano sees Babo’s expression, like that of “a shepherd’s dog,” change from “mere animal humour into an intelligent smile” (*PT* 161, 51, 67). In Melville, canine sentimentalism is always on some level racialized—“Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs”—and its “geniality,” like that of the torrid zone in Melville’s letter to Augustus, deflects attention away from the racial violence that is its other face (*PT* 84).

Melville explores the bloody twin of Hunilla’s sentimental dogs on Charles’s Isle, where a “Creole adventurer from Cuba” has brought his hounds to enact the violent practice of what Sara Johnson has called “canine warfare” against the enslaved workforce (*PT* 165).³⁹ These Cuban bloodhounds are a visceral manifestation of what Nicholas Spengler terms “creole sympathies”—the affective ties that bind the distant polities of Cuba and Charles Isle by defining them both geopolitically in opposition to Europe and racially in opposition to Black, *mestizo*, and Indigenous subjects.⁴⁰ Both plantation and prison, the penal colony of Charles Isle—though ruled by a king and sketched by Melville’s narrator in a series of comic feudalisms—offers a chilling reminder that nineteenth-century sympathies as well as the use of canine warfare in racial subjugation are fully modern.

Hunilla’s deserted habitation seems distant from the world of penal slavery and canine warfare enacted on Charles’s Isle, and even more so from the shipboard world of slave transport (before the war for freedom has been revealed) in “Benito Cereno.” And yet, as the sentimental dogs suggest, the echoes between the latter novella and this sketch are unmistakable. Like Delano, the narrator of “The Encantandas” sees in Hunilla the “Romish faith” and “somnambulism” of Benito Cereno—and like the captain of the *San Dominick*, apparently directing the transport of human cargo on a slave ship, Hunilla has “tied among the thickets ... some twenty moaning ... black bucklers,” “intended for a grateful present to our captain” (*PT* 159). The term “buckler,” a small round shield worn on the arm, provides a Renaissance metaphor and, in its protective function, a synecdoche for tortoise shell and tortoise respectively. But it is the word’s proximity to the zoological term “buck,” widely used in the trade and breeding of enslaved people, that draws out the full anthropomorphic horror of these simultaneously non-human, humanlike, and dehumanized tortoises. The narrator’s language suggests that he both sees and then unsees the specter of slavery in these penned “hostages”—and in the process he discloses the essential racialization underpinning the larger project of anthropomorphism itself (*PT* 153). For quickly he turns his eye from the tortoises to the higher mammalian rungs of the “human-like” and “the most singular sight of all”—the dogs—and cues the “lesser heartstrings” of canine sentimentalism (*PT* 116, 160, 162). Lest his readers miss the point given this unfamiliar but “beautiful

breed peculiar to Peru," he urges them to see the dogs in a more familiar domestic setting, "as if it had been some farmer's door shutting them out from shelter in a winter storm" (*PT* 160). Hearing the "clamorous agony" of the dogs left behind on the island, readers can unhear both the moaning of the tortoises and the sounds of slavery; the animal hierarchy thus upholds the narrator's celebratory humanism while also hiding the violence of the human category itself temporarily from view (*PT* 161).

The narrator's claim to "worship" humanity "not in the laureled victor" but in the "vanquished" Hunilla makes explicit the slide between a Christian theodicy and a humanist worldview: in the final lines of the sketch, Hunilla rides "a small gray ass" with an "armorial cross" into Payta just as Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem (*PT* 162). Like the sacrificial passion of Christ, Hunilla's suffering is justified by higher meaning—by what or whom her suffering redeems, beginning with the narrator and his fellow sailors who shed tears over her story and then load the "moaning ... black bucklers" onto the ship. The narrator understands his own role, like that of theodicy more generally, as essentially defensive: to guard against "scoffing souls" who might "quote" the tale and "call it firm proof upon their side"—their side of what question he cannot even say (*PT* 157). To this defensive end, the narrator concludes that, unlike the passion of Christ, Hunilla's corporeal suffering cannot be fully named or described: the "two unnamed events which befell [her] on this isle, let them abide between her and her God" (*PT* 157).

Melville devotes a full apophatic paragraph to his narrator's decision not to speak of these events, which he justifies by his ignorance of the potential effect—"for good or for ill"—of the disclosure and spread of the information "where it listeth" (*PT* 156). The problem of evil thus defines the narrative pause that "descends" against his "own purposes" in telling the story: the existence of ill, and an insistence on the uncertainty of its meaning given that "often ill comes from the good, as good from ill" (*PT* 156). Theodicy requires if not censorship then a certain delicacy—which Melville both exposes and bypasses by calling attention to the narrative dilemma as well as the unspoken suggestion of Hunilla's rape (rather than rescue) by passing sailors. Christopher Freeburg aptly calls this unnamed set of events an "apocalypse of the self" that registers an ontological blackness at the heart of the text, an unrepresentable annihilation of personhood that Hunilla both experiences and embodies.⁴¹ If Hunilla's experiences speak more broadly to the silenced history of sexual violence against Black and Indigenous women throughout the Americas, Melville is also, as Hester Blum argues, "staging a theoretical exploration of how the printed narrative text conforms to the supposedly 'kind' stipulations of the literary marketplace"; he is "both attentive to and angry with the narrative effects of the euphemization of acts of violence."⁴² Indeed, there is a difference between the narrator's unfolding decision not to "file this thing complete"—to aestheticize and sentimentalize Hunilla for his purposes—and Melville's authorial choice to focus his philosophical eye on the narrator rather

than Hunilla herself (*PT* 156). The narrator generically justifies what must not be justified, offering us the final image of Hunilla-as-Jesus, her suffering the sign of our humanity and civilization if not our redemption. Melville, by contrast, would perhaps agree only with the narrator's earlier and passing observation: that "events, not books, should be forbid" (*PT* 156).

Theodicy in the torrid zone thus becomes a problem not merely of the fallen world but of the emergent colonial-global contest. This is the terrible news inscribed on the back of the tortoise intruding into the "old-fashioned mansions" of Western philosophy. The narrator obsessively tracks the "signs of vanishing humanity" on these equatorial islands, but he is on the wrong track: the enduring problem presented by the torrid zone is not habitability but the human category itself, bequeathed in part by the texts that Melville rewrites in miniature in these sketches, from *The Tempest* to *Robinson Crusoe* (*PT* 172). Like Garcilaso, Melville draws on the figure of the New World castaway to gloss the unstable invention of the human, to suggest the rootedness of this concept in the history of New World slavery and colonialism—and to shadow forth, paradoxically, the *human* suffering caused by anthropocentrism itself. Melville's penultimate sketch stages slavery as a farce, with Oberlus embodying the violent settler who shows precisely what the canonical castaway figure obscures. Through Oberlus, we might say, Melville reveals the stakes of Defoe's rewriting of Garcilaso's Pedro Serrano as Robinson Crusoe. If Robinson Crusoe disavows but continually reveals his own will to own slaves and to profit from slavery, Melville's narrator trots through a series of modern theodicies that justify suffering on disavowed racial and geographic terms. The narrator shows just how "possible" it is to murder one day and create philosophy and poetry the next—whether in the seventeenth-century Spenserian world of enchanted isles or in a nineteenth-century world enchanted by racial capitalism and extraction from the torrid zone. How then to invest either world with any meaning beyond the "doggerel epitaph" with which the sketches end (*PT* 173)?

It may be the sheer cognitive burden of the global-colonial world, born of Western geography and the concept of the torrid zone, that explains why Melville's "scriptural engagement with Spanish America" notably diminished after the second publication of "The Encantadas" in *The Piazza Tales*, as Emilio Irigoyen has observed.⁴³ Perhaps Melville could go no further into the questions that he saw posed within and by the other America. Instead, in "The Encantadas," Melville leaves readers to imagine their own mortality, "tucked in with clinkers" (*PT* 173). But in these clinkers—the ash and lava fragments left behind by the earth's eruption—lies another kind of history, a geological account of "non-human time" that embeds the continuing potential of anti-settler colonial revolution in what Yoshiaki Furui calls Melville's "alternative futurity."⁴⁴ The narrator, apparently mired in distortive euphemisms on the subject of Black and Indigenous insurgency, can only say that "it might be thought a servile war would ensue" (*PT*

167). This virtuosically tentative and indirect statement summons all the available ironies of the torrid zone to Melville's pen—and leaves it to future writers to breathe new life into his narrator's withered tongue.

"The Bell Tower," the final story of *The Piazza Tales*, rounds out the larger book's toggling between "America" and the torrid zone with a strange flight to Europe. The story is set specifically, the narrator says, in "the south of Europe"—site of the Lisbon earthquake—and it ends with a shattering seismic rending of the earth (*PT* 174). Yet the "once frescoed capital" in this text turns out to be in Italy rather than Portugal: Italy where, like Hawthorne, Melville might flee "actualities" of slavery and colonial dispossession confronted, however obliquely, on the *San Dominick* or in the Encantadas (*PT* 174). In Russ Castronovo's reading of this story, Melville's Italy-set narrative refracts the nineteenth-century US by rebuking the nationalist monumentalism of his age, which decried a sinful slide from sacred origins into a fallen present by insisting that the origins were themselves fatally flawed—like both the story's bell-tower and the liberty bell that it evokes.⁴⁵ Ivy Wilson also reads the tale persuasively as a meditation on the US, in which "the industrial transformation of American society ... was reconfiguring the human body into a mere appendage for the machinery of production."⁴⁶

But we might also take more literally the story's transatlantic setting—and read "The Bell Tower" as a fable about the origins of racialization and enslavement in the modern global world. Its deepest insight may be, after all, to locate those origins in early Europe rather than its later encounter with Africa, Asia, and the Americas. On its surface, the tale offers a classic critique of the Enlightenment, punctuated by a tidy moral drawn from Proverbs at the end: "And so pride went before the fall" (*PT* 187). The Promethean figure at its center, an architect and mechanician called Bannadonna, refuses any limits in building the "noblest Bell-Tower in Italy"—a tribute to a particular city-state and its ruling class. Emboldened by his vast knowledge and prior successes, Bannadonna comes to view "man, [as] the true God" and, Frankenstein-like, secretly creates a monstrous creature of "human figure" that will stand astride the tower, "terrible to behold," and strike the bell on the hour (*PT* 185). Predictably, Bannadonna meets his comeuppance when he becomes so absorbed in his finishing touches on the tower that he loses track of the time and is struck by the mechanical monster carrying out its own mechanized task of striking the bell. A backward glance at the Age of Reason and a story about the dangers and excesses of human ingenuity, "The Bell Tower" is also a startlingly prescient fable of modern engineering in which a laborer is casually murdered over a workplace error while a production flaw, covered up to save time and expense, later yields a colossal accident.

But the real radicalism of the fable lies in the broad strokes with which it historicizes the European will to enslave. As sketched out in the tale, that will to mastery is ancient as the "forgotten days [of] Anak and the Titan," the biblical and classical cultures that intertwine to create the so-called West (*PT* 174). Yet the tale

also unfolds in a very specific moment of early racial capitalism—from roughly the thirteenth century to the fifteenth—when the nobility of Bannadonna's Italian city-state has been "enriched through commerce with the Levant" (*PT* 174). This commerce included commodities—wine, furs, spices—but the real wealth was driven by slavery, as Cedric Robinson once noted in outlining the origins of racial capitalism as it developed in early Europe: "Tartar, Greek, Armenian, Russian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Circassian, Slavonic, Cretan, Arab, African [Mori], and occasionally Chinese [Cathay] slaves—two-thirds of whom were female—were to be found in the households of wealthy and 'even relatively modest'" families in southern Europe.⁴⁷ One need not assume that Melville located his story in Europe to talk about slavery in the Americas, that is: his story is about slavery in Europe.

It is in the context of these European-based slavery and early racialization processes that we meet Bannadonna who is, we are repeatedly told, a "foundling" of unknown origins in a society that defines its peasants as descendants of Ham and its nobility as blood lineage going back to classical Greece (*PT* 178). However lowly his origins, Bannadonna lives on the cusp of a new historical era, yielding a powerful new class interest: he is an artisan rather than a serf and, by exploiting the distinction, can vie with the state's ruling class; there is even "a certain sardonical disdain lurking beneath the foundling's humble mien" as he sees the power of his "plebeian art to stir the placid dignity of nobles" (*PT* 178). As Bannadonna rises in power, he defines his new racial status in this early European context: thus, his murder of a worker, probably a slave, is "overlooked ... A kick from an Arabian charger; not sign of vice, but blood" (*PT* 176). His "blood" may be unknown and perhaps foreign, but it is no longer the vice-ridden blood of slaves, peasants, or serfs.

What Bannadonna reaches for in his tragic hubris is not just a height for the bell-tower that defies the laws of gravity and heaven; he also tries to achieve a new form of mastery that defies a social and historical fact—that slavery is a state of war. The story evinces this ever-threatening state of war in the "multitude [that becomes] tumultuous" waiting to hear the bell ring, the "now surging mob" outside the tower, and the "guard of soldiers" defending both the "nobility and principal citizens" and the tower door (*PT* 182). Even the "powerful peasant" who is eventually permitted inside to strike the hour—and who, "wishing to test at once the full glory of the bell," brings down the whole tower—offers a reminder that revolt is everywhere surging with possibility to topple the old order (*PT* 186). The rapacious ambition of Bannadonna—"no unenterprising spirit could have been his," notes the narrator mildly—is to create a new kind of slave: "a sort of elephantine helot, adapted to further, in a degree scarcely to be imagined, the universal conveniences and glories of humanity ... stocking the earth with a new serf ... iron slave to Bannadonna, and, through him, to man" (*PT* 184).

If the narrator proclaims Bannadonna's visionary will to enslave as a potential triumph for the emergent category of the human, or Euro-Christian man, the story

also implies the self-deception at the heart of this vision, and foreshadows the architect's doom, by revealing that "Talus was to have been the all-accomplished helot's name" (*PT* 184). The name is taken from the *Faerie Queene*, in which Talus is an "iron man ... willed" to serve his master "and do whatever thing he did intend"—but also an "immoveable, resistless" dispenser of justice "Who in his hand an iron flail did hold/With which he threshed out falsehood, and did truth unfold."⁴⁸ Like Spenser's Talus, Bannadonna's slave will ultimately refuse his master mercy simply by obeying the mechanical rule he embodies. As Castronovo and Wilson rightly note, the violence committed by Melville's "metallic agent" and "iron slave" had clear American resonances in the decade preceding the US Civil War. But this Spenserian figure of law (and, before that, the ancient Platonic myth of the metals) also embodies the tragedy of modernity to which European empire and colonial race-making give rise. We might call this nineteenth-century Talus, following Achille Mbembe, the "ghost of modernity"—which in Melville's fable resounds with "half-suppressed screams and plainings, such as might have issued from some ghostly engine overplied." This ghost, for Mbembe, is the "product of a process that transforms people of African origin into living ore from which metal is extracted"; in Melville's account, these "unleashed metals bay ... like hounds" in assuming man-of-metal form—before striking down their master (*PT* 176).⁴⁹

This is the fable's sketch of racial capitalism as it emerges out of the ancient West, assumes traction in early modern Europe, and is narrated from the perspective of the settler colonial nineteenth-century present. The narrator describes the process as gradual but profound—"by insensible gradations proceeding from comparatively pigmy aims to titanic ones"—and it is understood by Euro-Christian man, as it is by Bannadonna, as the work of a modern Prometheus, which is, in the European architect's view, the "heroic name for machinist," the titan who audaciously ushers in the world's future (*PT* 184). Indeed, Prometheus has always stood for Europe's role in global history. As Hickman has observed, "Celebrants and critics alike have seen in European science, technology, and the conquests these enabled, the face of the bold titan who stole fire from the gods and ignited human civilization"—introducing, along the way, "the blasphemous exaltation of the white race" that was invented in Europe's self-mythologization.⁵⁰ But Prometheus is a double figure; in his downfall, he also represents the spectacularly and eternally punished body, naked and chained, that always stands in for enslavement and particularly so in the modern era of chattel slavery. His torturer is Vulcan, god of fire and volcano—and of ironwork and the forge; we might say that Vulcan oversees the racialization process by which man-of-ore becomes man-of-metal. Perhaps this is why, in Melville's fable, we glimpse Bannadonna's "still, Vulcanic face hiding its burning brightness like a forge"; Bannadonna is both "Prometheus, the heroic name for machinist" and his punisher, Vulcan, the man who causes the metals, the men-of-metal, to scream and to bay like hounds (*PT* 178). In this sense,

Bannadonna is a version of Prometheus-as-modernity at its cruelest: in him we see the white torturer's self-image as a champion for "the glories of humanity."

The role of what the narrator terms "clockwork" is central to this fable of racial capitalism and enslavement. Bannadonna is killed by his iron slave as the clock strikes the hour and an earthquake strikes the city-state on the "first anniversary" of the tower's completion; clock time and linear calendrical time order both the plantation and what Johannes Fabian called the "denial of coevalness" that upheld slavery by establishing the primitivity of the colonized and the enslaved (*PT* 186).⁵¹ The narrator insists that Bannadonna's demise at the hands of his man-of-metal—an act which "overturned all"—is "so unlooked-for a catastrophe" that it requires "conjecture" about the role of magic (*PT* 185). But this is of course another version of Amasa Delano's unthinking of slave revolution even as it unfolds before him: the "iron slave" is found "still impending over Bannadonna, as if whispering some post-mortem terror," just as Babo's "hive of subtlety" stares across the plaza mayor of Lima (*PT* 184). There is nothing "unlooked-for" in what has happened—but it is telling that the "catastrophe" in this story set in the south of Europe is a new instantiation of racial slavery, and the revolution it inevitably causes, rather than the earthquake that arrives a year later. The Lisbon earthquake may have shattered Enlightenment optimism about the rational ordering of the world, but it was Europe's imperial conquests and the "America" they unleashed that constituted the earlier and deeper catastrophe.

"Terra Firma Can Deceive": Melville's Later Writings

In *The Confidence-Man*, the novel's con man par excellence, the optimistic Cosmopolitan, emphatically if comically echoes "what Dr. Johnson said of the alleged Lisbon earthquake: 'Sir, I don't believe it.'"⁵² This winking denial contains multitudes, as the conversation's larger and infamous context regarding "Indian-hating" makes clear (*CM* 144). The Lisbon earthquake and colonial modernity are philosophically intertwined in a way that achieves a specifically American result—a nineteenth-century version of the "new sort of happiness" that Crèvecoeur explored in the late eighteenth century.⁵³ Indeed, in *The Confidence-Man*, Melville returns to the "genial warmth of the Torrid Zone" he hailed in his letter to his cousin Augustus—but this time to consider the source of a key American temperament: the affect of racial capitalism's indirect but primary inheritors. When the optimistic Cosmopolitan assesses the contemporary US in 1856, he sees the "advance of the humanitarian spirit" where it was once in far shorter supply; so too its corresponding affect, geniality (*CM* 175). Now, though, in the "age of the joint-stock company," geniality is everywhere: "it is with this precious quality as with precious gold in old Peru, which Pizarro found making up the scullion's sauce pot

as the Inca's crown. Yes, we golden boys, the moderns, have geniality everywhere" (CM 175).

The Cosmopolitan makes a familiar argument about the progressive forward-march of history, bettering humanity as it goes. Northern US capital investment replaces South American conquest, yielding not only the "precious quality" of geniality instead of gold but also the temporal currency that defines the US and its "moderns" (CM 175). Lest readers miss the point that the whole narrative—of progress, of the humanitarianism and geniality of capitalism, of golden US modernity—is part of the Cosmopolitan's larger con, Melville makes sure he does not drop the point even after the conversation has moved on; pages later, he circles back awkwardly. "A moment since, we talked of Pizarro, gold, and Peru," he says, before describing how "the Spaniard first entered Atahualpa's treasure chamber" and doubted that "an opulence so profuse" could be real: "the needy fellow felt a twinge of misgiving, a want of confidence ... and went about rapping the shining vases ... But it was all gold, pure gold, good gold, sterling gold, which how cheerfully would have been stamped such at Goldsmith's Hall" (CM 177). In this revisionist version of the Black Legend, in place of Pizarro's epic cruelty and bloodlust, we find a "needy" conquistador whose main crime is not Atahualpa's murder but a lack of confidence in the reality of Atahualpa's wealth—followed by the Cosmopolitan's fantasy of all that wealth redirected north via Goldsmith's Hall.

The Cosmopolitan's present-day con is to accuse those marks unwilling to hand over their money of being "small Pizarros in their way—by the very princeliness of men's geniality stunned into distrust of it" (CM 177). They too have "needy minds" when they "doubt lest the liberal geniality of this age be spurious" (CM 177). The geniality of the joint-stock company age must be trusted, the Cosmopolitan insists, but he can articulate this geniality only in its direct relation to the violence of colonialism. His account continually points to the ongoing relations of North and South, and the shared but disavowed history binding the US and "Latin America." Central to this history is what Melville's narrator calls "the metaphysics of Indian-hating"—a philosophical tradition embracing Western thought in its continuing encounter with the Americas (CM 144). As a novel that is *about* Western philosophy—from Diogenes, Plato, and Aristotle to Bacon, Hume, and Rousseau—*The Confidence-Man* concerns itself with a specifically American philosophical problem, one that Michael Jonik incisively terms "the banality of genocide: how it can happen and how it was happening, under the banner of geniality or philanthropy" in the nineteenth-century US context.⁵⁴

But Melville also reminds readers that "the metaphysics of Indian-hating" is a *hemispheric* philosophy—one rooted in a shared colonial history that included not only the North American "Five Nations," as the Cosmopolitan notes, but also the South American "Araucanians" (CM 140). Settler metaphysics, like settler

colonial history, unfolded differently across the hemisphere—and the encounter of disparate genealogies of this metaphysics is part of what is at stake in “Benito Cereno,” where the eponymous Creole captain and Delano arrive at vastly different conclusions about the nature of evil in a world overseen by God. We never hear from Benito Cereno about his philosophical position, but Melville makes clear that Delano is a philosophical descendant of Crèvecoeur’s sunny-eyed eighteenth-century farmer, who condemns but depends upon the violence of the frontiersman that now allows him to occupy and till the land. So too is the Cosmopolitan a descendant in his very refusal to acknowledge “Indian-hating”: “Never heard of such a thing ... God bless me” (*CM* 140). When the Cosmopolitan then references the “alleged Lisbon earthquake”—“Sir, I don’t believe it”—Melville makes a small philosophical joke out of the larger point of “The Bell Tower”: that the 1755 Lisbon earthquake played an explicit role in the development of European philosophy regarding the problem of evil, and yet centuries of settler colonial Indigenous dispossession and African enslavement did not.

Melville’s later writings continue to feature geological earthquakes as manifestations of, and signposts for, the double bind of colonial modernity: for the responsibility to take evil seriously without resorting to theodicy, whether religious or secular, as a racial-geographic discourse for accepting the world as it is. In “Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War,” Melville’s 1866 collection of poetry devoted to the Civil War, the poet envisions global modernity itself, and not just the rupture of the nation, as an ongoing earthquake. In “The Apparition: A Retrospect,” the speaker recalls multiple movements of the earth: how “Convulsions came; and, where the field/Long slept in pastoral green”—like the “long land-slide of sleeping meadow” in “The Piazza”—“A goblin-mountain was upheaved” (*PT* 1).⁵⁵ The earthquake was as unthinkable as a slave revolution—what the Civil War in the long view essentially was—and neither the “goblin-mountain” of the Confederacy nor the white poet-observer could imagine it coming: “(Sure the scared sense was all deceived).”

The speaker recognizes the “unreserve of Ill” that is both the “goblin-mountain” and the earthquake of war that topples her, but a true state of undeception has still not been achieved: for “ere the eye could take it in, / Or mind could comprehension win, / It sunk!—and at our feet.” Only when the mountain is swallowed, Atlantis-like, into the earth can the speaker arrive at philosophical certainty:

So, then, Solidity’s a crust—
 The core of fire below;
 All may go well for many a year,
 But who can think without a fear
 Of horrors that happen so?

The speaker's only certainty is that the political and existential state of Solidity is as "all deceived" as the goblin-mountain once was.⁵⁶ The essential fragility of the world is its universal condition. And yet, as William Gleason has shown, the "slumbering volcano" that will inevitably burst the earth's "crust" can never be fully "deracialized"; Melville is clear enough about that in the infamous "Supplement" to the book, which ties the ostensibly universal "horrors" attending the world's "Solidity" to a specific if hypothetical and US-based historical referent, the possibility of a racial war or revolution: "exterminating hatred of race toward race."⁵⁷ The crust-like state of "Solidity" is not so abstract after all: it is the brittleness of nineteenth-century America as the national product of racial capitalism continuing to unfold across the global-colonial world.

"For terrible is earth," as the speaker puts it in "L'envoi," the final poem in *Timoleon*, the last book that Melville published before his death.⁵⁸ Why terrible? Because "this quarrel is with gods"—why they made the world they did, unfitting for "just men," unless they are "compromised in wrong." Even in this meditation, set in ancient Greece, on the end of one lone, misrecognized hero's life, Melville cannot escape his sense of theodicy as a problem of race, a problem of slavery, a problem of settler colonialism. The speaker recurs imaginatively to the world that emerged from the European race for empire, drawing on figures such as Alexander Selkirk and Sir Walter Raleigh as emblems for isolation or travel across landscapes that have analogues in "Virginia fair" or the "calms far off Peru" or "Polynesia reft of palms ... Marquesas!"⁵⁹ Most tellingly, though, is Melville's dedication of the book to a painter, Elihu Vedder, whom he had never even met—and on the basis of a single work of art: the portrait titled *Jane Jackson, Formerly a Slave*. The implied substitution is astounding: a Greek statesman and warrior takes the place of a formerly enslaved Black woman and mother as the poet pursues the problem of evil in a world overseen by Melville's god. Yet the dedication is itself evidence of Melville's apprehension of theodicy as a modern problem of justifying disproportionate suffering along racial and geographic lines.

Melville made similar race-laden theological substitutions in the last decades of his life as he relentlessly pursued what he called "dark sayings"—those sayings and stories that "somewhat savor of Holy Writ in its phrase 'mysteries of iniquity'."⁶⁰ The narrator of *Billy Budd* (1886)—who recognizes that the problem of evil is hardly a draw for "many a reader of today"—substitutes a beautiful English "barbarian" for the original shipman in the story: a "native African" and "black pagod of a fellow" whose sculptured form appears first in the story to represent the moral type known as the Handsome Sailor (*BB* 28, 4). The narrator specifies that the first Handsome Sailor, whose story he drops in favor of another, is "of the unadulterate blood of Ham"—which is to say that his suffering, whatever it may be, has already been justified in the oldest of racial theodicies (*BB* 4). But no modern theodicy

can fully transcend its colonial residue of race, which is why Billy's story—with its ambiguous justification of the English barbarian's innocent suffering—is haunted from the first by the "African" sailor who precedes him. Captain Vere's virtue in the story is his willingness to dispense with Christian theodicy—"a matter for psychologic theologians to discuss"—in accounting for the evil that has transpired aboard the ship: Claggart's devious framing of Billy and Billy's spontaneous manslaughter of Claggart (BB 53). Vere may be courting atheism—as per the French ship *Athée* that the *Bellipotent* encounters soon after Billy's execution—but he takes mature responsibility for the world he inhabits. Vere's great failure, instead, is that he then relinquishes this responsibility to wrestle with the problem of evil by inaugurating a perverse secular theodicy for his own infliction of unjustified punishment: the "angel must hang," that is, for the greater good of the hierarchy Vere wishes to protect, including his own place at the top of it (BB 47). That this hierarchy is rooted in the global-colonial world is also evident: the potential mutiny he wishes to avoid is bound up in the inter-imperial rivalry over Africa and the Caribbean, and "those wars which like a flight of harpies rose shrieking from the din and dust of the fallen Bastille" (BB 21). The state of Europe—"the convulsed Continent"—is also the state of the world that Europe has colonized (BB 15).

For "Columbus ended earth's romance," as Melville puts it in *Clarel*, his long 1876 poem set in the Holy Land in which the eponymous speaker attempts to make sense of his faith in a post-Columbus world—a world that theodicy becomes increasingly necessary to justify, and increasingly difficult to accept without a willful sense of cruelty.⁶¹ Whether by the Jordan River or in Caracas and Lima, earthquakes abound in this poem—which Carolyn Karcher movingly interprets as a "pre-history" of settler colonialism in Israel and the "perpetual war" with Palestinians.⁶² Through the migrant figure of Nathan, Melville presciently twins the American hemisphere with a Holy Land whose territories are continually disputed. Descended from Puritan ancestors—their "pilgrim-keel in storm and stress / Had erred, and on a wilderness"—Nathan grows up in Illinois surrounded by signs of ancient Indigenous life that evidence recent dispossession: "three Indian mounds," the "red sagamores of eld/Entombed within" (C 64–65). Nathan has seen "Bones like sea corals; one bleached skull"—and he has seen what the narrator of "The Piazza" only knows by metaphor: "Our mother, Earth: the founded rocks / unstable prove: the Slide! the Slide!" (C 87–88). Linked together in his mind, Nathan's thoughts about the movement of the earth and the history of Indigenous dispossession leave him "unhinged": he wakes in fear, crying out against "the White Hill's slide! The Indian skull!" (C 155). In this state of settler-derangement-cum-religious-doubt, Nathan meets a Jewish woman who introduces him to "Zion's story" and offers him a new life—a chance to live the frontier conditions and exterminating wars of those who came before him in Illinois (C 219). Just as his Puritan ancestors viewed as "Hittites—foes pestilent to God ... those Indians" of Pequod, so "Nathan the Arabs here esteemed the same—slaves meriting

the rod” (C 306–309). He dies in Sharon defending territory even his wife does not want—and exemplifying Melville’s enduring lesson of the post-Columbian world: that “terra firma can deceive” (C 137). The global-colonial order of the world may be all-devouring, but it cannot claim permanence. Earthquake will inevitably return.

Notes

1. Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 93.
2. Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, 51 (hereafter cited as *MD*).
3. Gómez, *The Tropics of Empire*, 53.
4. Melville, *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 34.
5. Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968), 195, 179.
6. Melville, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968), 157.
7. Charles Chauncy, *Earthquakes a Token of the Righteous Anger of God. A Sermon* (Boston, MA: Edes and Gill, 1755), 32.
8. Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, According to the Authorized Version, With Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References*, vol. 4 (Boston, MA: T. Samuel Armstrong, 1831), 788.
9. Marina Warner, “The Book of Miracles,” *New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2014, www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/05/01/book-miracles.
10. Melville, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1982), 100.
11. Wyn Kelley and Christopher Ohge, “Introduction,” in *A New Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Kelley and Ohge (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 1–7.
12. David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
13. Anacharsis Clootz was a Prussian-born political theorist, figure in the French Revolution, and self-proclaimed enemy of religion. On his role in Melville’s writing, see especially Hester Blum, “Atlantic Trade,” in *A Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Wyn Kelley (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 113–128.
14. Melville, *Mardi and a Voyage Thither*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 176 (hereafter cited as *M*).
15. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24.
16. Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Knopf, 1971); Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (Boston, MA: James Munroe & Company, 1836), 8.
17. Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1969), 100.
18. Alexander Von Humboldt, *Alexander von Humboldt en el Perú: diario de viaje y otros escritos*, ed. Estuardo Núñez and Georg Petersen (Lima: Banco Central de Reserva del Perú, 2002), 215.
19. Wyn Kelley, “The Style of Lima: Colonialism, Urban Form, and ‘The Town-Ho’s Story,’” in *Melville “Among the Nations”: Proceedings of an International Conference, Volos, Greece: 1997*, ed. Sanford E. Marovitz, A. K. Christodoulou, and Athansios C. Christodoulou (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001), 63, 68.
20. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 104.
21. While I follow the Northwestern Newberry editions in using four asterisks here, I must thank Emilio Irigoyen for pointing out that the original text in Putnam’s included five asterisks separated by spaces—a printed formation that invites us to notice the visual closeness of Melville’s phrase “live letters” and the five letters that these asterisks replace. Thanks to Irigoyen, too, for pointing out how these five asterisks raise other interpretive possibilities in their misalignment with the

- presumed missing word “mori” and the background knowledge that this presumption of what is erased depends upon. All of this ambiguity raises questions about “what is in front of our eyes and what is not,” as Irigoyen puts it (“Quito, Massachusetts: South America in Melville’s Mapping of Home,” paper presented at the Melville Society Conference, New York University, New York City, June 2019).
22. On the Latin American background of the sketches, see recent readings of the dog-king sketch Nicholas Spengler (“Tracking Melville’s ‘Dog-King’: Creole Sympathies and Canine Warfare in the Americas,” *Leviathan* 21, no. 3 [2019]: 71–93); Rodrigo Lazo (“The Ends of Enchantment: Douglass, Melville, and U.S. Expansionism in the Americas,” in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008], 216–217); and Michael Jonik’s chapter section (“The Surgings of Revolt,” in *Herman Melville and the Politics of the Inhuman* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 126–134). Spengler’s attention to the role of narrative sympathy in creating the text’s irony is indispensable; in his reading, the narrator’s apparent sympathies for the deposed dictator reveal the sketch as “an allegory of hemispheric violence and a deconstruction of the narrative means used to mitigate and justify that violence” (77). See also the chapter version of this inquiry in Spengler’s *Melville’s Spanish America: Hemispheric Sympathies, Transatlantic Contagion* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2024). See Jonik for a reading of Melville’s engagement with the human category in this text—a humanness implicated in “material processes, convulsive singularities, and emergent transindividual relations” (108).
 23. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Proem 2, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2013), 157.
 24. On the Elizabethan satanic epic, see Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors*, 54–66; see also Barbara Fuchs on the “Spanish race” in *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 88–97.
 25. Cited in *The Spenser Encyclopedia*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (New York: Routledge, 2006), 154.
 26. On the reimagining of England as temperate, see Susan Scott Parrish, *Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 261.
 27. Parrish, *Cultures of Natural History*, 272.
 28. *Ibid.*, 273–274.
 29. *Ibid.*, 264.
 30. Lazo’s reading of Melville’s Spenserian epigraphs is especially useful here for showing the links between tropicity and the “discourse of enchantment” in Melville as well as Spenser; as Lazo notes, “In *The Faerie Queene*, Plutonian rock and ‘delicious fruits’ cannot be divorced” (“The Ends of Enchantment,” 214).
 31. María Teresa Granmuglio, “Viajar y Escribir: Tres mirados sobre las islas Encantadas,” in *Melville, Conrad: Imaginarios y Américas (Reflexiones desde Montevideo)*, ed. Lindsey Cordery and Batriz Vegh (Montevideo: Universidad de la República/Linnardi y Risso, 2006), 37.
 32. On Melville’s appropriation of Darwin and his “democratization of the terms of intellectual inquiry” (147), see Blum’s discussion in *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 133–153. See also her incisive reading of “misery’s mathematics” in “The Encantadas” in relation to the “algebraist” in *Pierre* (“Douglass’s and Melville’s ‘Alphabets of the Blind,’” in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville*, 264–265).
 33. Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, 93.
 34. Lazo, “Dons and Cholos,” in *Herman Melville in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 119.
 35. Lazo cites José Varallanos’s *El Cholo y el Perú* as a “classic study” of the term that demonstrates how “from the colonial period to the nineteenth century the word ‘cholo’ was used as a synonym for ‘mestizo,’ [which was] more commonly used in twentieth-century United States and Mexico, also signifying the mixing of Spanish and Indian people and culture” (“Dons and Cholos,” 119).
 36. See Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, book 2 canto 12 (ed. Hamilton, p. 274) for the original text; Melville changes “seemly Maiden” to “seemly woman” (151) but leaves out the salient information in Spenser that her distress is a ruse or “Forgery.”
 37. Karl Marx, *Early Political Writings*, ed. Joseph J. O’Malley and Richard A. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57.
 38. The concept of Latin American “foundational fictions” comes from Doris Sommer’s study of the same name (*Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993]).

39. Sara E. Johnson's *The Fear of French Negroes: Transcolonial Collaboration in the Revolutionary Americas* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012) excavates in detail the violent history that this sketch nods to parodically; see also her article ("You Should Give Them Blacks to Eat": Waging Inter-American Wars of Torture and Terror," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 [2009]: 65–92), which examines the reemergence of canine torture in the twenty-first century with the allegations regarding Abu Ghraib prison.
40. Spengler develops the idea of "creole sympathies" in dialogue with a number of important Latin Americanist theorizations of the creole concept: Mignolo on "creole consciousness," Bauer and Mazzotti on "creole subjects" (*Creole Subjects in the Colonial America*), and Pratt on "creole self-fashioning" (*Imperial Eyes*, 75–76). Spengler's reading of the dog-king sketch in this light helps to explain much about the apparent sympathies of Melville's narrator in "The Encantadas" (originally ascribed to one "Salvator R. Tarnmoor" in *Putnam's*), and why he should be sympathetic towards the dog-king's plight and not that of "King Oberlus," from Europe. Tarnmoor, Spengler shows, is "not a detached observer but rather a contingent player in the affective and material networks of relation that linked the United States with those other Americas to the south" (72). The framework of "creole sympathies" thus helps to make visible the affective support undergirding both settler colonialism and slavery as ongoing structures of white supremacy.
41. Christopher Freeburg, *Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 161.
42. Blum, "Douglass's and Melville's 'Alphabets of the Blind,'" 258.
43. Melville originally published "The Encantadas" two years earlier, in 1854, in *Putnam's* (under a pseudonym).
44. On non-human time, see Yoshiaki Furui, "Against the Assaults of Time: Uncertain Futurity in 'The Encantadas,'" *Leviathan* 23, no. 3 (2012): 73–88. On slavery and anticolonial revolution, see especially William Gleason on the "poetics of insurrection"—and the image of the "slumbering volcano"—that Melville took from Douglass ("Douglass, Melville, and the Poetics of Insurrection," in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville*, 110–133). I also take inspiration here from the closing question in Lazo's essay on the reference to Cotopaxi in *Clarel*: "Could Melville have had Church's *Cotopaxi* in mind when writing that line?" ("The Ends of Enchantment," 226). Was he figuring insurrection against the empire of liberty as a necessary and "brave vent," a volcanic implosion of US democracy itself?
45. Russ Castronovo, "Radical Configurations of History in the Era of American Slavery," *American Literature* 65, no. 3 (1993): 523–547.
46. Ivy Wilson, "'No Soul Above': Labor and the 'Law in Art' in Melville's 'The Bell-Tower,'" *Arizona Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2007): 42.
47. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 16.
48. Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, book 5, canto 1 (ed. Hamilton, p. 512). I have modernized the original spellings.
49. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 40.
50. Hickman, *Black Prometheus*, 18.
51. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 35.
52. Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1984), 157 (hereafter cited as *CM*).
53. Crèvecoeur, "Rock of Lisbon," 70. See [Chapter 5](#).
54. Jonik, *Herman Melville and the Politics of the Inhuman*, 161.
55. Melville, "The Apparition: A Retrospect," in *Published Poems: The Writings of Herman Melville, Volume 11*, ed. Robert C. Ryan and Hershel Parker (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 116.
56. Melville, "The Apparition," 116.
57. *Ibid.*; Gleason, "Douglass, Melville, and the Poetics of Insurrection," 124.
58. Melville, "L'Envoi," in *Published Poems*, 317.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Uncompleted Writings*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2017) 28 (hereafter cited as *BB*).
61. Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Hayford et al. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), l.155 (hereafter cited by line number as *C*).
62. Carolyn Karcher, "Projections of the Holy Land: Melville's Journal through a Dual Lens," *Leviathan* 13, no. 3 (2011): 137, 138.

The Seismic Civil War

This book has explored earthquake as a figure for the fragility of slave-holding states since Plato and of settler colonial existence since Columbus's founding of La Navidad. It has also examined earthquake in Andean Indigenous thought as both the catastrophe of conquest and a geological enactment of the revolutionary, spatio-temporal remaking of the world. Turning to the context of early Anglo-America, I have argued that the long period of earthquake crisis in New England refracted the Euro-Christian encounter with the immanence of unsettlement as a constant and real possibility. And I have posited the emergence in the mid-eighteenth century, following the Lisbon earthquake and its subterranean connection to Lima, of a philosophical world-system built on the relation of an inheriting North and a catastrophic South. Out of this world-system, I have suggested, US-America emerged as a land of earthquake oblivion—a land that came to understand itself vis-a-vis a fundamental sense of elsewhere catastrophe.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the settler literary culture of the US had been invested in elsewhere catastrophe and earthquake oblivion for more than half a century: since Crèvecoeur created the “new man” known as the American. Even the post-apocalyptic fantasies of antebellum white writers were “elsewhens”—occurring in a distant future that affirmed the solidity of national greatness in the present. But this investment in elsewhere catastrophe was always rooted on some level in the knowledge that earthquake could occur at home. The willful forgetting of earthquake, the imagining of earthquake in geographies “south of south,” was a sign, paradoxically, of the earth's fragility in the US. In the slave-holding and settler world, writers had always known—even as they sought to relocate this truth to distant climes—that the ground was, as William Lloyd Garrison put it in 1829, “an earthquake rumbling under our feet—a mine accumulating materials for a national catastrophe.”¹ Indeed, precisely because it was the nation's preeminent figure for the violence of conquest and the inescapable possibility of conquest's overturn, earthquake became the inevitable metaphor for the US Civil War: a “Sign of State-quakes,” as Increase Mather had termed seismic activity, that a later national syndrome perpetually displaced.

This chapter expands on the topos of elsewhere catastrophe to examine the related figure of the seismic South as it shapes the very different writings of Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, and José Martí, a cluster of authors contributing to what Cody Marrs has called the “transbellum literature” of the US Civil War: literature that “stretches ... across and beyond the war itself” while

also recasting its traditional historicity as a putatively discrete event.² For the US South in the works of these writers is shaped by the distant southerly locations of catastrophe, from Lima to Lisbon, that came before it. The widespread apocalyptic figuration of the Civil War as a seismic event ruptured georacial certainties about the supposed North–South divides of the nation, the hemisphere, and the world. Earthquake thereby remained central to the ongoing invention of US-America in these years while also manifesting the deep timeframes and multi-hemispheric geographies of American literary history.

Douglass's Earthquake Aesthetics

Herman Melville's long nineteenth-century life (1819–1891) overlapped closely with that of Frederick Douglass, who died in 1895 and was probably born in 1817 or 1818, though the precise date of his birth was withheld from him, as he famously observed, to consolidate the kin-annihilating purposes of enslavement.³ Douglass's first autobiography, the classic US exemplar of the slave narrative, was initially published over a half decade before Melville fully honed his earthquake-whale style of critical thought. Melville's perspective on the southerly world—and what he elaborated across his career as the earthquake-ridden state of modernity—emerged in part from the contrast between his birthplace in the North and his voyages in the South. Douglass, on the other hand, had something in common with El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega: he too was born in a torrid zone and then wrote about it from a putatively temperate world in the North. If Douglass was “a masterful Signifier” in English—at the center of a defining scholarly narrative of the 1980s that in turn created a highly literary canon rooted in an African American vernacular framework—he also had a subterranean connection to Garcilaso's *terremoto* idiom.⁴

For that late twentieth-century critical narrative—centered on repeating key signifying figures and most famously the “trope of the talking book”—crossed centuries and continents of Black literary production to arrive in the early seventeenth century in the embrace of Garcilaso's Andean-derived speaking texts.⁵ Unlike their Anglophone counterparts, these Hispanophone talking pages, which appear in some of the most memorable passages in Garcilaso's histories, refute the supposed superiority of alphabetic literacy and instead parody it as a form of colonial mystification.⁶ Garcilaso's trope of the talking book, that is, never charted a path from writing to freedom; it emerges instead within episodes narrating Indigenous refusal to be awed by writing and its supposed ability to transmit voice. Drawn from Andean history and marked by perpetual irony, Garcilaso's trope also drew a direct link between Indigenous war against conquest and the disavowal of special powers residing in alphabetic writing. El Inca's trope was then cited—retroped—by later authors of early Anglophone Black literature, and from there

became part of the critical genealogy locating Douglass in the mid-nineteenth century with all his extraordinary rhetorical prowess.⁷ The “Red Pacific,” to adapt Jace Weaver’s phrase, thus bears unexpectedly but powerfully on the Black Atlantic—leading Gonzalo Lamana to claim that African American signifying, as famously defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr., “is, at least in part, an Andean [Indigenous] tradition.”⁸ Or perhaps we should say *inter*-Indigenous tradition, if we understand Douglass’s Signifying to come in part by way of the Fanti philosopher Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, who was born in what is now Ghana in 1757 and then captured, enslaved, and taken to Grenada. Before he became an abolitionist writer in English, Cugoana had read the Andean-born Garcilaso, who drank in Quechua stories, as he put it, with his mother’s milk.⁹

Peru, Spain, Ghana, Grenada, the US; the seventeenth through the nineteenth century; Quechua, Spanish, Akan, English: the transmission of texts across imperial languages can embrace the textual traditions (whether alphabetical or not) of non-imperial American languages, attuning readers to the fugitive and fleeting histories of ideas that reside in the spaces within or between texts in European tongues, embedding strands of Indigenous thought, whether of the Americas or Africa. This is not to insist on a supposedly stable origin story for the trope of the talking book or to try to reify an alternative genealogy for African American literature. Nor is it to suggest that Douglass’s writings about the torrid zone of the US South reprise the theoretical torrid zones of Garcilaso. It is to call attention rather to Douglass’s ambiguous but dazzling place within a long hemispheric history—one that links the seismic rending of the earth, as I have suggested, to the intermittent but unending revolutions of the enslaved—and to approach him as a preeminent theorist of the seismic US South. For Douglass too was drawn to earthquake as a figure for an aesthetic mode, a metaphor for making visible the subterranean connections between geological and historical thinking—and between slavery and theodicy—in the years before and after the Civil War.

Douglass’s early interest in seismic figuration emerges in his 1845 narrative in a strange and densely ironic passage on holidays for the enslaved. Douglass defines these carefully as “days between Christmas and New Year’s day” designated as a period of reduced work for the enslaved, during which, “accordingly, we were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and take care of the stock.”¹⁰ But Douglass’s interest is less in the (non-)cessation of labor than in the nature of time: “Time we regarded as our own, by the grace of our masters” (*D* 64). Such “grace” is not at all what the term suggests, of course, and in part because the enslavers turn out to have a keen interest in how the time is “used or abused,” as Douglass puts it (*D* 64). They become apprehensive and angry when they see the enslaved using their time to make tools or hunt, for example, for “a slave who would work during the holidays was considered by our masters as scarcely deserving them” (*D* 64–65). This disapproval—and the latent threat that the “holiday” time will be retracted—is evidently rooted not in the work per se but in the futuristic perspective that

the work itself suggests. What the enslavers seek to control, in other words, is the problem of future-thinking on the part of the enslaved subject, and the threat—of flight or other resistance—it necessarily entails. This is why, as Douglass explains, “drinking whisky” is the “mode of spending the time ... by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters”: inebriation offers an experience of time, whether immersive or escapist, that would seem at least temporarily to eclipse thoughts of the future (*D* 65).

The passage on holidays thus registers the obvious desire of the enslavers to control their enslaved workers in large part by managing their experience of time. Douglass describes “the effect of these holidays upon the slave” as “among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection”:

Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity. But for these, the slave would be forced up to the wildest desperation; and woe betide the slaveholder, the day he ventures to remove or hinder the operation of those conductors! I warn him that, in such an event, a spirit will go forth in their midst, more to be dreaded than the most appalling earthquake. (*D* 65)

The passage stages an extraordinary reversal of temporal authority. The enslavers may control the dispensation of time in the form of holidays, which Douglass acknowledges as an “effective means” of control, but he as narrator draws on observation and firsthand experience to predict how time will unfold under given circumstances. From this position of empirical command, Douglass can chart the course of time and pinpoint the outcome of a hypothetical event and its temporal immediacy with the certainty of a scientist: without the “slightest doubt,” he can also describe the mechanical workings, the “operation” of “conductors, or safety-valves,” underlying the speculative future history he is theorizing as the “appalling earthquake” of slave revolution. Geology, history, and engineering come together as Douglass undertakes here a kind of science of the spirit—the “spirit of enslaved humanity” itself. Earthquake is a figure both for that spirit in its revolutionary state and for a particular aesthetic mode, a mode of seismic interruption of mastery in its various guises.

Douglass hones this earthquake aesthetic in part by reworking Cotton Mather, whose 1815 edition of *The Christian Philosopher* he draws on throughout his writings, directing the language of his Puritan natural theology to different ends. As we saw in [Chapter 4](#), Mather published this text in 1721, long after the Salem witch trials and his earlier association of earthquakes with “the energy of the Devil in the Earth,” the demonological work of Indian “Powaws,” and “*Negroes* about your

houses ... like so many Ghosts and Spectres" who do "with Devilish Rites actually worship *Devils*, or maintain a magical conversation with *Devils*" (NC 62). *The Christian Philosopher* attempted to wrest control back from Mather's own earlier delirium in the face of the cosmological threat embodied by Indigenous and African diasporic presence in New England, and it did so by rationalizing nature as the product of divine intelligence and benevolent design. Such design explains the existence of volcanoes in Asia, Africa, and America, explains Mather—for "without these fiery vents their earthquakes would bring more tremendous desolations upon them."¹¹ In such barbarous zones of the earth, "nature seems to keep house underground."¹²

Douglass's reworking of Mather restores the suppressed context of slavery to the Puritan's rational account of nature. At the same time, the earth's "fiery vents" become "conductors, or safety-valves," the housekeeping of nature mirrored by the science of man: in this case, lightning rods that absorb natural electricity and the safety-valves that relieve excess pressure in a boiler. While the invention of the lightning rod struck some early New England Calvinists as a scandalous attempt to defy God's judgment as expressed in natural events—the very judgment that Douglass would call upon in the broad tradition of the American jeremiad—the use of the safety-valve had a later and quite specific context in this nineteenth-century moment. The safety-valve was key to the invention of the steam engine and the onset of the "steamboat imperialism" that brought access to the Mississippi River, vastly advanced US dispossession of Indigenous nations, and brought the slave-holding South to the height of its power.¹³ Thus, to speak of holidays for the enslaved as "safety-valves" preventing the "spirit of enslaved humanity" from reaching the "appalling earthquake" of slave revolution was to register several complex truths at once. The image discloses that the science facilitating imperialism and slavery had a counterpart in the social engineering of the plantation, exemplified in the dispensation of holidays in which drunkenness was encouraged. At the same time, imperial conductors or safety-valves can only redirect the "spirit" of the enslaved for so long before the system explodes, just as nature's housekeeping can and does result in earthquake.

In this light, Douglass would surely have agreed with Mather's observation in *The Christian Philosopher* that "earthquakes [can] be very moving preachers to worldly-minded men."¹⁴ But there is a crucial difference between how these "moving preachers" communicated their respective truths in the writings of Mather and Douglass. In Mather's conception, earthquake quintessentializes an abiding optimism regarding divine chastening: he virtually crows at the wonder, "Against all other strokes there may be some defense, yet there is none against an earthquake!"¹⁵ Earthquake was even "*useful*," as he put it in 1727—a word, as we have seen, that he also bestowed upon the man he enslaved, Onesimus: earthquake was thus a "most useful" chastening for a chosen people who also accepted the utility of slavery as divinely ordained.¹⁶ As Mather himself observed of enslaved

people throughout history as well as in Puritan Boston and in his own home, “It is God who has caused them to be servants” (NC 32). In Douglass’s writings on the “spirit of enslaved humanity,” on the other hand, earthquake figured the shattering of this foundational but enduring premise of theodicy regarding divine will in the creation of a slave-holding and settler state. Earthquake allowed Douglass to move dialectically between two temporal modes in his own writing: a linear progressive ideology of time, as Lloyd Pratt has described Douglass’s dominant temporal framework, and one that was theological and spirit-laden if not strictly messianic.¹⁷

Douglass became increasingly interested in the relationship between theodicy and slavery across his career.¹⁸ In his 1845 narrative, Douglass briefly mentions the classic biblical justification for slavery and notes its relevance and power, which he describes as “the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right” (D 17). If the scriptural story of Ham offered a moral justification of the evil of slavery in a world created and managed with divine oversight, Douglass emplaces it within a narrative of progress that contains it by rendering it already outpaced by modernity. The “force” of the Ham argument, he explains, is being gradually diminished each year by the birth of “a very different-looking class of people [who] are springing up at the south”: the children of enslaved Black mothers and “white fathers [who are] most frequently their own masters” (D 17). That slavery can just as easily be understood to violate as to vindicate the Bible—“If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural”—is certainly a point (D 17). But the more important argument advanced here is that the theodicy of slavery is naturally receding, “by the inevitable laws of population,” as history unfolds into a putative American modernity (D 17).

This vision of a primitive theodicy that gradually fades away is of course itself part of a larger theodicy of modernity: centered around the idea of linear historical progress, unfolding as it must in a world that is divinely created as the “best of all possible worlds”—despite the existence of evils that turn out, in this long view, to portend a larger good.¹⁹ The watchword of this modern theodicy is providence; it looks forward to future effects rather than backward to an ancient curse. And Douglass, writing confidently about the waning “power” of the old theodicy, views himself in the 1845 narrative as a beneficiary of the new one from the moment he is sent as an enslaved boy to live in Baltimore:

Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever since attended me, and marked my life with so many favors ... I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the

opinion. I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence. From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise. (*D* 35)

In this oft-cited passage, Douglass stages his early consciousness of himself within a larger historical narrative governed by providence and progress. He also understands the contradictory features of this providential discourse as passed down from the eighteenth century. First, he knows that claiming to discern the precise nature of providence is considered an “egotistical” sin of pride and a mistake of “erring reason,” as Alexander Pope put it, that is its own form of superstition.²⁰ Second, though, he recognizes that narrating himself committing that sin—seeking to know “All chance, direction, which thou can’t not see; / All discord, harmony, not understood”—is precisely how the post-Enlightenment subject marks his superior place on the great chain of being.²¹ To see himself as inscrutably but definitively chosen by providence is to be modern, to be a subject of forward-moving history, to be destined for a future lying ahead of those “darkest hours of ... slavery”—a segment of temporal experience that he calls a “career” to indicate that his “hours” in slavery are themselves progressive and hurling through linear time. Distant as this formulation may be from the story of Ham, what Douglass articulates here is also a theodicy: as he puts it later, in his famous apostrophe to the ships, “It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free” (*D* 58). Even the evil of enslavement, he suggests, contains within it a larger good.

The theodicy lying at the heart of Douglass’s own story of progress through life erupts, however, when he tells the mirror story of the nation’s progress through history in his 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”—delivered in Rochester, New York at the invitation of the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society. Addressing the white citizens of Rochester, Douglass gestures to the particular colonial history of their national present, casting back through settler time to a moment when “the population was weak and scattered, and the country a wilderness unsubdued” (*D* 200). This ostensibly discrete time of settler fragility, Douglass observes, corresponds to an equally discrete time before nature was purportedly made docile: “Neither steam nor lightning had then been reduced to order and discipline” (*N* 200). Looking pointedly away from the violence of this history, Douglass enjoins his settler listeners to absorb the progress-laden story of the nation putatively made by their ancestors—a story that is the necessary ground for believing in the primacy of human historical agency and thus taking responsibility for the presence of evil of the world. The speech eschews the epistemology of national history—“a branch of knowledge in which you feel, perhaps, a much

deeper interest than your speaker”—and its status as sacralized “staple of your national poetry and eloquence” (*D* 202). Douglass is interested instead in understanding how a particular kind of historical thinking itself produces historical change: in how the idea of a “sovereign people” came into existence, in how it bequeathed a sense of agency in the national “fathers” of his listeners, and in how the very narration or “simple story” of this past may generate historical action in his own moment (*D* 197). “My business ... is with the present,” Douglass famously says: “The accepted time with God and his cause is the ever-living now ... We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future” (*D* 202).

Yet here Douglass also faces the double bind embedded in the concept of Western modernity that his century has inherited from a Lisbon-descended intellectual tradition: accepting human responsibility to act with a sense of historical agency against evil in the present entails its own theodicy of progress, an avowed belief that the sorrow and suffering of the present and “accepted time with God” will unfold into a less sorrowful future. This future must be humanly created but is paradoxically also divinely overseen: the “ever-living now” is providentially organized with divine insight into the “better day” that is always “coming” (*D* 58). In navigating this paradox of progress, Douglass illuminates the inherent cruelty of theodicy by calling attention to one of its most flagrant exemplars, the sacralization of national liberty: “To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony” (*D* 204). The cruelty registered here is both rhetorical and material: to celebrate the providential unfolding of time implied in a national independence day is not merely to forget or ignore the suffering of the enslaved; it is to participate in a kind of historical thinking that materially shapes enslavement, that “drag[s] a man in fetters” through the present in the name of progress toward a divinely overseen future.

Thus, to contend with the theodicy embedded in his own historical account of the fourth of July and what it commemorates, Douglass famously turns to the Puritan tradition of the jeremiad—denouncing the sins of the nation and calling for theological-civic reform—as the most obvious means by which to interrupt the smooth narrative of time flowing progressively toward its better day. For if the Bible is a primary source of all Western theodicy in its sanctification of suffering, it also illuminates alternative forms of time that enable the questioning of theodicy itself. Douglass thus asks, late in the speech, in a spasm of theological agony: “What, then, remains to be argued? Is it that slavery is not divine; that God did not establish it; that our doctors of divinity are mistaken? There is blasphemy in the thought” (*D* 207). It is easy to assume here that the blasphemy lies in imagining a pro-slavery God, or a slavery ordained by God. The next line of the sermon certainly invites that conclusion: “That which is inhuman cannot be divine” (*D* 207). But if we pause in the space between these lines, the blasphemy works momentarily

in the other direction: "There is blasphemy in the thought," also, that God created anything other than an optimal world, one in which slavery, like all other forms of evil and suffering, exists for a reason.

Douglass, then, essentially bypasses the problem of philosophical optimism—the belief in a divinely ordered world that is the best of all possible worlds—by shifting the focus away from how God acts upon the world. Instead, Douglass returns to the abhorrent inhumanity of slavery, a surer philosophical ground. But the assertion—"that which is inhuman cannot be divine"—nevertheless begs cosmological questions, questions of ontological-theological determination, with which Douglass must wrestle. He finds his solution not by asserting that "whatever is, is right," but by rejecting the rationalism of philosophical persuasion: "Who can reason on such a proposition? They that can, may—I cannot. The time for such argument is past" (*D* 207). Turning both from "convincing argument" and from prophetic reassertion that an angry god will visit punishment on the nation, Douglass calls upon human responsibility by searching for an aesthetic mode with qualities of "scorching irony ... a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke" (*D* 207). Proffering the rhetorical technique of *occupatio*—"Oh! had I the ability"—he proceeds to describe the mode for which he is putatively searching: "For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake" (*D* 255).

These are the precise elements Mather explores in *The Christian Philosopher*, and they are called upon here not as decodable divine content but as rhetorical technique itself: to quicken, rouse, startle, expose, and denounce. Drawing upon but also signifying on Mather's earthquake writing, Douglass calls here for iteration through repeated cognitive shocks that actively generate feeling and produce knowledge. This earthquake aesthetic is wholly unlike the activist passivity that Mather urges before sublime natural elements that bespeak the power of God; Douglass imagines his rhetoric becoming itself the "very moving preacher" that is earthquake. He seeks a mode of making visible what cannot be seen and known—"the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake"—by his listeners, or even fully by himself: "I shall see, this day," he announces, "from the slave's point of view" (*D* 205). The task is on some level impossible, for he is no longer enslaved; he is no longer "within the circle," as he puts it in his 1845 narrative (*D* 23). In that case, describing the sorrow songs, Douglass notes that while enslaved he "neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear" (*D* 23). But the reverse is also implied: those outside the circle cannot see or hear as those within it. The aesthetic mode that Douglass searches for in the elements breaches that gap in perception, allowing him and his listeners to imagine themselves "within the circle," to see and hear what cannot be apprehended from the perspective of linear progressive time and its providential theodicy. As the speech moves on, Douglass shuttles rapidly between temporal-theological frameworks: he is able to "Welcome

infidelity! Welcome atheism!" while also returning to the jeremiad mode ("be warned! be warned!"); he pronounces the sacralized founding fathers "imposters" and describes the disappearance of god in the voice of Isaiah: "I will hide mine eyes from you" (D 214, 218).²² And he ends by reasserting the indomitability of Western progress: "Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated" (D 220). Simultaneously unifying and annihilating, the force of progress drives the dominant temporal mode of Douglass's larger corpus. But the earthquake-aesthetic mode that Douglass calls for in this passage allows him to interrupt that forward-driving movement with repeating shocks, whether he is conditionally welcoming atheism or pronouncing the *deus absconditus*.

Douglass continued to grapple with various forms of theodicy as he rewrote his autobiography over the subsequent decades. By the time he published *Life and Times*, he had excised his paean to the "special interposition of divine Providence in my favor," and had added in *My Bondage and My Freedom* a narrative of his childhood quest to "inquire into the nature and history of slavery":

Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters? Was there ever a time when this was not so? How did the relation commence? ... By some means I learned from these inquiries, that "God, up in the sky," made every body; and that he made white people to be masters and mistresses, and black people to be slaves. This did not satisfy me, nor lessen my interest in the subject. I was told, too, that God was good, and that He knew what was best for me, and best for everybody.²³

Laying out the essential theological problem—"that God was good," all knowing, and had made "some people slaves" in a world that was "best for everybody"—Douglass narrates himself as a young child rejecting the theodicy of slavery by intuition: "because it came, point blank, against all my notions of goodness" (B 68). According to his account, the young Douglass continues his inquiry, guided by internal moral sense, until he reaches "the true solution of the matter": "It was not color, but crime, not God, but man, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery" (D 69). This anaphora-laden revelation lays bare the connections among theodicy, colonialism, and racial predation by marking as a crime not only slavery but also the foundational, race-making, colonial theodicy itself: that "color" explains and justifies slavery. The "true explanation" for slavery lies not with God but in a history of crimes committed by man. The "existence of slavery" cannot be explained by recourse to the dominion of God without devolving back to the cruel theodicy that Douglass the boy understood could not be squared with "notions of goodness."

This coming-of-age revelation regarding the theodicy of slavery marks the emergence of young Douglass's sense of human agency—and therefore the dawning of a new kind of historical imagination: “What man can make, man can unmake” (B 69). But, as in his earlier writings, this narrative of revelation cannot escape its own larger theodicy of progress or the same basic theological structure. Douglass recounts the story of his awakening as a classic *felix culpa* from the “appalling darkness” of innocence into the new knowledge that constitutes self-sovereignty, rendering him “master of the subject” (B 69). Like the biblical fall, this one too introduces pain—“it was a kind of knowledge which ... increased my suffering”—but ultimately proves to have unforeseen positive value: “Yet it was knowledge quite worth possessing” (B 69). Like the Christian promise of redemption, the new knowledge, when pored over in careful thought, defeats isolation: “I began to make this subject my study. It was with me in the woods and fields; along the shore of the river, and wherever my boyish wanderings led me” (B 69). Douglass's knowledge of human agency thus provides “cheering assurance” of his future, investing him with “the idea of being a freeman some day.” In this theodicy of progress, his life in slavery is part of the larger good of his development into a free subject; whether or not he is chosen by providence, he has chosen the knowledge of his own historical agency—and with it the suffering—that ensures his future freedom.

The apparent difficulty of narrating the history of his own passage out of enslavement without recourse to the theodicy of progress underscores what is at stake in the moments of his writing where earthquakes, with the insurrectionary valence they carry across the centuries, threaten to rupture the smooth flow of his own historical progress. By the time he published *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass expanded the passages on the safety-valves provided by plantation holidays to relieve the mounting pressure of a revolutionary seismic rending. The amplification further interrupts the flow of his life narrative, this time with a discussion of “jubilee beating,” an improvisational music that he describes as “going on in all directions” and “strictly southern” (B 184). On the one hand, the music is a feature of the holidays, the “electric conductors” that keep the plantation machine purportedly safe from explosions; on the other hand, Douglass observes that the seeming “nonsense and wild frolic” of the music is accompanied by lyrics that give “a sharp hit ... to the meanness of slaveholders” (B 185). Even the safety-valve embodied in the form of holidays, it seems, has its own seismic element: the “Juba” music that issues small cognitive shocks to the smooth surface appearance of the plantation, as viewed by the enslavers who see the holiday celebrations as evidence of the larger order they are meant to uphold (B 185).

Douglass highlights the force of these shocks by including a sample set of jubilee lyrics along with his own incisive reading of their content as an effective “summary of the palpable injustice and fraud of slavery” (B 185). This summary is also a theological intervention, as the lyrics foreground the iniquity of a system

“giving—as it does—to the lazy and idle, the comforts which God designed should be given solely to the honest laborer” (B 185). With the author’s gloss, in other words, the song’s qualities as an anti-theodicy become apparent: it offers no biblical justification of slavery or even the promise of an angry god who will punish the sins of the enslavers. The song also refuses any sense of history or progress, any redeeming meaning of suffering out of which a better tomorrow will grow. It simply observes, from the perspective of the enslaved, what is systematically true in the present: “*de way / Dey takes us in*” (B 185). The song’s injunction to “Walk over! walk over!” echoes as a philosophical-theological fragment; it seems to urge human agency, movement or crossing over, without recurring to the dangerous promises of progress that attend the secular historical imagination: “what man can make, man can unmake” (B 185).

The jubilee music is everywhere—“almost every farm has its ‘Juba’ beater”—and it marks the safety-valve relieving, or conductor carrying away, what Douglass in *My Bondage* newly terms the “explosive elements inseparable from the human mind, when reduced to the condition of slavery” (B 185, 186). But the music also embodies—and perhaps brings forth—those seismic elements in its call to remake the order of things by “walk[ing] over” into a new space and time. In this expanded and music-laden discussion of slavery’s fatal social engineering, Douglass also specifies the geography of seismicity again and again as southern: “the south would blaze with insurrections” without its safety-valves: “A succession of earthquakes would be less destructive, than the insurrectionary fires which would be sure to burst forth in different parts of the south” (B 186). South is a key term in Douglass’s 1845 narrative, but in *My Bondage* it appears five times as often. It is no longer just the relative geographic term delineating those US states in which slavery continues to be practiced legally from those that had been for decades described as “free” prior to the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law. The term *South* has come to designate the threat of a national disaster—one that distinctly rebukes the habit of earthquake oblivion and the discourse of elsewhere catastrophe.

Douglass was not alone, of course, in forecasting a southern conflagration that would rend the national earth; Garrison’s observation that slavery was “an earthquake rumbling under our feet”—the nation’s feet—came decades earlier. And yet this great metaphorical earthquake, too, has been forgotten—written over by versions of Civil War history that emplot the civil rending that created Union and Confederacy while excising the earthquake of “immediate insurrection among the slaves” that Douglass and contemporaries understood was imminent. As the historian Steven Hahn puts it, “What seemed so obvious to slaveholders and Confederate officials at the time ... has been widely resisted or rejected by historians”: that the national rending of the Civil War must be understood through the massive revolution of the enslaved that occurred simultaneously with it when half a million enslaved men and women either left the South to travel North and to take up arms or stayed behind to remake the order of work under their own terms.²⁴ In

other words, the long-feared earthquake of slave insurrection struck hard *with* the Civil War—and it has since been forgotten, absorbed into the larger earthquake oblivion that characterizes American misremembering writ large. As Hahn notes, the consequences of this particular oblivion are significant, allowing historians to persistently unsee a major revolution of the enslaved—one that was arguably “even more far-reaching in the Civil War South than it was in Saint Domingue” and the creation of Haiti as the world’s first independent Black republic.²⁵

For in the US, the long revolution of the enslaved that preceded and reached its height during the US Civil War managed to permanently transform what Hahn describes as “a slave society that was by far the largest, most economically advanced, and most resilient in the Americas.”²⁶ In his own moment, Douglass understood that national tendency toward earthquake oblivion, and he sought an aesthetic mode that could make visible and render historical the vast seismic US South, both before and after it became a revolution of the enslaved that would be misapprehended, misremembered, and thereby forgotten.

Dickinson’s Earthquake Style

If Douglass’s writing elaborated a seismic South that would have been easy for contemporary readers to pinpoint on a map, Emily Dickinson explored the southernization of catastrophe more obliquely. Like Douglass, she pursued earthquake as a figure for limning the relation between surface and depth, and for imagining what can and cannot be seen based on a viewer location that is always simultaneously geographic, theological-philosophical, and structural. She understood that her perspective was determined by her location as a New Englander by birth and settler ancestry. To examine the various seismic Souths of her poems is to be confronted by the limits of knowledge—putatively rational and secular-providential—produced in the broad framework of the Global North. Thus, the speaker in poem 377 observes:

At least—to pray—is left—is left—
 Oh Jesus—in the Air—
 I know not which thy chamber is—
 I’m knocking—everywhere—
 Thou settest Earthquake in the South—
 And Maelstrom, in the Sea—
 Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth—
 Hast thou no Arm for Me?²⁷

This southerly location of earthquake—far from New England, as natural and inevitable as “maelstrom in the sea”—is tied to the association of seismicity with

the volcanoes that appear regularly throughout her poetry: Vesuvius, Etna, Pompeii. Volcanoes and their corresponding earthquakes are distant, geographically and psychically, from what the speaker in poem 517 calls simply "The North": the world "this side Naples—." The "Earthquake in the South"—whether the Civil War or the long, global catastrophe of southern-ness writ large—remains remote from the speaker and yet implicates her.²⁸

The religion practiced in her northern realm invites her to beseech the Euro-Christian trinity in the face of this southern conflagration: "At least—to pray—is left—is left—." But the speaker finds "Oh Jesus—in the Air—" to be absent or at least elusive; "I know not which thy chamber is— / I'm knocking—everywhere—." The poem suggests that the problem lies in the limits of her perspective, which is a problem of location; she is not "in the South," or "in the Sea." There is no context, even, in which she might take up arms in the earthquake of war. The divine oversight by which God "settest" catastrophe in this ambiguous southern site seems also to exclude her from the embrace of "Jesus Christ," whose own southerly birthplace the poem cites: Nazareth. Why do some suffer, like or with Jesus, in an earthquake-stricken South, while others sit in northern safety? The speaker refuses to engage in theodicy; instead, the poem simply observes the world's suffering is apportioned along geographic lines.

Dickinson's speakers stand both outside and within the history of New World catastrophe that she summons in her most global poems, such as poem 1691:

Volcanoes be in Sicily
And South America
I judge from my Geography—
Volcanoes nearer here
A Lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb—
A Crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home.

If the first two lines pronounce the southerly location of volcanoes, the emphasis provided by the line break reminds readers that the volcanoes of southern Europe have correspondences in the American hemisphere: to put this in the language of poem 415, line two here bears "the solemn News / That Potocatapeel exists." But line three positions the speaker at an intellectual remove from the southernization of volcanic existence: the information in the first two lines appears suddenly qualified, taken as it is from what she calls "my Geography." The possessive seems at once disciplinary (her own understanding, however limited, of the physical features of the earth throughout the world) and objective, referring to an actual geographic tome, perhaps a textbook, owned by the speaker.

And, in fact, one of Dickinson's own textbooks, written by Amherst's Edward Hitchcock, comprised just such a "Geography," understood here in its eighteenth-

and nineteenth-century sense as a purely physical science: *Elementary Geology*, published in 1840 as an introduction to the field, and a “Text Book for My Classes” that enacts a strong scientific version of the southernization of catastrophe. Exploring the nature of “igneous agency” and the qualities of lava and crater formation, Hitchcock’s volume cites from translated biblical passages to interweave the geological, geographical, and moral contexts that might explain how ancient cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.²⁹ Southerly in every way, and not only because they “undoubtedly occupied what is now the southern part of the dead sea,” these cities were as notable for their wickedness as for their wealth, and for the spectacle of “their riches devoured by fire.”³⁰ Crucial to the story of divine geological punishment are the observers, the “righteous” and “innocent” who “beheld and rejoiced,” and “laughed them to scorn” at the sight of cities “destroyed by volcanic eruption.”³¹ Hitchcock’s *Elementary Geology* aimed to show the rational principles built into the peat and rocks and minerals—and into the occurrence of earthquakes throughout the world’s Souths and, correspondingly, into their absence in “Land without Earthquakes.”³² All of this showed the careful scientific logic by which “the Deity has always exercised over the globe a superintending Providence.”³³

But Dickinson’s speaker questions what Hitchcock termed “Geographical Geology.”³⁴ She finds “Volcanoes nearer here” than her “Geography” lets on: psychic ones to which she has full access just a cognitive “Lava step” away. In a now famous line, she pronounces her ability to “contemplate” the “Crater” of “Vesuvius at Home.” Critics have found in this image, and in her volcanic rhetoric more generally, everything from the explosive force of same-sex desire and female sexuality to supposed evidence of the poet’s undiagnosed epilepsy. In the context of catastrophism, though, the potential meanings of a personal Vesuvius matter less—or at least differently—than the ways in which a New England or American volcano would violently undermine a particular epistemology based in science, theodicy, and the interaction between the two. The speaker in poem 517 outlines the problem as an aesthetic one:

A still—Volcano—Life—
 That flickered in the night—
 When it was dark enough to do
 Without erasing sight—
 A quiet—Earthquake Style—
 Too subtle to suspect
 By natures this side Naples—
 The North cannot detect
 The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—
 The lips that never lie—
 Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—
 And Cities—ooze away—

The “quiet—Earthquake Style” of cognitive rupture—which characterizes the “still—Volcano—Life” of some precarious southerly existence never specified in the poem—is simply imperceptible, “Too subtle to suspect,” by certain viewers. Such viewers, moreover, are defined by their geographical location but not straightforwardly so: their “natures this side Naples” both reinforce a sense of geographical determinism and undermine it, evoking the idea of essential climatological character while also raising the possibility that “nature” itself may be multiply constructed, and may exist in more than one framework of knowledge. One such framework constitutes a broadly conceived “North” and a perspective that fails to discern the true relation between surface and depth—the deeper meaning—made visible by spectacular catastrophe: for “The North cannot detect / The Solemn—Torrid—Symbol—” when it gazes toward the South. The epistemological limits established here are not trivial. “The North” may digest the news of wide-scale destruction, as “Cities—ooze away—,” but it has no access to any understanding that occurs outside its own limited framework: it cannot parse utterance from “The lips that never lie— / Whose hissing Corals part—and shut—” without further elaboration. “The North” can only glimpse—from the nocturnal realm of settler dreams and nightmares—some “flicker[ing]” of what it is blind to each day, when true “sight” is erased by the certainty and perceived solidity of long occupied ground.

Dickinson separates North from South, that is, but she does so along epistemological and aesthetic lines, rather than along the fused geographical-theological one that structures the racial theodicies of American catastrophism in the nineteenth century. At the same time, she reveals a crucial relation between catastrophic geography and temporality:

I have never seen “Volcanoes”—
 But, when Travellers tell
 How those old—phlegmatic mountains
 Usually so still—
 Bear within—appalling Ordnance,
 Fire, and smoke, and gun,
 Taking Villages for breakfast,
 And appalling Men—
 If the stillness is Volcanic
 In the human face
 When upon a pain Titanic
 Features keep their place—
 If at length the smouldering anguish
 Will not overcome—
 And the palpitating Vineyard
 In the dust, be thrown?

If some loving Antiquary,
 On Resumption Morn,
 Will not cry with joy "Pompeii!"
 To the Hills return! (F 165)

This speaker can move in temporally close to see a "pain Titanic" on a single "human face" in the moment of utter destruction—when "the palpitating Vineyard" of daily life in an ancient city of the Roman Republic suddenly ends, "in the dust ... thrown." But she can also describe an eighteenth-century future in which a "loving Antiquary" from Switzerland may cry out "with joy 'Pompeii!'" There is no resurrection here: it is "Resumption Morn," the enduring present of misrecognition by the North. Indeed, the speaker herself acknowledges that she has "never seen 'Volcanoes'—" except in books "when Travellers tell" about them. And as with the "Geography" textbook, the speaker here establishes a skeptical distance from what she learns by reading; even the word "Volcanoes" is called into question by quotation marks.

One of the travelers Dickinson likely read—closer to "South America" than "Sicily"—was John Lloyd Stephens, whose *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) was widely read in New England; Dickinson's father owned a copy.³⁵ Stephens was probably the source for much of the Spanish-American and Caribbean imagery scattered throughout her poetry, from "the purple territories / On Pizarro's shore," the "Brazilian Pampas" and the repeated references to Peru to "Odors from St Domingo—" and "Colors—from Vera Cruz—" (F 136, 661, 726). Moreover, when Dickinson's speaker in poem 1127 refers to men at daybreak meeting each other as if "Each foreclosed a news— / Fresh as a Cargo from Batize," it is not unreasonable to assume that the cargo is human—as is the "cargo" that Stephens encounters on his first arrival in the country of "Balize": the "two little African natives bearing on their cheeks the scars of cuts made by their parents at home," "taken from on board a slave-ship."³⁶ Belize recalls to Stephens's imagination the venerable history of "Spanish galleons laden with the riches of Mexico and Peru," but its Caribbean reality, glimpsed as he first walks the streets, reminds him more of "St. Domingo": "the town seemed in the entire possession of blacks," as if it were "the capital of a negro republic."³⁷

In Belize, that is, Stephens encounters what Melville later calls the "slumbering volcano" of "San Dominick."³⁸ But the true "igneous agency" in this popular Central American travelogue—distinguished by its many descriptions of volcanoes, lava, and ruin—comes from a different racialized threat: that "a volcanic calm, quivering with apprehensions of an attack" will be followed by "a rising of the Indians, and a war of castes."³⁹ Stephens made this prediction in 1841, six years before the onset of the half-century-long Caste War of Yucatán, during which the Maya people fought for their independence from settler rule. Ascending the volcanoes of Central America and documenting their flames and smoke, Stephens also sketched the potential for what he termed the "horrors of a war of castes": the

possibility that “the hour of retributive justice was nigh, and that a spirit was awakened among the Indians to make a bloody offering to the spirits of their fathers.”⁴⁰ In this volcanic atmosphere, the power of “but a word” spoken by an Indigenous leader might “cause the massacre of every white inhabitant.”⁴¹

Such passages from Dickinson’s father’s copy of *Incidents*—on Indigenous subjects putatively “roused from the sloth of ages, and with muskets in their hands, their gentleness ... changed into ferocity”—provide a georacial context for her southernizing more generally, and for poem 165 on “Volcanoes” specifically: in which the word, as set off in quotation marks, flows toward “those old—phlegmatic mountains / Usually so still— / [which] Bear within—appalling Ordnance, / Fire, and smoke, and gun.”⁴² Literal volcanoes may “Tak[e] Villages for breakfast.” But so too may the all-devouring caste war that Stephens accurately predicts. In Dickinson’s poem 165, a moment of total destruction performs its work of “appalling Men—” in an abstractly volcanic space, seemingly far from history.

But Dickinson’s speakers know the past they abjure and also that they are made by it, even when they utter its truths from an almost nonsensical distance: “Talk with prudence to a Beggar,” warns one speaker, “Of ‘Potosi’ and the mines!” (F 118). The reference points can seem merely symbolic, a proverb’s code: discussing vast wealth with a destitute vagabond is ill advised. But the warning also emplaces an unspoken New England context in deeper and broader historical grounds. Dickinson’s speakers reference but do not see firsthand the “Ear Rings of Pizarro,” torn from the bodies of Inca elders (F 368). They can taste racialized violence at their northern dinner tables—“but a Berry of Domingo / And a Torrid Eye—” but they do not have before them the full “Man / Dainty adorned with Veins and Tissues” (F 1064). The “Starved Maelstrom” of catastrophe is southernized, neither at home nor close at hand. Yet her poems theorize this very relation between the elsewhere and the here. They simultaneously enact a philosophical interrogation of settler colonial terror, of a liminal space between metaphysics and psychology shaped by the violence and horror of New World history across time (F 1064).

Dickinson’s speakers do not seek out the signs of Hitchcock’s “superintending Providence” in this history; instead, they ask how both proximity to and distance from violent catastrophe come to shape understanding. How can a white and wealthy nineteenth-century community know the reality of appearances in a small New England town? Are the forms of knowledge produced by their “Travellers” and their “Geography” vastly limited? What proves too “subtle” to “detect”? Can a northern “nature” apprehend “Earthquake in the South” by imagining “Vesuvius at Home”?

Too much pathos in their faces
For a simple breast like mine—
Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple line—(F 95)

If these questions are essentially philosophical, Dickinson's speakers suggest that their answers can only be sought by honing "a system of aesthetics— / Far superior" to the one they have merely received—a system that recognizes a set of relations, however imperceptible, between her speakers and places like "St. Domingo," "Balize," "Peru," and "Potosi" (F 95). This practice of aesthetic honing across the space of the incommensurable is Dickinson's own "quiet—Earthquake Style," philosophically opposed to the dominant nationalist mode of earthquake oblivion.

Twain's Earthquake Humor

While Dickinson and Douglass were in their disparate northern locations meditating in different but related ways on the earthquake of the Civil War, Mark Twain was running from it—headed west as fast as a horse-drawn coach could carry him. It took Twain only two weeks as a secessionist defender of the US South to realize that he was not willing to defend either his family's longstanding investment in slave-holding or the border territory of Missouri from domination by Union forces—at least not at the cost of his own life. So he followed his older brother Orion, the recently appointed secretary of the Nevada Territory, out to the silver-mining boomtown of Virginia City, where he hoped to find work and wait out the national rending. The story of his five-year sojourn in the West, published in 1872 as *Roughing It*, includes his travels in Nevada Territory, California, and finally, after a southward voyage, the Hawaiian Islands. *Roughing It* also narrates Twain's experience of a geological earthquake—a magnitude 6.3 event occurring in San Francisco in 1865—that punctuated the end of the Civil War. Twain had fled from the seismic US South only to experience literal earthquake in the West. His extended response to the San Francisco earthquake paradoxically manifests its own version of earthquake forgetting, and its own southernizing of catastrophe.

Unlike other commentators on the San Francisco earthquake, the greatest in the area on written record at the time, Twain struck a distinctly casual note in describing his experience. In the San Francisco portion of *Roughing It*, he has just narrated his losses in silver speculation and his consequent return to the "slavery" of earning his own living through journalism, when the seismic event occurs: "A month afterward I enjoyed my first earthquake. It was one which was long called the 'great' earthquake, and is doubtless so distinguished till this day."⁴³ The word "enjoyed" signals immediately that Twain will be subverting traditional models for describing earthquake, rejecting the register of anguish and terror and even the more tempered descriptions of surprise and unease characteristic of scientific or journalistic writing. *The New York Times*, for example, reported on the "altogether alarming" effect of the rocking buildings after the earthquake's "two tremendous shocks."⁴⁴ Twain distances himself from such dire assessments, and throws his weight instead into a strangely, for so skeptical a writer, confident projection of

the future by asserting that the 1865 earthquake will still be thought of by later readers as California's "great" earthquake (R 420). The idea that another, bigger earthquake might one day happen seems beyond question—and indeed, Twain was already mocking concerns that another earthquake might strike a mere nine days after the 1865 great earthquake struck. His "Earthquake Almanac," written for the *San Francisco Dramatic Chronicle*, distinguished the different days of the ensuing month with phrases like "mild, balmy earthquakes" and "occasional shakes, followed by light showers of bricks and plastering" and "spasmodic but exhilarating earthquakes, accompanied by occasional showers of rain and churches and things."⁴⁵ For October 28, he predicted, "Misery, dismal forebodings, and despair. Beware of all light discourse—a joke uttered at this time would produce a popular outbreak."⁴⁶

Twain has been called the first "master of earthquake humor" by Deborah Coen, and it is worth pausing to think about how his "light discourse" on the earthquake functions and what it accomplishes.⁴⁷ Like any good journalist, he describes the scene in detail as it changes over the course of the event, and a street marked by "solitude and a Sabbath stillness" becomes "teeming life" in a matter of minutes, with "Every door, of every house, as far as the eye could reach ... vomiting a stream of human beings" (R 421). Moreover, Twain does not suppress or look away from what he sees with his own eyes, including a "buggy distributed into small fragments along three hundred yards of street" and "the entire front of a tall four-story brick building [that] sprung outward like a door and fell sprawling across the street, raising a dust like a great volume of smoke" (R 421, 420). This is not obvious material for comedy, so Twain elicits the initial humor in the account from his own emplacement on the scene as a journalist. Experiencing the earthquake's initial "great rattle and a jar" of the earth, he assumes that a fight has broken out in a nearby house, providing him salacious material for a story: "here was an item!" When he is thrown "up against a frame house," he hurts his elbow and then, "from mere reportorial instinct, nothing else," checks the time (R 420). Narrating with a comic eye on himself, Twain is able to describe the "really terrific shock" and the "third and still severer shock," the "violent joggling up and down" of the ground, and all that this causes physically as a kind of slapstick comedy—replete with a "fat man ... crashed half way through a glass window ... wedged fast and squirming and screaming like an impaled madman" (R 420–421).

This portion of his account concludes by invoking and then deflating the language of natural signs, marvels, and portents: "Of the wonders wrought by 'the great earthquake,' these were all that came under my eye" (R 421). The rest of his account turns to secondhand reports of the earthquake and the "tricks it did," which opens much more room for the comedy of social exposure—as, for example, in the case of "prominent citizens" who are caught playing billiards in saloons on the Sabbath when they run out into the street "in their shirt-sleeves, with billiard cues in their hands" (R 421). Indeed, Twain gets most of his mileage out of the

“queer apparel” and nakedness of people seen running into the streets, including a “foreign consul’s lady” whose appearance in a bath towel enables some leering and a joke about women’s fashions and their tiresome expense in the eyes of their husbands (R 421, 422). Most of Twain’s jokes—other than a passing reference to men caught with shaving lather on their faces and to a “frightened dog” who gets stuck on a roof—are about women, including a pregnant woman almost hit by the club of a falling bronze Hercules statue who then goes on to bear a child with a club foot (R 421, 423). “If the reader sees any coincidence in this, he must do it at his own risk,” says Twain, who characterizes the general popular discourse of earthquake after the event as a laughably feminized form of “toothsome gossip” that he riffs on but encourages the reader to scorn (R 421, 423). Being awed or overwhelmed by the earthquake is, in Twain’s account, for frightened ministers who flee their churches as well as, of course, women and female children—“hardly a girl or matron in the city but suffered losses” of their “mantel ornaments and toilet bottles” (R 423).

In other words, the point of Twain’s “seismic humor” is to establish a social norm vis-a-vis the earthquake event; he invites readers to raise an ironic eyebrow in nonchalance, along with him, or to risk being the object of ridicule.⁴⁸ As is, for example, a “prominent editor” whom Twain derides for his fear: “He flew down stairs, in the principal hotel, with nothing on but one brief undergarment—met a chambermaid, and exclaimed: ‘Oh, what shall I do! Where shall I go!’ [The maid] responded with naive serenity: ‘If you have no choice, you might try a clothing-store!’” (R 422). Don’t act like a hysterical woman, Twain teaches his readers; anything other than casual irony regarding the event of the “queer earthquake” is the reaction of fools (R 424). While Humboldt had earlier in the century described the universal first experience of earthquake as transcendent and revelatory, Twain, by contrast, suggests at the close of the episode that the main thing memorable about his experience of the earthquake is the “San Francisco gossip” that it engendered—if only “for the next week” (R 242). In *Roughing It*, Twain was training his readers and perhaps himself in the manly art of earthquake forgetting.

The book models this stance not only in its specific commentary on the 1865 San Francisco earthquake but more importantly also in its larger form as a “personal narrative,” as Twain designates the book in his preface, a genre that in his view eschews what he calls “pretentious history” and “philosophical dissertation” (R 33). Yet there are both historical and philosophical gambits in this work. *Roughing It* promises in this preface to play a trick of time, one that is in some sense the kind that all absorption in reading allows: to “help the resting reader while away an idle hour” (R 33). But the work also transforms the time of the Civil War, with which its account overlaps, from the historical rupture of a national earthquake into the “variegated vagabondizing” of the author himself, the content that its narrative unfolds (R 33). *Roughing It* allows the contemporaneous nineteenth-century reader to re-experience these years as Twain purports here that he himself

did—not as an implosive time of catastrophe in the South but as the “idle hour” of a linear and westward-traveling narrative. Twain promises further not to “afflict [the reader] with metaphysics or goad him with science”—not to dwell, that is, in the earthquake territory that lies at the intersection of philosophy and geology and that also figures the very kind of historical rupture the book is set on repressing (R 33). To forget earthquake is to forget the fundamental instability of settler colonial existence and to disavow the fragility of the settler psyche and its slave-owning twin.

And yet earthquake cannot be eluded as Twain makes his escape from national rupture into Indian Country. As he and Orion first set out in their horse-drawn coach, the driver makes a crack about the heavy bags of mail they are carrying out west—a passing remark but significant enough to be set off in the contents under its own heading: “Between a wink and an earthquake” (R 35). The joke is that only “a little” of the mail is for “Brigham and Carson and ’Frisco” while “the heft of it” is for the Plains Indians “which is powerful troublesome ’thout they get plenty of truck to read” (R 55). Twain claims to understand the comment is “intended to be facetious” only because of the driver’s expression: “he just then got up a fearful convulsion on his countenance, which was suggestive of a wink being swallowed by an earthquake” (R 55). Condensed in the joke, however, is an entire colonial history of mistaken assumptions about the ability of European colonizers to mystify their way through conquest with the technology of alphabetic writing—a history, as we have seen, that is the source of much irony in Garcilaso’s writing and its trope of the talking book. The violence that ensued from these assumptions—signaled here by the phrase “powerful troublesome”—is the only part of the joke not based on colonial myth (R 55). And the deeper point that the driver is making is about the danger of the journey all the coach passengers and the driver are undertaking; all of them may be, like the driver’s wink, “swallowed by an earthquake” in response to their unwelcome presence on the Plains.

Twain’s association of seismic movement and the defense of Indigenous sovereignty continues as the narrative carries him west to Nevada. Just as their coach is about to cross the site of a well-known attack on an overland mail carrier—“the sand hills near the scene of the Indian mail robbery and massacre of 1856”—the narrative takes a sudden detour from the time and place of the action to discuss an avalanche on Mont Blanc in Switzerland (R 97). The ostensible point is that travelers’ satisfaction in seeing things that “some other people had not” can lead them into danger, and the ascent of the famous European mountain serves as his case in point (R 96). But the striking details of the avalanche accumulate into a non sequitur: a human agent—a single mountaineer who trips—makes the “crusted snow smoke” as he falls from “bench to bench, and from terrace to terrace, jarring the earth where he strikes” (R 96–97). He brings with him trees, “roots and all,” and then “little rocks,” “big boulders,” “then acres of ice and snow and patches of forest,” until “he rides into eternity on the back of a raging and

tossing avalanche,” and finds himself “with six or seven thousand feet of snow and stuff on top of him” (R 97). As with the San Francisco earthquake, Twain renders the scene as a physical comedy, with the mountaineer “wav[ing] his hat magnificently” as he falls to his death—and thereby setting a tone that carries the narrative through a comic version of the massacre, in which driver, conductor, and all but one of the passengers are killed (R 97). The punchline—that Twain later meets “a hundred and thirty-three or four people” who all claim to be the single survivor—converts the episode into a story about the circulation of Western legends (R 97). But the earlier movement of the earth in the narrative—acres and thousands of feet of it—holds the story’s more fundamental meaning: that the ground of settler colonialism is neither solid nor permanent.

The unremitting violence of Twain’s seismic humor—itself a particular form of earthquake forgetting—emerges in full clarity in Twain’s infamous chapter on the Goshute Shoshone of Nevada and Utah. The Shoshone historian Ned Blackhawk posits this chapter as the unacknowledged site of the author’s first self-imaginings as a literary writer.⁴⁹ And indeed, this chapter marks Twain’s self-described apostasy from his status as “a disciple of Cooper and a worshipper of the ‘Red Man’—even of the scholarly savages in the ‘Last of the Mohicans’” (R 168). In putting his first encounter with the Goshute Shoshone people to paper, Twain commits himself as a writer to an ostensible practice of verisimilitude in opposition to the “mellow moonshine of romance”: to revealing “the degraded real to James Fenimore Cooper’s imagined literary ‘red man,’” as the Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd puts it (R 168).⁵⁰ Blackhawk and Byrd are among relatively few scholars to take seriously Twain’s investment—despite the author’s insistence in the preface to *Roughing It* that he was writing an anti-philosophical personal narrative—in what Melville called “the metaphysics of Indian hating.”⁵¹ And in Twain’s case, the practice of Native dehumanization was indeed a form of metaphysics: his profound and universalizing anti-Indigeneity in *Roughing It*—registered in his claim that “wherever one finds an Indian tribe he has only found Goshoots more or less modified”—was inextricable from questions about the very ground of settler colonial being, whether it was solid and stable, and what this meant in a world putatively overseen by providence (R 169).

This is not to say that Twain’s dehumanizing view of Native American people never changed or wavered over the course of his long career, or to deny the force of his anti-imperial critique toward the end of the century, when he became, if fleetingly, an acute observer of overseas US imperialism and settler colonialism in Australia. But his particular metaphysics of Indian-hating—and the larger set of questions it stood for—was with Twain even at the end of his life when, in the first decade of the twentieth century, he wrote “Letters from the Earth,” a profound anti-theodicy that rebuked the foundational justification for the presence of evil despite a good and omnipotent God. “Letters from the Earth” (ca. 1909) is the story of the *felix culpa* into that “invaluable possession, the Moral Sense,” that was

occasioned by Adam and Eve's partaking of the forbidden fruit. In the retelling of the Bible that follows, Twain casts the story of the fall as God's "assassination" of his original human creations and all subsequent events as further proof of the malign divinity that oversees the eternal truth that "Human history in all ages is red with blood, and bitter with hate, and stained with cruelties."⁵² His summative example hinges on Indigenous presence in the nineteenth-century US. Reversing the Puritan typology of an English New Jerusalem beset by Indian Canaanites, Twain instead considers the ancient Israelites as the aggressors in God's merciless "campaign among the Midianites," led by Moses as a war of extermination—a divine war that Twain in turn offers as the founding explanation for "the red Indian of America," who "has duplicated God's work, and done it in the very spirit of God."⁵³ Thus, the "white settlers" of "America" in this anti-theodicy parallel the innocent Midianites slaughtered upon God's command, and Twain illustrates their plight with his lurid account of an 1862 Indigenous attack upon a settlement in Minnesota, an account clearly designed to elicit special horror in his early twentieth-century settler readers.⁵⁴ And although Twain ends by pronouncing that "the Indian was more merciful than was the Father of Mercies," the lingering point in this bitter account of God's moral failures is its culmination in the metaphysics of Indian-hating: the mystery of evil, for Twain, is the purportedly enduring and savage threat of Indigenous presence to settler colonial security.⁵⁵

Earthquake must be forgotten because it challenges this metaphysics of hate along with other philosophies of settler possession. Not long after Twain was in Nevada Territory, in fact, an earthquake appeared at the center of the visions experienced by the Paiute prophet known as Wodziwob who—like the earlier prophet Tenskwatawa—prophesied a seismic overturning of settlement that would return the American land to its original Indigenous possession while "the whites would be swallowed up."⁵⁶ The Paiute people ritualized Wodziwob's prophecies through the practice known as the Ghost Dance in the late 1860s and these ceremonies continued over the generations, emerging most famously in the 1880s with the theological teachings of Wovoka, who led the Ghost Dance revitalization movement that was then practiced widely across Native communities of the West, including the Sioux and the Lakota—who were infamously massacred in 1890, essentially for their religious practice of the dance.⁵⁷ The Ghost Dance movement called for worship rather than war or human violence, but earthquake and sometimes flood figured the anticolonial emotion and agency of the land as it swallowed or swept away a genocidal settler culture to restore harmony. In the years leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre, the figure of earthquake—as transmitted by the Ghost Dance—was being actively scrutinized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the US Department of War.⁵⁸

Whether or not Twain knew about Wodziwob's early visions in the 1860s is uncertain, but there is an odd episode in *Roughing It* when Twain travels up the Carson River and encounters "a small Indian camp" near the site of a rustic inn

where he plans to spend the night (R 232). In one of the few passages in which Twain has direct communication with an Indigenous character, he notes that the nearby “Indians were in a great hurry about something, and were packing up and getting away as fast as they could”; they take the time, however, to issue him a warning in both words and hand gestures that “in their opinion a flood [is] coming” (R 232). In his telling of this brief exchange, Twain predictably enacts narrative dominance over his Indigenous interlocutors by referring to their language as “broken English” and their prediction—labeled “an Indian prophecy” in the contents—as a “ruse” (R 232). The latter conclusion emerges from rational consideration and empiricist observation: “The weather was perfectly clear, and this was not the rainy season” but “an exceedingly dry time”; the river is “insignificant,” with only one to two feet of water; and the measurements of its width and height are not worrisome (R 232, 233). Twain and his companion cannot even locate a likely source for inundation—“So, where was the flood to come from?”—and they decide not to be taken in by misleading or false information from an unreliable source (R 232–233).

But in the next paragraphs, the prophesied flood arrives, “raging and foaming in the wildest way”—and, ambiguously signifying or even intending destruction, the waters “meant damage” (R 233). The flood has an agency, that is, that strikes Twain as malign: “The waves had now come ashore and were creeping about the foundations and invading the great hay-corral adjoining” (R 233). He and the other settlers must contend with the fury of the water as they try to salvage their animals: they are “knee-deep” then “waist-deep” then “breast-deep” until finally they watch as “the sun-burned bricks melted down like sugar and the big building crumbled down to a ruin and was washed away in a twinkling” (R 233–234). The physical signs of settlement have been swallowed by the earth. The land itself undertakes a physical and psychic challenge to the permanence and solidity of settler colonial possession: this is the broad context in which Twain’s earthquake humor performs the necessary task of earthquake denial and forgetting.

In the final sections of *Roughing It*, the author’s trip to the Hawaiian Islands provides a narrative foil for the slapstick California earthquake—and a well-worn trope of national earthquake amnesia—by bringing the author to the South Seas literary site of elsewhere catastrophe, a place where Twain can contemplate volcanoes and earthquakes and the possibility of large-scale destruction in the register of sublimity rather than humor. “I think the memory of it will stay with me always,” pronounces Twain about this catastrophic elsewhere, where “only a Pompeii and a Herculaneum were needed to make the story of [its ancient] irruption immortal” (R 544, 537). The South Seas islands were also, as we have seen, the earthquake-ridden setting of *The Crater* by Twain’s nemesis Cooper—and as in Cooper’s antebellum novel, this portion of *Roughing It* stages the very entanglement of slavery and settler colonialism that the larger text and its author are clearly seeking to flee and forget. As Amy Kaplan first noted, the end of *Roughing It* “took Twain

homeward into the American South” and to the memories of the prewar past, both the nostalgia for and the nightmare of slavery.⁵⁹ Twain may have fled the seismic South of the Civil War, but he sees corollaries to the US South wherever he goes: in the islands’ lush and lucrative sugar plantations and in the Kanaka Maoli who appear to him like “negroes in a slave pen” (R 495). But antebellum slave-owning prosperity is only one part of the complex displacement of the US South occurring in this portion of the text: when the sounds of Hawaiian-language singing reach his ears as the Union army song “Marching through Georgia,” it is clear that the Civil War will not leave Twain behind (R 469). And although Twain tries here to domesticate fear through a dominating style of humor—offering his own pseudo-transliteration and translation of the Hawaiian words—the unimagined meaning is nevertheless clear: what he hears in the song is the threat of a dark-skinned and unfree labor force. The song uncannily summons the specter of a Civil War that was also a revolution of the enslaved.

At the same time, the Hawaiian portion of *Roughing It* also evinces Twain’s simultaneous attempt and failure to narratively contain the threat to colonial dominance—the enduring possibility of unsettlement—posed by the contemporary, living Kanaka Maoli. For the most part, the narrative encases the Kanaka within comic, minstrel-like sketches that promise their eternal subordination or that, as Byrd points out, maintain their supposedly natural propensity for death and disappearance: as Twain writes, “the natives are able to *lie down and die whenever they want to*, whether there is anything the matter with them or not” (R 457).⁶⁰ Yet Twain cannot avoid the history of Indigenous unsettlement legible to him everywhere in the Hawaiian landscape. After he traverses “a mountain of dreary and desolate lava” that puts him in mind of “Herculaneum and Pompeii,” he stands at the historical site of Captain Cook’s death and looks out on Kealakekua Bay: eruption of the earth and Indigenous attack meet across the centuries in his mind (R 510). Here, as Byrd notes, the narrative also records its own stutter, its own inability to complete a thought, as Twain tries to imagine “the doomed man struggling in the midst of a multitude of exasperated savages” and then demurs: “but I discovered that I could not do it” (R 511–512).⁶¹ What follows is in fact an extended imagining of the attack upon Cook and his subsequent death as well as an unambiguous judgment upon the explorer for having mistreated the guileless “natives” who once welcomed him with hospitality (R 511). Out of his purported failure to imagine Cook’s death, Twain creates instead a scene of *disidentification*—a decisive split between his own US settler colonial identity and the settler colonial history of Hawaii (still decades away from official US occupation and statehood) emblemized by the English explorer. Once his obsessive account of Cook’s death has concluded with this psychic cleaving—which allows one colonial history to eclipse the other—the narrative restores Twain to the ship and envisions him “sleeping the refreshing sleep and dreaming the happy dreams that are only vouchsafed to the weary and the innocent” (R 514).

His national innocence established—as Kaplan memorably puts it, “Hawaii in fact Americanized Mark Twain”—Twain is free to move toward a serious contemplation of history as elsewhere catastrophe, far from US futurity.⁶² The narrative now turns to his visit to Kilawea—in contrast to which Vesuvius seems “a mere toy”—and his experiences there, far from comedy, “almost amount ... to revelation” (R 528, 529). He meditates on an 1840 eruption of the volcano that “rent its overburdened stomach and sent a broad river of fire careering down to the sea, which swept away forests, huts, plantations, and every thing that lay in its path”; and he painstakingly describes the “fish ... killed for twenty miles along the shore” before documenting the “loss of human life” occurring with the earthquakes and the “drowning [of] a number of natives” in the ensuing tsunami: “The devastation consummated along the route traversed by the river of lava was complete and incalculable” (R 537). Contemplating such devastation allows Twain to hail an unlikely literary ancestor, Edgar Allan Poe—dropping his name in reference to the “singular fraud perpetrated upon the eye by isolated great altitudes”—as he visits Maui’s Haleakala volcano in the next section of the narrative (R 541). Where Poe was the great biographer of the apocalyptic Civil War, as Ishmael Reed would call him, Twain is able to cast himself as a survivor of elsewhere catastrophe—“the Last Man, relic of a vanished world”—regenerated in the Hawaiian Islands by “the sublimest spectacle I ever witnessed” and ready to return to the US mainland (R 544).⁶³ To do so requires abnegating the immanence of Indigenous cosmologies in Hawaii, making jokes about the supposed death of the Kanaka gods upon the arrival of Christian missionaries, and suppressing the presence of the deity Pele, the goddess of volcanoes, even though Twain knows and cites her name in *Roughing It*. Once he has established the distance of the US Civil War and American settler colonialism from the elsewhere catastrophe of colonialism in Hawaii—and from the divine realm of Pele and other Indigenous deities—Twain is ready to return to the comedy of American innocence, far from the land of earthquakes.

Martí and the Charleston Earthquake of 1886

In the two decades following the Civil War, the nineteenth-century national propensity for earthquake forgetting grew stronger as the settler-nation sought to reimagine the war—like settler colonialism itself—as an exceptional catastrophic event cordoned off in the past. As nationalist discourse imagined a US “exemption” from earthquake, so too did US economic investment in Latin America, as one of the exemplary “lands of the earthquake,” begin to increase.⁶⁴ Peru became a leading importer of US industrial products such as steel, which US businesses then promised to turn into modernizing railroads, ostensibly pulling the country out of its dark and disastrous past while directly profiting from disaster in the present. When Peru was hit with an earthquake in 1868, as we saw in [chapter 1](#),

US investors made great public shows of donating relief money to its victims while simultaneously bribing government leaders into taking on massive foreign debt to continue building the railroad—a situation that eventually brought chaos to Peru's economy and laid the groundwork for the War of the Pacific in 1879. The figure of catastrophic “lands of the earthquake,” in other words, held literal value for investment and profit by the US. Voltaire's mid-eighteenth-century prediction that “le nord va s'enrichir” held true even as a new northern nation consolidated itself as a global power in the next century.⁶⁵ But in 1886, despite the supposed national American exemption from seismic disaster, the city of Charleston, South Carolina, at the heart of the former Confederacy, was struck by a major earthquake.

José Martí was a boy in Cuba during the US Civil War. By 1886, he was in exile from two southern polities—Venezuela as well as Cuba—when he wrote from his residence in New York City about earthquake eruption within Charleston. These were what Susana Rotker has defined as the “critical radicalization” years for Martí, during which he produced his massive collection of “Escenas Norteamericanas”—writings on varied figures and events in late nineteenth-century US life—which she memorably characterizes as “an experimental laboratory for modernist writing” and “a perpetual reflection on being, or on the imperative of being Latin American.”⁶⁶ Martí presented much of this work to the largest Spanish-speaking readership to be found throughout the hemisphere, the subscribers to *La Nación*, published in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His editor at *La Nación*, Bartolomé Mitre, had enjoined him against any appearance of criticizing the US in his work, and he had been encouraged as well to offer “less Martí, less Latino, less of the Spanish race, and less about South America,” and give readers instead “a little more of the yankee, the new type of modern man.”⁶⁷ Writing within these constrictions, Martí managed nevertheless to spectacularly confound his editor's injunction with the chronicle on the 1886 Charleston earthquake. For Martí portrayed the event not only as the decimation of a US Southern city but also as an oblique meditation on multiple, overlapping southern spaces in the hemisphere.

As Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones has observed, Martí was “entre imperios,” between empires during his US exile, and more specifically was in discussions with other exiles over the anti-imperial struggle against Spanish colonialism at the very moment when he was also writing about the US Civil War, which captured his literary imagination and offered him a poetic-philosophical space in which to work out his ideas about the most legitimate form of war for Cuban Independence: a sacred national war whose terrible sacrifices would be correctly interpreted by a national poet for its redemptive capacities.⁶⁸ Within such a framework of “romantic historiography,” Martí inevitably admired the victory of the North and the legal end of slavery and, at the same time, the fact that the former US Confederates had been successfully incorporated into the unified post-Civil War nation, to the point of allowing them to celebrate their “confederate celebrations.”⁶⁹ But if he was establishing a vision of Cuba's future in his “appropriation of national North

American myths” regarding the US Civil War, as Díaz-Quñones argues, this vision was inherently troubled by the hemisphere-wide problem that Martí insisted was, in the case of Cuba, not a problem: the possibility of *guerra de razas* or race war.⁷⁰ Writing about rupture in his earthquake chronicle, Martí could not interpret the post-Civil War US according to the usual terms of its “political and literary prestige”; seer that he was, he could not help seeing differently in this moment of rending.⁷¹

The chronicle’s focus on the Black population of Charleston and Martí’s detailed descriptions of diasporic religious practice suggest a different dimension of being “entre imperios,” undermining the fundamental opposition of the two Americas that Martí would later take up in “Nuestra América.” As Antonio López asks, “How is Martí’s imagination of an African diaspora in Charleston, despite its narrow US provenance, implicated in the question of ‘race’ across the Americas?”⁷² The Charleston chronicle offers a provisional answer, suggesting that we understand Martí’s vision of African diaspora in Charleston as a contemplation of blackness and slavery throughout the hemisphere, where the institution’s uneven status (ending in Cuba, ongoing in Brazil, and remade into new forms everywhere else) was a major concern. Martí engages multiple Souths in his Charleston chronicle, in large part by positioning his text within hemispheric literary networks that exceed the US newspapers from which he took his information about the earthquake. At the same time, the chronicle unfolds an account of earthquake that continually pushes against the worldview that Martí articulates elsewhere—an anti-secular mode of seeing and recognizing that ultimately considers the potential of the very seismic eruption that he adamantly denied was possible in Cuba.

The opening of the chronicle describes Charleston’s unqualified annihilation. An earthquake has left destruction and nothing but ruin where once lay the city “like a basket of fruit”: a symbol of welcome and domestic abundance, of a cultivated Eden of “forests of magnolias and orange and jasmine trees.”⁷³ The reader of this chronicle, like its narrator, can “see the ocean from decks draped with vines” (T 65). Yet this privileged ocean-view perspective is a potent reminder that all interpretation is based on a narrative location and a particular angle of vision. Martí’s self-referential narrative eye moves in and out of close range, as the author prescribes proper perspective for his meditation: “These misfortunes that tear out the entrails of the earth must be seen from the summit of the skies” (T 66). From a mansion’s oceanside balcony or from a loftier perch, Martí’s perspective is, self-consciously, generated out of narrative itself: in his words, “*Decirlo es verlo*”: to say it is to see it (T 67). Indeed, Martí *must* tell it to see it, for he was not in Charleston at the time of the earthquake and had probably never visited the city himself.

As Rotker has shown, Martí took many of the details of the earthquake and its aftermath, often with literal and word-for-word translations, from Anglo-phone newspaper accounts circulating throughout the US.⁷⁴ But these myriad

fragments from other accounts are profoundly reconceived in his chronicle—and often supplemented by descriptions of the city that Martí surely learned from Cuban and other Spanish-American compatriots who lived in or passed through Charleston. A reference at the opening of the chronicle to the “unfortunate travelers” who came to South Carolina on the *Puig*—a ship carrying political exiles from Uruguay—brings nineteenth-century Latin America into the foreground of Charleston’s earthquake (T 65). None of the Anglophone newspapers connects the 1875 arrival of the *Puig* in South Carolina with the earthquake that occurred a decade later; Martí’s Charleston slides out of its provincial US Southern setting in such moments and into a wider hemispheric frame.

Written for readers in Buenos Aires, but circulating in literary networks throughout Spanish America via *La Nación*’s wide subscription as well as reprinting in other periodicals, the chronicle limns a verbal map for the hemisphere’s wealthiest classes. Something of a *flâneur*, the narrator charts the city for would-be travelers, describing the streets running toward its two rivers, its waterfront, its wharves, and locating its business center and its “luxurious hotels” by street names (T 65). Martí reminds the chronicle’s readers—for whom Charleston lies to the north—that any North–South axis of orientation constantly slides, as do its attendant moral geographies. As Martí subtly observes, moreover, the late nineteenth-century US South shared its recent slave-holding past with much of the greater hemisphere to its own South: indeed, “El Terremoto de Charleston” was published just one week after slavery, including the *patronato* policy of indentured servitude, was finally abolished in Cuba by decree of the Spanish crown on October 7, 1886. Cuban slavery was still in effect as Martí composed his chronicle—but it would be rendered illegal by the time his words saw print. In this sense, we might even say that the abolition of Cuban slavery, and not the earthquake in South Carolina, is in some sense the most immediate context of Martí’s chronicle on Charleston: while writing about Charleston, Martí is also writing about Cuba.

Martí initially renders Charleston as Cuba’s more hospitable twin. When the narrator alludes to the episode of the *Puig*, whose Uruguayan political refugees were received “with kindness” in Charleston, Martí also subtly reminds his Spanish-American readership of a context they would have known well: that officials in Havana had turned these exiles away from their designated destination (T 65). Expelled from their homeland after ten years of civil conflicts involving Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, the refugees from Montevideo found their way from Cuba to Charleston, which they understood to be a city inspired by “the cult of the law,” as one of these *letrados*, journalist Agustín de Vedia, put it in a later account: a “democracy based in the most scrupulous respect for human liberty” and “the genius of the yankees.”⁷⁵ From here, after resting among the “yankees” of the US South, the Uruguayans made their way to New York and, in Vedia’s case, on to Argentina. Martí would almost certainly have read Vedia’s account, which was widely cited in the US after its publication in Buenos Aires in 1875. Vedia had

a decade earlier been the founder of the Argentine newspaper *La América*, a publication opposed to then Argentine president, Mitre, who had in 1870 launched *La Nación*, the very newspaper to which Martí was submitting his chronicle on Charleston under this editor's censorious eye.⁷⁶ The web of contextual allusions condensed within Martí's single reference to the *Puig* is extremely dense, in other words, opening his Charleston chronicle out beyond Cuba onto racial politics in the southern hemisphere.

Indeed, as Martí's chronicle slowly discloses its account of slavery's ongoing afterlife, it also gives the lie to Vedia's text with its celebration of Charleston as an oasis of liberty; for it turns out to be because of—and not despite—Charleston's "cult of the law" that white supremacy holds the city in its thrall. At the same time, "El Terremoto de Charleston" offers an embedded critique of the false racial promises of the lettered city throughout the Americas, North and South. Bartolomé Mitre provides a case in point; he often praised the Black *mártires modestos* or modest martyrs who died during Argentina's independence struggles but he did so while also enacting and supporting a national policy of *blanqueamiento* that disappeared large portions of the nation's African-descended population.⁷⁷ The widely touted project of seeking immigration from Europe to whiten Argentina, a project that Mitre explicitly endorsed, was by far the most effective strategy of *blanqueamiento*—or, rather, Black elimination: a reminder that all transoceanic immigration projects in the Americas must be understood, in part, as distinctive phases of settler colonial self-perpetuation.

Read within these contexts, "El Terremoto de Charleston" takes on new resonance as an *escena norteamericana* that has a message for the South American city in which it was published. For Martí—who maps and orders Charleston in his opening paragraphs—subsequently devotes himself to shattering the most entrenched ideals of the settler colonial Americas with the force of the very earthquake he describes. Like the earthquake, his chronicle utterly disorders the lettered city that Vedia found in Charleston, exposing the violent underside of its celebrated *culto de la ley*. At the same time, Martí's gilded age-era critique undermines the spirit of positivism that had allowed Domingo Faustino Sarmiento to celebrate an 1851 earthquake in Chile—"¡Viva el temblor!" ("Long live the earthquake!")—as an opportunity for economic growth and the rebuilding of Santiago as a European-inspired city in which intellectual and scientific progress would carry the nation ever forward into a futurity of whiteness.⁷⁸ The chronicle thus reminds us that "disaster capitalism," as Naomi Klein has elaborated it in the context of late twentieth-century and contemporary neoliberalism, has a long and racialized history rooted in slavery and settler colonialism.⁷⁹

Unlike the Anglophone accounts from which he took his details regarding the earthquake, Martí does not shy away from linking the catastrophe at hand to Charleston's slave-holding past. For example, *The Philadelphia Enquirer* published a description of the Charleston earthquake—"A Glance at the City" (September 2,

1886)—from which Martí seems to have taken a number of specific details that he subtly reframes. Where the *Enquirer* simply notes that “interred in the cemetery adjoining St. Philip’s Episcopal Church are the bodies of many noted persons, including Gadsden, Rutledge, and Pickney [and] the tomb of John C. Calhoun,” Martí inserts an irony of simultaneity: the earthquake’s dead in 1886 are taken to the same cemetery “where without talking lies this Calhoun who spoke so well, and Gadsen, and Rutledge, and Pinckney” (T 69). Martí’s point regarding this John C. Calhoun, who spoke so well, seems to be that he was speaking most often, or most significantly, to defend the institution of slavery—as did James Gadsden in supporting bondage as a “social blessing”; John Rutledge, who represented South Carolina at the constitutional convention and fought to conserve slavery to state determination; and “Pinckney,” probably Charles Cotesworth, whose family name was synonymous with the slave-holding elite, and who, like Rutledge, played a role at the constitutional convention in preserving slavery.⁸⁰ In *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, these are the names simply of “noted people”; evoked by Martí, however, these names represent the political defense of slavery against its opponents. Narrating the devastation of the earthquake, Martí shows us the now silenced Calhoun lying in an everlasting embrace of white supremacy.

Martí adjusts the narrative view continually throughout the chronicle, turning the eye back to what it refuses to see. As he struggles with history and geography, he also makes striking attempts to achieve a Sarmiento-like perspective on the earthquake “from the summit of the skies,” or perhaps from a well-appointed balcony, that will allow scientific knowledge to triumph over the catastrophe: “from there the earthquakes, with all their frightful adornment of human sorrows, are nothing more than the adjustment of the visible soil over its shrunken entrails, indispensable for the equilibrium of creation” itself (T 66). The passage envisions an indifferent but still anthropocentric universe in which scientific fact and human futility can both occupy the center of a romance. Man is but a “poor warrior of the air, embroidered in gold” whose “majesty” and “judgement” stand diminished by the earthquake (T 66, 69). And yet he remains Man-as-Transcendent—“he senses that he rises, like a bubble in a ray of sun—ascending with the scientific progress that endows him with new knowledge of his place in the universe”: exalted even as he is relativized by positivist achievement and a rejection of metaphysics (T 66).

But Martí soon nudges this perspective to the brink, where science fails. Noting that Charleston’s earthquake was anomalous—“never there had the earth [even] shuddered”—the narrator moves from the language of specialized science (*solfataras* are the natural steam vents in volcanic craters releasing hot sulfur gases) toward the dense metaphor of poetry (T 67). His point is geological but verges on the metaphysical: Charleston had none of the geographical predictors for earthquake—and yet earthquake struck, destroying “this peace, [this] lady of the cities of the noonday hour” (T 67). Not just Charleston but all cities of the South are

implicated in this mystery of seismic and spiritual eruption. Martí lists the institutions that have sent funds in response to the catastrophe: “the stock exchanges ... the theaters ... the newspapers ... the banks.” But still, by the chronicle’s end, the unresolved question haunts him: “What could have been the cause of this shaking of the earth?” (T 75). His speculative scientific answers are interspersed with refrains of doubt (“But there are no volcanoes there in the extensive area in which the earthquake was felt” [T 67]). The exclamations crescendo with suggested theories of the earthquake’s cause, as does the impinging sense that the land has, by some agency or another, been chastised: “the earth has been wounded” (T 76). There is no Sarmiento-inspired opportunity for progress here, only the grim return to historical stasis: “on the repaired tracks enter the trains loaded with cargoes of cotton ... the humble negroes return ... to their meek chores and their many offspring” (T 76). Earthquake has not changed Charleston’s position within a greater world-system for which it supplies “cotton for Europe and India”—and supplies, too, the labor that harvests it.

Against the failures of science and historical progress, Martí posits an alternative: what he paternalistically terms “the impetuous imagination of the negroes” (T 65, 68). “El Terremoto de Charleston” stands apart from other accounts of the 1886 earthquake for the space it devotes to the presence of Black Charleston residents, and particularly to Black religious response to the catastrophe—especially striking given Martí’s antipathy to religion, or at least to the deleterious effects of Church power on the state. Yet Martí reanimates standard Anglophone accounts of momentary social equalization after the earthquake with distinctly religious breath. In this respect, the chronicle subtly embeds the account of the earthquake within questions of theodicy, anthropomorphizing the event and imbuing it with religious significance that undermines Martí’s ostensibly secular frame. “Who has taken this city by the waist, and shaken her in the air, with a terrible hand, and broken her?” he asks (T 67). How different this view of nature is from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s, as Martí himself had recognized in his obituary of the North American poet four years earlier. “All of Nature throbbing before him, like a bride,” Martí observed of Emerson’s transcendentalism: “His entire life was the dawn of a wedding night.”⁸¹ We are left with the sense that in Emerson’s philosophy, the absence of natural evil—of a force that can shake a whole city by its waist—is also a refusal to contend with human, historical evil. What was this terrible hand that Emerson did not see? Martí’s Charleston chronicle gives no explicit answer, but by rhetorically raising the specter of sexual violence and then figuring the ensuing presence of “high fires,” “wide flames,” “the horror of the beasts,” all exposed in a hellish moment of apprehension—“the earth opens in cracks”—Martí offers a devastating theological counter-image to the sentimental tropes of racial hierarchy plucked from several Anglophone accounts of “old men [who] pass in the arms of their faithful servants” (T 68).

Indeed, in Martí's hands, this figure evokes not sentimental reassurance regarding the racial status quo but its theological upheaval—as surely as “cane in torment”—now returned for the moment of reckoning, a judgment that every white Charlestonian recognizes on some level: for “each one believes he has before him a tiger” (T 68). The earth itself “calls ... to the battle”—against the inhumanity of white supremacy—and even white supremacy's defenders know this as they struggle to hold onto their power (T 67). As the aftershocks continue, the “common level” that other newspapers describe as the catastrophe's aftermath becomes instead a new racial order, forged in religious practice: “the arrogant whites, when the fear intensified, united their voice humbly with the improvised hymns of the frenetic negroes” (T 70). The context of slavery's afterlife is clear, for Martí names the unfolding moment of spiritual witnessing *un jubileo religioso*—a phrase that seems to appear nowhere in the Anglophone newspapers describing the aftermath of the earthquake (T 70).

Jubilee is the consecrated fiftieth year, according to instructions in Leviticus, when liberty must be proclaimed throughout the land. Jubilee expresses freedom from slavery, but its other meaning—of freedom from debt, of restoration of property stolen through peonage—is even more relevant in 1886 Charleston, where the conditions of neoslavery, including not only Black incarceration but also the production of white wealth through the systematic creation of Black debt, were hardening into institutions. *Un jubileo religioso* in this context is thus a practice of freedom in the face of centuries-long unfreedom; it addresses not only the past but also the present and future. Martí insists in the chronicle that white Charlestonians, “los blancos arrogantes,” must confront in this moment “their greatest shame” (T 70). But he speaks simultaneously to the Cubans who will see slavery finally abolished within a week of the chronicle's publication, and to the Argentines whose government is promoting *blanqueamiento*, when he names an obligation to forgive: “our greatest obligation is to forgive it” (T 70). To recognize their own shame is to partake of their own possible role in the transformative powers of jubilee. Shame becomes a form of recognition—across time, across languages, across the readership of *La Nación* and the shared history of settler colonialism and slavery in the Americas.

Martí also forges connections unmentioned in other accounts between Black Christianity, white supremacy, and the meaning of the earthquake—and he does so with a serious consideration that he refuses to show to “the foolish pastors,” the vulgar preachers who deliver “messages of rage” to “la muchedumbre campesina,” the country white folk gathered to hear them (T 71). The framework within which these white exhorters interpret the earthquake does not interest Martí. Instead, he centers Black religious expression in the chronicle, drawing on specific quotations that were derisively recorded in Anglophone papers and recasting them as fragments of Black theological engagement at a moment in which divine judgment is unfolding.⁸² Specific references to Sodom and Gomorrah and Mount Horeb

raise new possibilities: that the divine retribution of the earthquake may be for historical sins rooted in the sexual crime of rape, for example; or that the earthquake will bring sustenance to a chosen but oppressed people, just as Mount Horeb opens up to offer water to Moses and his followers in the wilderness. At the center of this Black religious community are those whom Martí calls “peregrinos” or pilgrims—a religious term that does not appear in the Anglophone record. These Black pilgrims are now homeless: “they go and come with their home on their back” (T 72). They refigure the words of Jesus—“The birds have their nests” (“Los pájaros tienen sus nidos”)—when he cautions the scribe who proposes to follow him: “Birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20 and Luke 9:58; T 74). The Black pilgrims, then, both embody Jesus’s injunction to live as a refugee, and refuse the arrogance of the biblical scribe whom Jesus gently rebuked: “¡Señor, déjanos nuestros nidos!” (“Lord, leave us our nests!”) they implore, though they have seen their homes fall to the ground (T 74).

As the chronicle unfolds, the figures of Black religious practice become increasingly threatening—as, for example, when Martí describes the “terrible dances” of the Black pilgrims: “Birds of amazement, oblivious of the other men, seem to have perched on their skulls, and peck at them, and whip their shoulders with their wings in crazed fury” (T 72). Transforming the birds cited by Jesus, this gothic image of invisible creatures entwined with Black dancers also evokes the Igbo-derived figure of the flying African common to Black folktales in the Atlantic, especially the Carolinas, Georgia, and Cuba. Martí claims to see “the primitive fear that natural phenomena inspire in their luminous race” (T 72), but he also registers something more like a flight of freedom: the role of religious practice in transcending the captured conditions of Black life in post-Reconstruction Charleston as well as the wider Americas. And while Martí purports to see in these Black religious scenes “their barbarous melancholy,” “this violent and naive fear,” and “an unspeakable anxiety,” the chronicle also gestures at the joy of divine eruption amidst the horror of white supremacy and a centuries-long history of slavery (T 74). Although Martí finally terms what he has described as “this frenzy of race in a religious guise,” the details that he has carefully assembled attest otherwise by describing a powerful theological sphere, albeit one that he cannot access (T 74). “*Decirlo es verlo*”: in the very narrative attention that Martí gives to these scenes, he creates a space in which to glimpse the powerful working of Black religious imagination.

At the same time, Martí slowly undermines the secular imagination of his own narrative voice, bringing him to the point at which he cannot turn away from his own encroaching belief that “un castigo lógico,” a logical punishment, is at hand (T 72). Martí may be merely recording various details about Black religious response to the earthquake, but when he does so, he is the one who imagines—and exclaims—that he hears the “noise of the cane.” He senses not just the “balsams” but also the “venoms” of Africa; he remembers that nature cruelly creates “among

animals the lion”—and “among plants el manzanillo”: the poisonous tropical plant that shares the name of the city in Cuba that broke out in slave revolt early in the nineteenth century (T 72, 73). “Poison,” an enslaved Cuban man reportedly told the authorities after the quelling of a revolutionary movement for freedom in 1844, “was better than war.”⁸³ Meanwhile, in South Carolina, multiple measures were soon passed to prevent the poisoning of masters by their slaves.⁸⁴ In Martí’s chronicle, then, even as he continues to insist on the fearful humility of the Black Charlestonians themselves, earthquake and Black religious uprising against white supremacy are subtly aligned. With its overlapping and often self-contradictory Souths, Martí’s “El Terremoto de Charleston” intervenes in the hemispheric literary networks across which his chronicle is working and speaks to the failures of scientific and social positivism while also attending to the eruption of Black religious practice in response to the Charleston catastrophe, a “frenzy of race” that clears conceptual space in his writing for the possibility of Black revolution—the possibility, that is, of the very *guerra de razas* he refused to consider possible in Cuba.

Martí’s chronicle makes but a single reference to Indigenous history or contemporaneous Native dwelling. The earthquake, he tells us, brought a Cherokee man to a moment of religious reckoning: “A Cherokee Indian, who had just put a brutal hand to his poor wife, fell to his knees in feeling the ground that moved under his floor, and pledged his word to the Lord that he would never again subject her to punishment” (T 71). The singularity of the moment is striking: there is no other Native presence in this chronicle, though it gestures outward to Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, and Ohio. Martí apparently develops the anecdote from an Anglophone account that cites the alleged beating as one of the “comic incidents” that always attend “great tragedies.”⁸⁵ Significantly, however, the wife-beater in the original account is not in fact Cherokee; rather, he is an “old tough” who resides in Cherokee County, Georgia and, in a further irony, lives and beats his wife regularly on particular grounds still known in the late nineteenth century as the site of “an ancient Indian ball ground.” When the reverberations of the Charleston earthquake shake the ground, the old wife-beater, clearly a white settler, perceives the convulsion as a warning: “Suddenly the tough fancied he saw, floating in the air all about him, weird specters, ghosts of the Cherokee Indians who used to gather there.” Martí’s transformation of this account raises multiple questions. Is it possible he mistranslated the Cherokee County location of the incident as the racial identity of the “old tough”? Perhaps, though it would be unusual in so gifted a translator. Moreover, it is almost inconceivable that Martí would miss the old tough’s apprehension of Indigenous ghosts, which are registered twice in the original passage. Why does he omit these specters and offer instead an anecdote that reads like a staple of nineteenth-century Anglo-American missionary literature: crude and cynical in its gloss of earthquake theodicy as supposedly interpreted by the Indigenous subjects of an attempted Christian conversion? Whatever else he

accomplishes in this mistranslation of the anecdote, Martí offers his readers a living, ongoing Cherokee man rather than an urbane joke about a settler superstition regarding formerly Indigenous land.

A year before the earthquake in Charleston, Martí had published “Los Indios en los Estados Unidos” in *La Nación*, where he wrote approvingly of the US reformers who had proposed to improve the lives of Indigenous people by forcing their adoption of private property and thereby breaking up collectively owned lands. Although Martí does not say so in the chronicle, this was a strategy of Native elimination that he had witnessed firsthand, and with approval, while living in Guatemala and touring coffee plantations.⁸⁶ From the vantage point of the Guatemalan plantation owner, the US reservation system represented a less effective Indian policy, a step behind a more efficient means of settler-controlled production, when compared with their own forced Indigenous labor system. Guatemala’s labor system also had the distinct settler advantage of rapidly producing and expanding the population of *ladinos*, Spanish-speaking people of Indigenous background but no longer categorized by the government (and often no longer self-categorizing) as *indios*: also a distinct strategy of Native elimination. By contrast, the US reservations left Indigenous people to be “grim, lazy, and sensual”: “to cut them down to the roots would be more reasonable than degrading them,” opined Martí for his Spanish-American readers.⁸⁷ Such readers included not only elite Guatemalans, of course, but also an Argentine reading public that had two years earlier seen the end of “La Conquista del Desierto,” a fifteen-year war of extermination and enslavement carried out against the Indigenous people of Patagonia.⁸⁸ Martí applauds US-Indian education in the chronicle, but he closes “Los Indios en los Estados Unidos” with a striking image of the individual squares of cleared farmland sold off to settlers: “the beautiful squares of green, cultivated with elegant care”—“they seem, opening themselves to the eyes of men worthy of contemplating them, to be massive green flowers.”⁸⁹ Six years later, in “Nuestra América,” Martí famously defended the disowned, Indigenous mother of “those born in [Spanish] America”—and cried out against “the American of the North, who chokes her Indians in blood, and goes from more to less.”⁹⁰ As his apprehension of US imperialism came into focus, so too did Martí’s vision of *mestizaje* as a modernizing—and peacefully Native-eliminating—project.

The invocation of the *indio cherokee* thus sounds a dissonant note in a chronicle on Charleston focused notably on Black religious imagination. It is jarringly out of place, a textual fragment that reads against the chronicle’s wider context. And yet Martí clearly understood the entanglement of Black and Indigenous histories throughout the Americas—precisely when he recognized, or refused to recognize, the possibility of a revolution for freedom undertaken not only against a shared imperial enemy but also against ongoing settler colonial states originating out of both Indigenous and African slavery. Indeed, Martí delegitimized this particular revolutionary possibility as a “race war” that had never and could never happen in

Cuba: unthinkable in the ontological sense famously described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot.⁹¹ “In Cuba, there is no fear of race war,” Martí insisted in his 1893 essay “Mi raza”: “In Cuba, there is never race war.”⁹² Such denials speak significantly to Martí’s central role in writing the ambivalent seismic Souths of the nineteenth-century Americas. For they shadow forth a version of the great revolutionary writer rooted less in the linguistic, cultural, and geographical idea of “Nuestra América” than in the disparate but shared histories of slavery and settler colonialism across the hemisphere. “Every enslaved man is so; it is not just the Indian,” he wrote in “Los Indios en los Estados Unidos,” regarding the debasing effects of colonialism.⁹³ Here, the language of slavery binds together rather than separates the different settler histories of slavery, dispossession, and elimination. Martí’s point is the possibility if not the inevitability of insurrection and war undertaken by those who have been enslaved, dispossessed, and otherwise eliminated: “he who is exterminated, exterminates” (“al que lo extermina, extermina”), as he puts it. “For this reason, are the revolutions that come after prolonged tyranny so cruel.”⁹⁴

The errant *indio cherokee* in Martí’s imagination of Black religious response to the earthquake thus gestures toward the linked histories of Black and Indigenous slavery and the ongoing systems of dispossession and elimination operating across the hemisphere, albeit in different and uneven ways. At the same time, Martí’s account of the earthquake in Charleston offers an uncanny and timeless reply to Crèvecoeur’s convulsive Farmer James regarding his eighteenth-century fictional sojourn in and around that same southern city. The earthquakes you fear *will* happen, Martí’s account says back: they will occur during the American Revolution and during the Civil War—just as they have been happening all along. You cannot cordon the hemisphere’s seismic Souths off from the North, nor can you simply go west and into the woods. For your presence itself is a centuries-long earthquake, and there can never be harmony until you remediate the violence of conquest throughout the hemisphere and indeed the global-colonial world.

Notes

1. William Lloyd Garrison, “Address to the Colonization Society,” July 4, 1829, in *Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison* (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1852), 49.
2. Cody Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.
3. For more on Herman Melville and Frederick Douglass together, see the essays collected in *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Robert Levine (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
4. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
5. Gates outlines the tradition of the “talking book” in African American literature in his chapter of the same name in *The Signifying Monkey*, 127–169.
6. On Garcilaso’s parody of the mystification of literacy, see Gonzalo Lamano, “Signifiyin(g), Double-Consciousness and Coloniality,” in *Inca Garcilaso and Contemporary World-Making*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and Christian Fernández (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press,

- 2016), 297–315. On the tradition of “el libro que habla” in Latin American literature more generally, see Jossianna Arroyo, “Transculturation, Syncretism, and Hybridity,” in *Critical Terms in Caribbean and Latin American Thought*, ed. Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel et al. (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 133–145.
7. Gates notes that Ottobah Cugoano, one of the earliest authors to use the trope, adapted it from a scene he found in El Inca Garcilaso’s *Comentarios Reales* (*The Signifying Monkey*, 149–152).
 8. Drawing on Paul Gilroy’s concept of the “Black Atlantic,” Jace Weaver theorized the “Red Atlantic” in his 2014 book as a concept that brings Indigenous people in the Americas to the forefront of Atlantic history and literature across the centuries, from 1000 through the early twentieth century (Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014]); Lamano, “Signifyin(g), Double-Consciousness and Coloniality,” 297–315.
 9. Gates offers preliminary background on Cugoano (*Signifying Monkey*, 146–147); see also Martha Frederiks, “Oludah Equiano’s Views of Europe and European Christianity,” *Exchange* 42, no. 2 (2013): 157–197. Garcilaso uses the figure of maternal milk for learning both the Quechua language and Inca culture in the *Comentarios*, ed. Miró Quesada, vol. 5, 115.
 10. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Stauffer and Gates (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016), 64 (hereafter cited as D).
 11. Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, 108.
 12. Ibid.
 13. See Maya Jasanoff, “On Steamboat Imperialism,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 10, 2013, www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/10/10/our-steamboat-imperialism.
 14. Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, 110.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Mather, “The Terror of the Lord,” 37.
 17. Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 164–165. See also Pratt’s illuminating discussion of messianic time in Douglass’s “The Heroic Slave,” 178–186.
 18. On this career-long interest, see most recently Timothy J. Golden, *Frederick Douglass and the Philosophy of Religion: An Interpretation of Narrative, Art, and the Political* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), esp. chapter 3, “Overcoming Theodicy: Narrative, Poetry, and the Phenomenology of Suffering,” 97–130.
 19. Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (La Salle, France: Open Court, 1985), 228.
 20. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, in *The Major Works*, 280.
 21. Pope, *Essay on Man*, 280.
 22. On the theological resonances of these passages in particular, see Reginald F. Davis, *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor of Liberation Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 27–29.
 23. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. John David Smith (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 68 (hereafter cited as B).
 24. Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom*, 57.
 25. Ibid., 96.
 26. Ibid., 97.
 27. Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. W. R. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Where poem numbers are referenced parenthetically, I have included “F” for Franklin.
 28. On the poem’s apocalyptic resonances, see Timothy Donahue, “The Apocalyptic Fury of the Civil War,” in *Apocalypse in American Literature and Culture*, ed. John Hay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 138–140.
 29. Edward Hitchcock, *Elementary Geology*, 25th ed. (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1855), 288.
 30. Hitchcock, *Elementary Geology*, 301.
 31. Quoted in *ibid.*, 302.
 32. Ibid., 298.
 33. Ibid., 340.
 34. Ibid., 370.
 35. Rebecca Patterson, *Emily Dickinson’s Imagery* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 143–148.
 36. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, vol. 1, 12th ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848), v, 16.
 37. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel*, 14, 12.

38. Melville, "Benito Cereno," 81.
39. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1841), 135.
40. *Ibid.*, 135.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, ed. Hamlin Hill (New York: Penguin Classics, 1981), 420 (hereafter cited as *R*).
44. "Great Earthquake in California; Two Tremendous Shocks within Half a Minute. All the Bells in San Francisco Set Ringing by the Motion. Trifling Injury to Property, and No Lives Lost," *The New York Times*, October 10, 1865, www.nytimes.com/1865/10/10/archives/great-earthquake-in-california-two-tremendous-shocks-within-half-a.html.
45. Twain, *Earthquake Almanac*, in *The Works of Mark Twain: Early Tales & Sketches*, Vol. 2: 1864–65, ed. Edgar Marques Branch and Robert H. Hirst (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 298.
46. Twain, *Earthquake Almanac*, 299.
47. Coen, *The Earthquake Observers*, 57.
48. *Ibid.*, 56.
49. As opposed to Virginia City, where Clemens first deployed his famous pseudonym; see Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 274.
50. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire*, 65.
51. Melville, *The Confidence-Man*, 4.
52. Twain, *Letters from the Earth: Uncensored Writings*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: Harper-Collins, 1962), 53.
53. Twain, *Letters from the Earth*, 54.
54. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
55. *Ibid.*, 55.
56. James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, in *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1892–93*, part 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896), 702.
57. See Louis S. Warren, *God's Red Son: The Ghost Dance Religion and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 271–294.
58. Warren, *God's Red Son*, 221.
59. Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 75.
60. Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*, 25–26.
61. *Ibid.*, 21.
62. *Ibid.*, 52.
63. Reed, *Flight to Canada*, 10.
64. Eugene Lawrence, "The Lands of the Earthquake." See [Chapter 1](#).
65. See [Chapter 2](#).
66. Susana Rotker, *The American Chronicles of José Martí: Journalism and Modernity in Spanish America*, trans. Jennifer French and Katherine Semler (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 60.
67. Quoted in Roberto Fernández Retamar, "Nuestra América": cien años y otros acercamientos a Martí (Havana, Cuba: Editorial SI-MAR, 1995), 148.
68. Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones, "Martí: La guerra desde las nubes," *Revista del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas* 9 (1997): 201–204, 223–224.
69. Díaz-Quiñones, "Martí: La guerra desde las nubes," 223; see Martí's chronicle of the same year, "Gran Fiesta Confederada."
70. Díaz-Quiñones, "Martí: La guerra desde las nubes," 202.
71. *Ibid.*
72. Antonio López, "Chronicling Empire: José Martí on the Avenue of the Americas," in *The Cuban Republic and José Martí: Reception and Use of a National Symbol*, ed. Mauricio A. Font and Alfonso W. Quiroz (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 132.
73. Martí, "El Terremoto de Charleston," in *Obras Completas*, vol. 11 (Havana, Cuba: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2011), 65 (hereafter cited as *T*).
74. Rotker, *The American Chronicles of José Martí*, 98.
75. Agustín de Vedia, *La Deportación a la Habana en la barca "Puig": Historia de un atentado célebre* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Especial Para Obras de Pablo E. Coni, 1865), 215, 222, 234.

76. On Mitre, see especially William H. Kattr, *The Argentine Generation of 1837: Echeverría, Alberdi, Sarmiento, Mitre* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 251. Kattr also notes that Vedia was part of the younger generation of journalists and writers who countered state censorship and “biased reporting” by trying to “educat[e] the people of the interior” regarding official corruption by offering in some cases their own personal histories (251).
77. Bartolomé Mitre, *Páginas de historia biblioteca de la nación* (Buenos Aires: La Nación, 1906), 3. See Seth Meisel’s “The Fruit of Freedom: Slaves and Citizens in Early Republic Argentina,” in *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives: Blacks in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Jane Landers and Barry M. Robinson (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 273–304. Tanya Katerí Hernández also discusses Argentina’s state policies as “the epitome of blanqueamiento” (*Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 20–27); see also Robert J. Cottrol, *The Long, Lingering Shadow: Slavery, Race, and Law in the American Hemisphere* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 113–142.
78. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Ambas Américas: revista de Educación, Bibliografía i Agricultura* (Alicante: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2010), 348. Julio Ramos offers an excellent discussion of Sarmiento’s response to the earthquake and compares it to Martí’s in Charleston (*Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. John D. Blanco [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001], 119–120). See also María Pilar Blanco on Martí’s rewriting of Sarmiento in *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
79. See Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*.
80. On Gadsden, see Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 135; on Rutledge, see David O. Stewart, *The Summer of 1787* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 194; on Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, see Jeffrey R. Young, *Pro-Slavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South* (Charleston, SC: University of Charleston Press, 2006), 239–249.
81. Quoted in *Lecturas Norteamericanas de José Martí: Emerson y el socialismo contemporáneo (1880–1887)*, ed. José Ballón (Mexico City: National Autonomous University of Mexico, 1995), 65.
82. See, for example, “A Stricken City. Charleston’s Woes—Another Visitation of Earthquake Last Night. The Panic Revived,” *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana), September 4, 1886.
83. Fernando Ortiz, *Hampa afro-cubana: Los negros esclavos, estudio sociológico y de derecho publico* (Revista Bimestre Cubana, 1916), 434.
84. See Sharla M. Fett’s chapter “Sacred Plants,” in *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
85. The original account, titled “Earthquake Echoes,” appears in a number of papers, including *The Wilmingtonian* (Wilmington, Del.), September 18, 1886, Image 4; *Helena Weekly Herald* (Helena, Mont.), September 30, 1886, Image 1; *Wheeling Register* (Wheeling, W. Va.), September 16, 1886, Image 2; *The Palatka Daily News* (Palatka, Fla.), October 9, 1886, Image 3; and *Burlington Weekly Free Press* (Burlington, Vt.), September 24, 1886, page 12, Image 12.
86. On Martí in Guatemala, see Robert L. Huish and W. George Lovell, “Under the Volcanoes: The Influence of Guatemala on José Martí,” *Cuban Studies* 39 (2008): 225–243.
87. Martí, “Los Indios en los Estados Unidos,” in *Obras completas*, vol. 10 (Havana, Cuba: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1963–1973), 324–325.
88. On the so-called Conquista del Desierto (1878–1885), see especially *The Conquest of the Desert: Argentina’s Indigenous Peoples and the Battle for History*, ed. Carolyn R. Larson (Santa Fe, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2020).
89. Martí, “Los Indios en los Estados Unidos,” 327.
90. Martí, “Nuestra América,” in *Obras Completas*, vol. 6 (Havana, Cuba: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1963–1973), 16.
91. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 2015 [1995]).
92. Martí, “Mi raza,” 298.
93. Martí, “Los Indios,” 324.
94. *Ibid.*, 323–324.

Epilogue

Orogeny: The ability to manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events.

N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, appendix 2

Twenty years after the Charleston earthquake, California experienced what remains one of the most significant seismic events of the modern era and the most fatal in the history of the United States: the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Like many earthquakes, this one precipitated another kind of disaster, some thirty devastating fires that broke out from ruptured gas mains and quickly spread across the city, devouring it in flames. In the all-too-rational calculus of disaster public relations, California's major developers pressured the state legislature to legally rename the event as the "San Francisco Fire"—and not because the fire, like the tsunami that followed the Lisbon earthquake, had caused the greater damage to property. Instead, the developers wanted to disassociate the possibility of the earthquake from the state's reputation by replacing the event of the seismic disaster with the ostensibly more predictable and manageable event of fire.¹ As Mike Davis has explained, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake threatened the expensive advertising campaign that was then rebranding southern California as a mediterranean paradise rather than a dangerous "subtropical" hellscape, as it had often been characterized by eastern US travelers.²

To call the disaster an earthquake was to risk southernizing northern California and thereby all the state, creating a conceptual torrid zone where climatological temperance was necessary to recruit new businesses and their building projects. Developers and speculators in both northern and southern California reaped the financial benefits of forgetting the earthquake by remembering the fire and of overwriting earlier disasters in the state through similar strategies. Soon California led the nation, becoming the model and exemplar for environmental catastrophe oblivion throughout the twentieth century. "Disaster amnesia," as Davis put it memorably, "is a federally subsidized luxury."³

In the current century, with near daily news of environmental catastrophe around the world, such amnesia seems less possible to manufacture. US writing now pronounces America not as exceptionally separate from the "lands of earthquake" but as itself a veritable "Quakeland," to borrow from the title of a book by journalist Kathryn Miles, a country waiting for "The Really Big One," as

per a popular *New Yorker* article by Kathryn Schulz.⁴ But the topos of elsewhere catastrophe is still very much with us; it still coexists happily with our understanding of contemporary environmental disasters, earthquake included. Thus, on the one hand, the *New York Times*, recognizing that “climate-related emergencies like hurricanes, fires and floods are becoming more frequent,” can refer readers to Wirecutter, its product recommendation service, for helpful advice on how to construct a superior (cheap emergency kits discouraged) catastrophe-preparedness supply—with individual guides for hurricane, wildfire, and earthquake.⁵ On the other hand, the Ecuadorian-American writer Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, author of *The Undocumented Americans*, implores readers of the *Times* not to believe that other kinds of catastrophe, traditionally associated with Latin America, are impossible in a land without such figurative earthquakes: “Even in the United States, political corruption, economic collapse and extrajudicial punishment can happen at any time,” she warns. Her subsequent psychological diagnosis neatly encapsulates a crucial dynamic of elsewhere catastrophe: “Maybe that’s an intolerable thought and painting immigrants as fundamentally different from us, bearers of an otherworldly suffering, allows us to pretend they are not like us and that their fate is not intertwined with our own.”⁶ These two approaches to our catastrophic era register very different relations to the future. One pronounces the imminence of climate disasters and the necessary individual planning for them; the other suggests that the truest preparation for the future lies in a society’s collective responsibility toward the catastrophe befalling others here and now.

This is not to say that an emergency bag is a bad idea. Octavia Butler modeled this exact preparation for her readers in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), a stunningly predictive speculative novel in which the immigrants seeking refuge from climate (along with the very elements Cornejo Villavicencio describes) are in fact US citizens headed for Canada.⁷ The disaster kit that Lauren Olamina assembles in Butler’s novel as she awaits imminent catastrophe is now part of living with the so-called new normal for readers of major US newspapers, which draw their advice from organizations such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the American Red Cross, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The exceptional prescience of Butler’s Lauren Olamina has now become the bland advice dispensed by the US government—a fact that calls to mind the warning of the contemporary French philosopher Jean Baudrillard that “any state capable of predicting and managing catastrophe would be so coercive as to make people prefer the catastrophe” itself.⁸

Precisely such state prediction and management of catastrophe are the subjects taken up by N. K. Jemisin, Butler’s speculative fiction heir, and the author of the *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017). The novels are set in a catastrophic future world in which the continual threat of earthquake has become central to everyday existence. Life is punctuated by intermittent periods known as “Fifth Seasons”—defined, according to the paratextual material in appendix 1,

as “extended winter,” “lasting at least six months” and usually many years. Such winters are more properly periods of “atmospheric occlusions”: “seasons” during which “the earth has broken somewhere and spewed ash or deadly gas into the sky, resulting in a lightless winter that lasted years or decades instead of months.”⁹ Because no one is secure in such climates, continual migration becomes a universal way of life. But there is nowhere permanent to go in this world of constant darkness and massive death. The plight of the refugee becomes the planetary human condition.

Yet one of the points that Jemisin’s trilogy makes repeatedly is that the “end of the world” is not a singular potentiality held by the future and shared universally—a hypothetical event we hold in common. In fact, apocalypse happens all the time: “Let’s start with the end of the world, why don’t we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things” (*BE* 1.1). So begins the prologue of the first volume. Initially unnamed, the omniscient narrator speaks both intimately and casually about the environmental and geological catastrophe that has destroyed most life on the planet. The question is both rhetorical—“why don’t we?”—and gently coercive: catastrophe is the necessary ground of a story that will not be belabored with narrative sympathy for the implied human reader who is living at “the end of the world.” Instead, the narrator parses over three volumes the different ways a world can shatter. The trilogy opens with “a personal ending”: a nameless woman, our protagonist, bent over the broken body of her son. She shrouds him with a blanket but does not cover his face because he has not grown past, and will now never grow past, his fear of the dark.

An incipient global catastrophe means nothing in this moment to the mother: “she will pay no attention to the world that is ending outside” precisely because the “world has already ended within her” (*BE* 1.1). Her child has been murdered, and this fact overshadows the outside world, beyond the body of her son, that is also ending. The separation between these two worlds marks the fundamental pivot of all history and of all morality in Jemisin’s trilogy, which is in part about how readers understand and negotiate the two. As the narrator asks later in the trilogy, “For how many centuries has the world killed rogga children so that everyone else’s children can sleep easy?” (*BE* 2.329). How this centuries-long murderous practice relates to the other “end of the world,” the geological and climatological one, is the story unfolded across the trilogy’s three volumes. For Jemisin, *rogga* is an epithet, a derogatory and wounding term whose homophonic relation to its counterpart in the linguistic history of US racial violence is unmistakable. Cradling her murdered child, the mother embodies two selves: one “bewildered, shocked,” the other “bitter, weary” because the killing has been happening all around her for as long as she can remember (*BE* 1.1).

But in fact this mother’s personal world-ending is deeply intertwined with the other imminent ending—one that will be geological, “writ continentally” (*BE* 1.1). This is the ending of the planet itself, set in a future time when the only known

terra firma has become “one vast, unbroken continent” made up of formerly separate lands (BE 1.2). Its dimensions appear on the map provided at the opening of each volume, and on them readers will recognize the vague contours of their own known world—the Arctics and Antarcotics, something of North America, South America, Africa, perhaps India, and part of Asia—now lost to the future. This future continent is “Ordinary, except for its size and its dynamism” (BE 1.2). It trembles with perpetual earthquakes, devastating enough to move seven former continents back into one Pangaea. Perhaps because the people of this world were once buoyed by the eternal optimism of elsewhere catastrophe, they began to call their continent The Stillness. The name denies the earthquakes the people were determined to forget. Now, in this distant future, forgetting is no longer possible because the threat of seismic catastrophe is perpetual: “It is a land of quiet and bitter irony” (BE 1.2).

If Plato’s *Republic* begins with the touch of a nameless slave, never heard from again, so too does Jemisin’s political meditation in the prologue. While the mother tends to her murdered child, an as yet unnamed character stands on a hilltop and reaches forth—vibrating with awareness of those he cannot see: his “fellow slaves.” Yet Jemisin’s nameless and enslaved man will not remain so for long. Unlike Socrates, her narrator eventually, and lovingly, discloses the enslaved man’s identity; her text teaches readers from the outset that “here is a man who will matter a great deal” (1.4). At the close of the prologue, this unnamed figure reaches forth not to hail a better life beyond but to destroy the world as he knows it. What he enacts is slave revolution in its most extreme form, an upheaval not only of the vast imperial power controlling all The Stillness but also of the very earth:

He reaches deep and takes hold of the humming tapping bustling reverberating rippling vastness of the city, and the quieter bedrock beneath it, and the roiling churn of heat and pressure beneath that ... tak[es] hold of the great sliding-puzzle piece of earthshell on which the continent sits ... the strata and the magma and the people and the power. He holds it. He is not alone. The earth is with him. Then he *breaks* it. (BE 1.7)

This inaugural catastrophe is geo-environmental—the broken earth yields a new Fifth Season—but it also constitutes a revolution against slavery. For, like the environment, the man’s body too has been shaped indelibly by the long history of enslavement, and he now uses it as a weapon, exercising “all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection” (BE 1.6).

What enables the man to destroy the world is a special form of aesthetic apprehension of earthquake, a sensory mode known as “orogeny” that can literally move the earth or stop its shaking. As defined in the trilogy, orogeny is an embodied form

of perception and focus, as well as a power and a practice, that comes to define an enslaved people whose sensory powers have been shaped over centuries of colonial dispossession and captivity. The concept allows Jemisin to reject the biologism at the heart of chattel slavery's racial logic while also exploring the embodied forms of experience and knowledge that attend the afterlife of slavery as well as the intertwinement of slavery's ongoingness with environmental devastation. The trilogy thereby develops a complex historicity for this future world: one that not only posits a relation between ecological catastrophe and the violent history of racial capitalism but also embodies a literal fusion of the two within the futuristic figure of the orogene. The seismic name evokes both ancestral origins and the origin of foundational and enduring crimes that remain hidden and unspoken; orogene is also The Stillness's pseudoscientific proxy term for the larger and unthinkable geo-racial truth that the trilogy explores. As our narrator explains, this truth lies "beneath the surface, a leviathan waiting to uncurl" (*BE* 2.8): a Melvillean philosophical whale that can rend the ideological surface on which The Stillness, like the reader's own world, has been built. As the trilogy unfolds, readers come to understand the brutal and subterranean processes of incarceration and extraction by which The Stillness remains, if not still, at least intact and unrent by earthquakes that swallow cities at will. In this future world, The Stillness survives through the extraction and redirection of the orogeny of the enslaved—through a state-managed process of incarcerating and then draining their bodies of life, first to provide the world's energy and then to keep the earth itself from imploding in seismic catastrophe.

Jemisin's trilogy thus literalizes in a particularly brutal way the central premise of the Anthropocene: that humans are now geological, geomorphic agents. Her orogenic characters obliterate the received boundary between human and natural history by enacting both at once in spectacular ways: exerting earth-shattering force with their very fingertips. But the trilogy does not merely dramatize the insights of contemporary climate scientists, historians, and geographers on a heightened, futuristic scale; the novels also stage a critical intervention into this scholarship. Collectively, the *Broken Earth* trilogy insists that the history and possible futures of planetary catastrophe must be addressed through the history of conquest if there is to be any human future—or, in Jemisin's characters' distinction, as the category of the human cannot be untethered from violence—any future for *people* at all. The novels thus imagine the double historicity of a future world: its relation to the climatological historical present, and the relation of this historical present to the long, ongoing global history of conquest, from early modern to contemporary forms of racial capitalism.

Assembling the future remains of ecological catastrophe, Jemisin develops in her unforgettable narrator a geo-historical self who can narrate the ancient earthquake history of a shattered world. The narrator's own story, when finally disclosed in the third novel of the trilogy, is not fully tellable in human language. His name is

Hua, and his story requires what he calls *earthtalk*, which he can describe but not fully translate into words. Unlike human language, which Hua understands and yet experiences as inadequate with its “thin vibrations that only ripple the air and barely stir the ground,” earthtalk consists of attunement to and manipulation of the deepest vibrations of the earth (*BE* 3.43–44). It is a language formed of its own aesthetic capacities: a single “name-word” in spoken language reduces the irreducible “*deep stab, breach of clay sweetburst, soft silicate underlayer, reverberation*” (*BE* 3.44). Earthtalk is also the secret language of an Indigenous people known as the Niess—not their real name, as Hua explains, but the one that was easiest to pronounce by the conquerors who enslaved them, took their land, and renamed it Syl Anagist.

The land’s new name summons classical language and logic, a formation out of Greek and Latin roots: Syl (Together) Anagist (Return to the Most Essential Idea). But the conquerors’ foundational principle—that “life is sacred”—is a distinctly modern truism born of their central extractivist project. Life is sacred in Syl Anagist precisely because extracting from the living bodies of the Niess enables the overvaluation and prolonged maintenance of other lives. *All* lives matter, to the Syl Anagist, because the least valued lives provide the energy upon which the most valued lives depend for comfort and for avoidance of drudgery: in order to shape “life itself to fit their whims” (*BE* 3.3). But this rhetorical ruse of a future modernity, Jemisin suggests, has ancient Western origins: for the story of Syl Anagist retells the Platonic myth of the metals, the original noble lie of classical politics. In Jemisin’s future world, the myth of the metals has become—across a geological *longue durée* of Western thought and extractivist practice—both a reality and the central myth supporting continued conquest and enslavement.

As the citizens of Syl Anagist reinvent themselves as original to the land, they attempt to eliminate the indigeneity of the Niess by creating a new origin story that is also a radical bioengineering project transforming the conquered into people-of-ore: “tuners,” as they are called, whose enslaved labor sustains the society in its larger project of extracting energy from the earth. Tuners are literal “earth beings,” kept underground where they attune themselves to seismic movement and facilitate the extraction of energy until they are sent to a mysterious “briar patch,” where their bodies join a thicket of energy sinklines designed to sustain the world’s power systems (*BE* 3.262). Jemisin’s future world thus elaborates the concept of the Plantationocene, apprehending the contemporary era of ecological catastrophe in its historical relation to the “politico-economic invention” inaugurating a cruel and colonial modernity: the plantation.¹⁰

This plantation was theorized into existence, as the narrator explains: it is the culmination of many “disciplines for which the future will have no name” (*BE* 3.50). Moreover, if much of modern Western thought is in large part defined by the theoretical separation of human and natural evil, Jemisin’s trilogy develops a consciousness for the future—an earthquake philosophy—that reconnects the two.

"When a comm[unity] builds atop a fault line, do you blame its walls when they inevitably crush the people inside? No; you blame whoever was stupid enough to think they could define the laws of nature forever" (*BE* 3.7). Rousseau made a similar remark after the Lisbon earthquake, though he was defending God by condemning Portuguese architects for building too high. But Jemisin insists that we restore the philosophical question of evil that Rousseau was trying to sidestep. "[S]ome worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares," her narrator warns. "Don't lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place" (*BE* 3.7). And when the inhabitants of *The Stillness* cry out "oh evil earth!" after an earthquake, the trilogy bears out not their futuristic primitivism but the truth of their lament. The earth *intends* to do damage when it shakes the human world into catastrophe. And it does so, Jemisin's work suggests, as a direct result of a centuries-long extractive history that intertwines human catastrophe—genocide and slavery—with catastrophic damage to the earth.

If certain modern forms of rationality have sought to teach conquest's beneficiaries how to find themselves—however humbly and knowledgeably—"at home in the world," Jemisin's trilogy asks readers whose claims on the world as home have been violently rent and displaced to make this philosophical project possible in the first place. At the same time, the trilogy confronts how to live not at home but *unhomed* in the world. Unhomed not merely because of the broken earth's continuously rending surface, but because home cannot retain its precise meaning, its implied enclosure of a particular surface, in a world of non-human beings that includes a raging earth. By the end of the trilogy a literal earthquake-revolution emerges as the origin of a distant planetary future. The world knows it as the Shattering, a dual event that is both a slave revolution and a total war undertaken by the earth itself. Revolution and earthquake meet in the force of orogeny, which—perhaps in a distant echo of the Andean concept of *pachacuti*—is a form of apprehension with political grounding in the earth itself.

As the narrator slowly discloses how both the dispossessed and the earth have come to speak through the event of seismic catastrophe, the *Broken Earth* trilogy dramatizes the conundrum at the center this book: how and why earthquake and the long and ongoing catastrophe of conquest in the Americas have so often been intertwined in philosophical inquiry and literary imagination. If a history of catastrophe requires a literature of catastrophe, a dictum issued from the Caribbean, a history of refusing to acknowledge catastrophe requires its own literary reckoning—one that I have tried to assemble across these chapters by following the figure of earthquake, and the logic of elsewhere catastrophe, across the deep timeframes and disparate geographies of American literature. Earthquake has been central to the invention of America, as I have argued here, because it often marks a profound moment of undeception by rupturing the smooth surface of quotidian experience for those whose lives are lived out in apparent immunity to disaster.

Notes

1. On “The Conversion of the ‘Great Earthquake’ into the ‘Great Fire,’” see Susanne Leikam, *Framing Spaces in Motion: Tracing Visualizations of Earthquakes into Twentieth-Century San Francisco* (Heidelberg: University of Heidelberg, 2015), 234.
2. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 11.
3. *Ibid.*, 47.
4. Kathryn Miles, *Quakeland: On the Road to America’s Next Devastating Earthquake* (New York: Penguin, 2017); Kathryn Schulz, “The Really Big One,” *The New Yorker* (July 20, 2015). On the “lands of earthquake,” see [Chapter 1](#).
5. Tara Parker-Pope, “Is Your ‘Go Bag’ Ready?” *New York Times* (September 2, 2021); The Wirecutter Staff, “The Best Emergency Preparedness Supplies,” *New York Times* (August 31, 2021).
6. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, “Immigrants Keep Loving America, Even When America Doesn’t Love Them Back,” *New York Times* (May 15, 2023).
7. Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2019).
8. Cited in Coen, *The Earthquake Observers*, 12. I have been unable to locate the original Baudrillard text—“Paroxysm: The Seismic Order”—in print or online.
9. N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, in *Broken Earth Trilogy*, 3 vols. (New York: Hachette, 2015), 94 (hereafter cited by volume and page number as BE).
10. Sidney Mintz, “Caribbean Society,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 311, 306–319. On “cruel” and “colonial” modernity, respectively, see María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “Cruel Coloniality; or, the Ruse of Sovereignty,” *PMLA* 131, no. 3 (2016): 722–730; and Jean Franco, *Cruel Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

Index

For the benefit of digital users, indexed terms that span two pages (e.g., 52–53) may, on occasion, appear on only one of those pages.

A

Acosta, José 9–10, 106–111, 114, 167, 276–277
Adams, John 185
Adeimantus 48
Adorno, Rolena 105–106
African slavery. *see* slavery
Almagro, Diego de 121
Alvarez, David 129–130
Anderson, Douglas 222
Andrews, William 169
Angelo, Michel 40
Anne, Queen of Great Britain 154
Anzaldúa, Gloria 105–106
Aravamudan, Srinivas 223
Arendt, Hannah 30–31
Aristotle 8–9, 46, 180, 275–277, 288
Atahualpa, Juan Santos 131–132
atheism 261, 291–292, 303–304
Augustine of Hippo, St 68–69

B

Baartman, Saartjie 8
Bacon, Francis 57, 187, 240–244, 246, 288
Basil, St 107
Baudrillard, Jean 31, 337–338
Bauer, Ralph 12, 106–107, 144, 187–188, 246
Bayle, Pierre 68–69
Benjamin, Walter 14, 30–31
Bercovitch, Sacvan 33
Berlant, Lauren 74
Betancor, Orlando 106–107, 109–111
Bible. *see* Christianity
Blackhawk, Ned 317
Blum, Hester 282–283
Bodin, Jean 121–122, 126
Bolaño, Roberto 102–103
Bolingbroke, Henry St John, 1st Viscount 68–69
Bozeman, Theodore Dwight 241–242
Bradford, William 18, 141, 145–148
Brathwaite, Kamau 181–182
Brecht, Bertolt 35
Brickhouse, Anna 15

Brooks, Joanna 172–173
Brooks, Lisa 144
Burke, Edmund 18–19, 69–70, 181–182, 184–185, 201, 262–263
Butler, Octavia 337–338
Byrd, Jodi 13–14, 317, 319–320

C

Cadava, Eduardo 206–207
Caesar 196–197
Calhoun, John C. 325
Cañizares-Esguerra, Jorge 9–10
cannibalism
 colonial topos of 118–119, 231–233
 colonialism-as-cannibalism 234–235
 economic exploitation and extraction, and 5–6
 Indigenous peoples, and 78
 starvation/survival cannibalism 232–233
 Voltaire's *Candide*, and 86
Casas, Bartolomé de las 77–78, 107–108
Castronovo, Russ 284–286
Césaire, Aimé 35
Chakrabarty, Dipesh 31–32
Charlevoix, Pierre François Xavier de 82–83
Chauncy, Charles 260
Chile
 Pinochet dictatorship, Indigenous peoples and 102–103
 Santiago earthquake of 1647 132
Christianity
 apocalyptic tradition 6–7, 30–31
 atheism and 261, 291–292, 303–304
 capitalism and 247
 earthquake history of Europe, and 6–7
 earthquakes as Judgment of God 168–169
 earthquakes as Voice of God 129
 economic exploitation and extraction, and 143–144, 166
 Guaraní War (Paraguay) 1755, and 79–87
 Just War concept, and 18, 156–158
 Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 69
 modernity and 30–31

- New England earthquake of 1638, and 145–153
- New England earthquake of 1727, and 212–217
- pachacuti*, and 106, 108–113
- Puritan Biblical seismic imagery 141–142, 144–145
- Salem witch trials 18, 143, 159–161, 298–299
- “Settler Enlightenment”, and 167–175
- theodicy and 74–87
- Cicero 68–69, 117–118, 196–197
- Clarke, Samuel 68–69
- classical Greece and Rome 145–153
- Atlantis earthquake (legendary) 157
- elsewhere catastrophe, and 16–17
- Global South, and 16
- Plato’s earthquake philosophy 46–58, 68
- Pompeii (ancient Rome) 68 CE 146
- Roman physical science 9
- Sparta earthquake of 464 BCE 48
- Stoic earthquake philosophy 9, 46–58, 141, 145–148, 153
- West as non-South 16–17
- climate change, seismicity and 7–8
- Cobo, Bernabé 111–112
- Coen, Deborah R. 37–41, 63–64, 314
- Columbus, Christopher
- colonial topos of Indigenous peoples, and 78
- discovery of Americas 16–17, 234–235, 248
- European earthquake discourse, and 108
- Henry VII’s non-sponsorship of 95–96
- Portuguese enslavement of Africans, and 187
- post-Columbus world, Herman Melville’s response to 291–292
- quincentenary 1
- slavery amnesia, and 35–36
- La Navidad colony, and 15–16, 29–30, 230, 240, 253–254, 262–264, 295
- Voltaire’s *Candide*, and 80–81, 88
- Cook, Harold 10
- Cook, James 264–265, 273–274, 319–320
- Cooper, James Fenimore 19–20, 239–255, 258, 317, 319
- Cotesworth, Charles 325
- Cotton, John 154, 158, 161–167, 169
- Covid-19 Pandemic, geological movements and 6
- Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John de
- British vs. colonial American allegiances 182–183
- Indigenous dispossession, and 204–209
- Letters from an American Farmer*, settler colonialism and 197–204, 231–232, 288–289, 331–332
- Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 18–19, 180
- “new sort of happiness”, on 18–20, 175, 222, 287–288
- “Rock of Lisbon”, American Beauty and 183–190
- Torrid Zone conceptualization, and 190–197, 258
- unsettlement, and 209–219
- US national identity, on 15, 18–20, 180, 182–183, 224–225, 295
- Critias 51–58
- Cromwell, Oliver 7–8, 154
- Crousaz, Jean-Pierre de 68–69
- Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah 296–297
- Cusi Yupanqui 111
- Cusicanqui, Silvia Rivera 5, 112–113, 133
- Cuvier, Georges 7–8, 12–13, 244
- D**
- Danforth, Samuel 170
- Dante 37–38, 40, 180
- Danticat, Edwidge 2–3, 14–15
- Darwin, Charles 275
- Davis, Mike 21, 336
- Defoe, Daniel 123–130, 240–241, 245, 247, 283
- Delano, Amasa 287
- Deleuze, Gilles 63–64
- Descartes, René 9–10
- Díaz, Junot 80
- Díaz-Quinones, Arcadio 322
- Dickens, Charles 38–39
- Dickinson, Emily 20–21, 295–296, 307–313
- Diodorus Siculus 48
- Diogenes 288
- disaster capitalism
- economic exploitation and extraction, and 88–97
- elsewhere catastrophe, and 1
- Lima-Callao (Peru) earthquake of 1746, and 88–97
- neoliberalism and 13–14, 31–32, 325
- racial capitalism, and 17, 21–22, 64–65, 85, 325
- dispossession
- African slavery and 211–212, 230, 289
- “Americanity” and 80–81
- amnesia as to 35–36
- defence of 109
- divine punishment, as 114–115
- earthquake amnesia, and 19–22, 240, 253–254
- earthquakes as voice of dispossessed 342
- earthquake stories, and 15–16
- economic exploitation and extraction, and 96
- elsewhere catastrophe, and 29, 35–36

dispossession (*Continued*)

geology and 8

Indigenous peoples, of 13–14

Indigenous peoples' resistance to 82

Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 64

literary and philosophical justifications for 16–17

modernity and 1

predatory optimism, and 68

settler colonialism, and 150, 202–209, 212, 214–217

slavery and 14, 20–21, 211–212, 299, 331–332

undecision and 262–266, 273–274, 284, 289, 291–292

d'Olivet, Pierre-Joseph Thoulrier 68–69

Donegan, Kathleen 32

Douglass, Frederick 20–21, 295–307, 313

Downing, Emmanuel 156

Drake, Francis 123–124

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne 35

Dussel, Enrique 1, 14–15, 105–106

Dutch East Indies. *see* [Indonesia](#)

E

earthquake amnesia

dispossession and 19–22, 240, 253–254

economic exploitation and extraction, and 14, 235–236, 239, 247

Edgar Allan Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and 228–239

environmental catastrophe amnesia, and C 336

governmental economic expedient, as 336

James Fenimore Cooper's *The Crater*, and 239–255

national trope of 319

settler colonialism and 17

slavery and 17

violence and 17

earthquake events

Atlantis (legendary) 157

Cape Anne (Massachusetts) 1755 141, 174

Charleston (South Carolina, US) 1886 321–332

Cumaná (Venezuela) 1766 4–5

Cumaná (Venezuela) 1799 4–5

Ecuador 1868 132

Haiti 2010 2–3

Ipswich (Massachusetts) 1684 132

Lima (Peru) 1586 108

Lima-Callao (Peru) 1746 17, 64–65, 88–97, 131–132, 180–181

Lisbon (Portugal) 1755 3, 16–20, 58, 63–69, 71–75, 79–88, 96–97, 130, 141, 159–160, 175, 260

Massachusetts Bay Colony and Plymouth Plantation 1638 141, 145–153, 212–217

Monticello (Virginia) 1774 224–226

Montserrat 1762 222–223

New Madrid (Missouri, US) 1811–1812 19–20, 40–42

Neyra (Banda Islands) (Indonesia/Dutch East Indies) 1616 10–11

Peru 1868 321

Pompeii (ancient Rome) 68 CE 146

Port Royal (Jamaica) 1692 18, 141, 157–158, 160–162, 164, 173–174, 181, 194, 197

Riobamba (Ecuador) 1797 132

San Francisco (US) 1865 20–21

San Francisco (US) 1906 21

Santiago (Chile) 1647 132

Sparta (ancient Greece) 464 BCE 48

Wenham (Massachusetts) 1684 132

earthquake science

historical development of catastrophe-centric 8–14

optimism 12–13

Scientific Revolution 10–13

traditional knowledge, and 5–7

ecological catastrophe, and racial capitalism 340

Ecuador

earthquake of 1868 132

Riobamba earthquake of 1797 132

Ehrenreich, Barbara 13

El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. *see* [Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca](#)

Eliot, John 142, 144

elsewhere catastrophe

alternative futures, and 1

catastrophic thinking 30–37

disaster capitalism, and 1

early European imperialism in the South, and 16–17

economic exploitation and extraction, and 39–40, 45, 57–58

Edgar Allan Poe, and 27–30

history of 1

invention of America 1–3, 15–16, 27, 342

national trope of 336–337

racial capitalism, and 1

settler colonialism, and 1

slavery, and 1

Emerson, Ralph Waldo 264–265

Enlightenment

economic exploitation and extraction, and 65–74

“extractive Enlightenment” 65–74
 Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 18–19
 new scientific understanding of earthquakes 142–144
 origins of classic Enlightenment novel, Indigenous writings and 123–130
 “Plantation Enlightenment” 11
 predatory optimism, and 63, 96–97
 settler colonialism, and 18
 “Settler Enlightenment” 167–175
 Epicurus 68–69
 Equiano, Olaudah 19–20, 222–225
 Erasmus 68–69
 Europe
 catastrophic thinking 33–34
 contrast of American and European beauty and sublimity 183–190
 distinctiveness of US national identity 15
 earthquake history of American Continent, and 6–7
 elsewhere catastrophe, and 16
 Enlightenment and. *see* Enlightenment
 historical development of catastrophe-centric earthquake science 8–14
 history of conquest 3–5
 Scientific Revolution 10–13
 US as “image and likeness of” 1
 “extractive Enlightenment”. *see* Enlightenment

F

Fabian, Johannes 287
 Falwell, Jerry 33
 Faulkner, William 36–37
 Fernández-Palacios, Christian 113–114
 Ferrara, Alfonso II d’Este, Duke of 108–109
 finance capitalism, colonialism and 199–200
 Finseth, Ian Frederick 210–211
 Fosbury, Timothy 195
 Franklin, Benjamin 145, 173–174, 219, 262–263
 Frederick II (The Great), King of Prussia 65
 Frézier, Amédée François 88–90, 96
 Furetière, Antoine 69–70

G

Gadsden, James 325
 Gage, Thomas 95
 Galindo, Alberto Flores 132
 Ganson, Barbara 82
 Garcia, Edgar 7
 García Márquez, Gabriel 36–37, 123–124
 Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca
 Cotton Mather, and 165
 Daniel Defoe, and 123–130, 245, 283

Edgar Allan Poe’s *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and 238
 Frederick Douglass, and 296–297
 Herman Melville, and 259–261, 266–270, 276–277, 283
 Inca ancestry 103–104
 “Inca Enlightenment”, and 117–123
 influence on European writers 103–104, 123–130, 227, 245
 Mark Twain, and 316
 naming of Peru, on 236
 Peruvian invention of guano fertilizer, on 247, 254
 settler colonialism, on 192
 Torrid Zone conceptualization, and 113–117, 278–279
 undeception, on 103–104
 unsettlement of Spanish America, and 130–133
 whaling, on 259
 Garrison, William Lloyd 295
 Garrouette, Eva Marie 5–6
 Gates Jr., Henry Louis 296–297
 “geniality”
 of capitalism 247
 Torrid Zone, of 258–259
 geology
 catastrophism 7, 12–13
 economic exploitation and extraction, and 8
 geological movements, Covid-19 Pandemic and 6
 seismicity, and climate change 7–8
 uniformitarianism 7, 12–13
 George III, King of Great Britain and Ireland 214–215
 Ghosh, Amitav 7
 Glaucon 46, 48
 Gleason, William 290
 Glissant, Édouard 2–3, 21–22, 43–45, 58, 64
 Global North
 earthquake amnesia. *see* earthquake amnesia
 enrichment by exploitation of South 65–74, 78–81, 87–88, 92, 95–97, 121–122, 180, 259, 321
 “extractive Enlightenment” 65–74
 global-colonial modernity 20
 importation of workers from Global South 13
 non-South, as 16–17
 “Trembling World” concept, and 43–45
 Global South
 classical Greece and Rome, and 16
 early European imperialism in 16–17

Global South (*Continued*)

- economic exploitation of, "extractive Enlightenment" and 65–74
- Edgar Allan Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and 228–239
- elsewhere catastrophe, and 16
- exportation of workers to Global North 13
- "geniality" of Torrid Zone 258–259
- "global-colonial" modernity 20
- "Inca Enlightenment" 113–117
- Northern enrichment by exploitation of 13, 65–74, 78–81, 87–88, 92, 95–97, 121–122, 180, 259, 321
- seismic South 18, 20–21
- southernization of disaster 16, 19–21, 239, 270–271, 308–309
- "Trembling World" concept, and 43–45
- gold, exploitative extraction of 199–200
- Gramuglio, María Teresa 277
- Greece, ancient. *see* classical Greece and Rome
- Greeson, Jennifer 11, 209, 212–213, 227
- Grotius, Hugo 156–158
- Gruesz, Kirsten Silva 154, 160
- Guaman Poma de Ayala, Felipe 17–18, 103–117, 133, 192
- guano fertilizer, Peruvian conception of 247, 254
- Guaraní War (Paraguay) 1755 16–17
- Guicciardini, Francesco 121
- Guillaume, Michel 182–183
- Gutiérrez Aguilar, Raquel 133

H

- Hahn, Steven 228, 306–307
- Haitian Revolution, and Romanticism's crisis of faith 4
- Haiti earthquake of 2010 2–3
- Hakluyt, Richard 158–159
- Hall, David D. 142
- Hamilton, Roland 106
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel 150, 228, 271–272, 284
- Hay, John 33
- Heath, Emanuel 194
- Henry VII, King of England 95
- Herschel, John 242–243
- Herzog, Tamar 120–121
- Hickman, Jared 277–278, 285–286
- Hitchcock, Edward 308–309, 312
- Hobbes, Thomas 44, 69–70
- Holguín, Diego González 111
- Homer 40, 68–69
- Hones, Sheila 37
- Hooke, Robert 12, 158–159
- Horne, Gerald 13–14, 182–183
- Huayna Capac 114–115

- Huet, Marie-Hélène 30–31, 33–34
- human biology
 - anatomy. *see* anatomy (human)
 - optimism and 12–13
- "humanitarianism" of capitalism 247
- Humboldt, Alexander von
 - Cumaná earthquake of 1766 4–5
 - earthquake science, and 38, 242–243, 253, 315
 - exploratory voyages of 275
 - guano fertilizer, on 247
 - Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 3–4
 - undeception, on 4–5, 20, 267–268
- Hume, David 288
- Hutchinson, Anne 145, 150–153
- Hutchins, Zach 204

I

- Iannini, Christopher 194–195, 212–213
 - imperialism. *see also* settler colonialism; slavery
 - "alchemy of conquest" 12–13
 - catastrophe of conquest 4
 - early imperialism in the South 16–17
 - earthquake stories, and 15–16
 - Herman Melville's later writings as
 - commentary on seismic global-colonial world 287–292
 - Herman Melville's *Mardi* as commentary on seismic global-colonial world 261–267
 - Herman Melville's *The Piazza Tales* as
 - commentary on cruel coloniality of theodicy 271–287
 - history of conquest 3–5
 - human anatomy, and 8
 - human-animal hierarchy of coloniality 234
 - Just War concept, and 18, 156–158, 250–251
 - modernity and 17
 - theodicy and 74–79
 - undeception and 4
 - violence and 4
 - West as non-East and non-South 16–17
 - "Inca Enlightenment" 117–123
 - Indonesia, Neyra (Banda Islands) earthquake of 1616 10–11
 - invention of America 1–3, 15–16, 27, 64–65, 79–87, 342
 - Italy, Ferrara earthquakes of 1570 108–109
- J**
- Jamaica, Port Royal earthquake of 1692 18, 141, 157–158, 160–162, 164, 173–174, 181, 194, 197
 - James, Henry 15, 208
 - James, Jennifer 247
 - Jefferson, Thomas 205, 225–226

Jemisin, N. K. 57–58, 338–342
 João V, King of Portugal 84
 Johnson, Edward 149–152
 Johnson, Henry 92–96
 Johnson, Samuel 287–288
 Jonik, Michael 165–166
 Just War concept 18, 156–158, 250–251

K

Kant, Immanuel 65–69
 Kaplan, Amy 319–320
 Karcher, Carolyn 291–292
 Kelly, Wyn 267–268
 Kendrick, T. D. 63–64, 85
 Kennan, George F. 33–34
 Keynes, John 121–122
 King, Tiffany Lethabo 35–36, 187
 Klein, Naomi 13–14, 31–32, 325
 Kolbert, Elizabeth 7–8

L

Lamana, Gonzalo 296–297
 Larsen, Svend Erik 65–66
 Lautau (Felipe) 116
 Lawrence, D. H. 227
 Lawrence, Eugene 37–43
 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 17, 64, 74–79, 277
 León, Pedro Cieza de 119
 Lepidus 121
 Locke, John 103–104, 117–119, 126, 224, 269
 López, Antonio 322–323
 Louis XIV, King of France 76
 Lowe, Lisa 224
 Luciano, Dana 226–227
 Lucretius 68–69
 Luque, Hernando de 121
 Lyell, Charles 7, 12–13, 244

M

MacCormack, Sabine 112–113
 Machiavelli, Niccolò 121, 126
 Mackenthun, Gesa 249–250
 Malagrida, Gabriel 83–86
 Maluenda, Amalia 102–103, 132
 Maravall, José Antonio 4
 Marc Antony 121
 Marrs, Cody 295–296
 Martí, José 20–21, 295–296, 321–332
 Mather, Cotton
 Christianization of Americas, on 154
 earthquakes as Judgment of God 168–170, 172–173, 223
 earthquakes as Voice of God 129
 earthquake science, and 9–10

Frederick Douglass, and 298–300, 303–304
 Hugo Grotius, and 156–157
 Port Royal earthquake of 1692, and 157–161
 Salem witch trials, and 157–161, 228–229
 Mather, Increase
 earthquake history, and 153–160
 earthquakes as Judgment of God 168, 170–174
 seismic activity and US Civil War, on 20–21
 Mather, Richard 154
 Mazzotti, José Antonio 97, 113–114
 McGann, Jerome 164–165
 Melville, Herman
 catastrophe theorist, as 261
 “earthquake life”, on 162
 earthquakes/whaling/mining association, and 259–261
 Frederick Douglass and 296
 “geniality” of Torrid Zone, on 258–259
 Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, and 207
 James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Crater*, and 250–251, 258
 John Lloyd Stephens and 311
 Mardi as commentary on seismic global-colonial world 261–267
 “metaphysics of Indian hating”, on 317
 “misery’s mathematics”, on 75
 Moby-Dick as commentary on earthquake foundations of modern western philosophy 267–271, 340
 The Piazza Tales as commentary on cruel coloniality of theodicy 271–287
 Miles, Kathryn 336
 Milton, John 37–38, 224
 mining
 associations with earthquakes and whaling 259–261
 earthquake/extractive geography relationship 143–144
 economic exploitation and extraction, and 9–10
 gold, of 199–200
 Mitre, Bartolomé 324–325
 modernity
 catastrophe and 13–14
 catastrophic thinking, and 30–31
 Christianity and 30–31
 colonialism and 4
 colonial modernity 29–30
 dispossession and 1
 earthquakes’ undermining of “modernity myth” 2
 history of 14–15

modernity (*Continued*)

- imperialism and 17
- invention of America, and 14–15
- modernity myths 3
- philosophical modernity 17–18
- settler colonialism, and 14
- US as “modernity’s culmination” (modernity myth) 1

Mogrovejo, Toribio de 97

Montalvo, Francisco Antonio 97

Montserrat, earthquake of 1762 219

Moore, Dennis 183

More, Thomas 57, 117–118, 243–244, 247

Morrison, Toni 39–40, 230–231

Morton, Charles 142–144

Myers, James P. 182–183

N

Nadler, Steven 76

Neiman, Susan 63–64, 209–210

neoliberalism, disaster capitalism and 13–14, 31–32, 325

Netherlands, Dutch East Indies. *see* Indonesia

Newton, Isaac 65, 241–242

Nixon, Rob 4

Norton, Mary Beth 161

O

Octavian 121

O’Gorman, Edmundo 1

Olamina, Lauren 337–338

optimism. *see* predatory optimism

Orange, Tommy 34–35

“orogeny” of dispossession and of slavery 340

Ovid 196–197

P

Paquiquineo (Don Luis) 15

Paraguay, Guaraní War 1755 16–17, 64–65, 79–87

Pascal, Blaise 68–69

Passannante, Gerard 66

Pérez, Emma 105–106

Peru

colonial topos of cannibalism, and 118

earthquake of 1868 42–43, 321

economic exploitation and extraction from 260–261

guano fertilizer, invention of 247, 254

“Inca Enlightenment” 117–123

Lima-Callao earthquake of 1746 17, 42, 64–65, 88–97, 131–132, 180–181

Lima earthquake of 1586 108

naming of 236

Spanish subjugation of 106–107

Philip II, King of Spain 104, 275–276

philosophical modernity 17–18

Phipps, William 160

Pinochet, Augusto 102–103

piracy, as economic exploitation and extraction 193–194

Pius V, Pope 108–109

Pizarro, Francisco 121

Plato 16, 46–58, 65, 68–69, 157, 229, 243–244, 288, 295, 339

Pliny the Elder 157

Plutarch 48, 205

Poe, Edgar Allan

earthquake amnesia, and 227–240, 253

elsewhere catastrophe, and 27–30, 32, 37, 58

Mark Twain, and 320

southernization of catastrophe, on 19–20

undeception, on 262

Pombal, Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, 1st Marquis of 84–86, 91–92, 192

Pope, Alexander 17, 68–71, 73–74

Portugal

economic exploitation and extraction by 96

enslavement of Africans 16–17

history of conquest 3

Lisbon earthquake of 1755 3, 16–20, 58, 63–69, 71–75, 79–88, 96–97, 130, 141, 159–160, 260

Pratt, Mary Louise 105–106, 185, 299–300

predatory optimism

Christianity and 97

economic exploitation and extraction, and 80–83

Enlightenment and 63, 96–97

Guaraní War (Paraguay) 1755 64–65, 79–87

Indigenous peoples, and 96

invention of America, and 64–65, 79–87

Lima-Callao (Peru) earthquake of 1746, and 64–65, 88–97

Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 63–69, 71–75, 79–88, 96–97

Northern enrichment by exploitation of South 13, 65–74, 78–81, 87–88, 92, 95–97, 121–122, 180, 259, 321

settler colonialism, and 18–19

theodicy and 74–79

US and 18–20

Voltaire’s *Candide*, and 79–87

Prince, Thomas 174–175

Puritanism. *see* Christianity

Q

Quijano, Anibal 17, 80–81, 105–106
 Quintus Curtius Rufus 89

R

racial capitalism
 affect of 287–288
 catastrophe of 229
 conquest and 341
 disaster capitalism, and 17, 21–22, 64–65, 85
 ecological catastrophe, and 340
 economic exploitation and extraction, and 80–81, 88–97, 191, 283
 elsewhere catastrophe, and 1
 slavery and 287
 undeception and 283–288, 290
 US as product of 290
 violence and 340
 white supremacy, and 247
 Raleigh, Walter 290–291
 Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino) 40
 Raynal, Abbé [Guillaume Thomas François] 212–214, 218–219
 Reed, Ishmael 228, 320
 Reynolds, David 33–34
 Reynolds, Jeremiah 265
 Reynst, Gerard 10–11
 Rivett, Sarah 144
 Robertson, Pat 2
 Rome. *see* classical Greece and Rome
 Rotker, Susana 321–323
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 17, 71–74, 97, 288, 342
 Rozario, Kevin 33
 Rutledge, John 325

S

Salem witch trials 18, 143, 159–161, 298–299
 Sallust 196–197
 Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino 325
 Sarreal, Julia 82
 Schönfeld, Martin 65–66
 Schulz, Kathryn 336–337
 Scott, David 261
 Scott, Thomas 260
 seismicity. *see* geology
 Selkirk, Alexander 290–291
 Seneca 9, 141, 145–148, 153
 Sepkoski, David 7
 settler colonialism. *see also* dispossession;
 slavery
 American literary history, and 18–19
 catastrophe and 14
 colonial/Indigenous relationship, exploitation
 and 5–6

colonial modernity 29–30
 colonial topos of cannibalism 118–119,
 231–233
 dispossession and. *see* dispossession
 earthquake amnesia, and. *see* earthquake
 amnesia
 earthquake science, and 9–10
 economic exploitation and extraction, and
 190, 194, 199
 elsewhere catastrophe, and 16
 Enlightenment and 18–19
 extractive Enlightenment and 65–74
 Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American
 Farmer*, and 190–197, 231–232, 288–289,
 331–332
 Herman Melville's later writings as
 commentary on seismic global-colonial
 world 287–292
 Herman Melville's *Mardi* as commentary on
 seismic global-colonial world 261–267
 Herman Melville's *The Piazza Tales* as
 commentary on cruel coloniality of
 theodicy 271–287
 human-animal hierarchism of coloniality 234
 “Inca Enlightenment”, and 117–123
 invention of America, and 180
 Just War concept, and 18, 156–158, 250–251
 Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 180–183
 modernity and 4, 14
 New England settler colonialism 197–204
 colonialism-as-cannibalism 234–235
 “Plantation Enlightenment”, and 11
 predatory optimism. *see* predatory
 optimism
 racial capitalism, and 196–197, 207
 “Settler Enlightenment” 167–175
 Spanish subjugation of Peru 106–107
 Spanish subjugation of South American
 conquests 113–117
 theodicy and 74–87
 Torrid Zone conceptualization. *see* Torrid
 Zone conceptualization
 unsettlement of Spanish America 130–133
 Sewall, Joseph 169
 Sewall, Samuel 143
 Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl
 of Shaftesbury 184
 Sharpe, Christina 13–14, 35–36, 272–273
 Shklar, Judith 63–64
 Silhouette, Étienne de 68–69
 Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake (Michi Saagiig
 Nishnaabeg) 226
 slave capitalism, settler colonialism and
 196–197, 207

slavery. *see also* dispossession

African slavery/Indigenous dispossession

linkage 211–212, 230, 289

dispossession and. *see* dispossession

early European imperialism in the South 18

earthquake amnesia, and 240, 253–254. *see*

also earthquake amnesia

earthquake science, and 9–10

earthquake stories, and 15–16

economic exploitation and extraction, and 162–163, 166

elsewhere catastrophe, and 16

Indigenous peoples' resistance to 82

literary and philosophical justifications for 16–17

New England settler colonialism, and 18, 153–160

“orogeny” of 340

racial capitalism, and 287

self-authored slave narratives 19–20

theodicy and 74–87

undecption and 262–263, 284, 289

violence of 289

Slotkin, Richard 33–34, 36

Smith, Adam 66–69

Smith, Josiah 169–170

Socrates 46–58

Soni, Vivasvan 201

Sontag, Susan 34–35

Spain

“Inca Enlightenment”, and 117–123

subjugation of South American conquests 113–117

unsettlement of Spanish America 130–133

Spengler, Nicholas 281

Spenser, Edmund 275–277, 283, 285–286

Spillers, Hortense 35–36, 187

Spitzer, Leo 69–70

starvation/survival cannibalism 232–233

Stephens, John Lloyd 311–312

Sweet, James 84–85

Sweet, Timothy 7–8

Syl Anagist 341–342

Symmes, John Cleves 265

T

Tasso, Torquato 40

Taylor, Charles 63–64

Tecumseh 226–227

Tenskwatawa 226–227, 239

theodicy 74–87, 271–287

Timaeus 53–54, 57

Torrid Zone concept 17–20, 37–43, 103–104, 113–117, 180, 190–197, 211, 242–243, 258–262, 273–279, 283–284, 297, 336

“Trembling World” concept 43–45

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph 331

Twain, Mark 20–21, 295–296, 313–320

U

undecption

definition of 4

dispossession and 262–263, 284, 289

economic exploitation and extraction, and 258–261, 266–267, 270–273, 283

imperialism and 4

racial capitalism, and 283–288

revelation and 4–5

slavery and 262–263, 284, 289

uniformitarianism. *see* geology

United States (US). *see also* US Civil War

(1861–1865); settler colonialism; slavery

belief in immunity to earthquake 19–22, 37–43

California environmental catastrophe denial 336

Cape Anne earthquake of 1755 141, 174

catastrophic thinking 30–37

Charleston earthquake of 1886 321–332

Civil War. *see* US Civil War (1861–1865)

early global earthquake history 153–160

earthquake amnesia 11, 17, 19–22, 42, 319

elsewhere catastrophe, and 16, 27, 336–337

Enlightenment and 18–19

environmental catastrophe amnesia 336

Haiti earthquake of 2010, and 2–3

Indigenous dispossession by 299

invention of America, and 1–3, 15–16, 27, 64–65, 79–87, 342

Just War concept, and 18, 156–158, 250–251

Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 18–19, 30–37, 175

“modernity’s culmination”, as (modernity myth) 1

Monticello earthquake of 1774 224–226

New Madrid earthquakes of 1811 19–20, 40–42

nineteenth-century imagination of catastrophe 18

optimism 12–13

predatory optimism 18–20

product of racial capitalism, as 290

“Quakeland”, as 336–337

Sand Creek massacre (1864) 35

San Francisco earthquake of 1865 20–21

San Francisco earthquake of 1906 21, 42

- seismic future of 21
- settler colonialism, and “alchemy of conquest” 12–13
- slavery. *see* slavery
- southernization of disaster 19–21, 239, 270–271, 308–309
- Stoic earthquake philosophy, and 141, 145–148, 153
- theodicy and 79–87
- “Trembling World” concept, and 43–45
- unsettlement
 - earthquake stories, and 15–16
 - Spanish America, of 130–133
- US Civil War (1861–1865)
 - Charleston earthquake of 1886, and 321–332
 - earthquake amnesia, and 228, 295
 - earthquake as metaphor for 20–21
 - elsewhere catastrophe, and 33–35, 37, 39, 41–42
 - Emily Dickinson, and 307–313
 - Frederick Douglass, and 296–307
 - José Martí, and 313–321
 - Mark Twain, and 313–321
 - San Francisco earthquake of 1865, and 20–21
 - “Sign of State-quake”, as 20–21
 - undeception and 285–286, 289
- V
- Valdivia, Pedro de 116, 131
- Valenčius, Conevery Bolton 40–41
- Vasconcelos, José 57
- Vedia, Agustín de 324–325
- Vega, Garcilaso de la; *see* Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca.
- Velasco, Don Luis de. *see* Paquiquineo
- Venezuela
 - Caracas earthquake of 1812 41–42
 - Cumaná earthquake of 1766 4–5
 - Cumaná earthquake of 1799 4–5
 - Indigenous earthquake philosophy 5
- Vermij, Rienk 9–10
- Villavicencio, Karla Cornejo 336–337

- Virilio, Paul 31
- Voigt, Lisa 124
- Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet)
 - Candide* as commentary on “Americanity” 17
- Edgar Allan Poe’s *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and 227–229
- Garcilaso de la Vega, and 103–104, 117–118, 130, 259
- Herman Melville, and 20
- James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Crater*, and 227
- J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* 216
- Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and 68–89, 180–181
- southernization of catastrophe, on 17, 64–65, 95–97
- Thomas Jefferson, and 225

W

- Wafer, Lionel 259–260
- Walker, Charles 90, 131
- Wallerstein, Immanuel 17, 80–81
- Warburton, William 68–69
- Warner, Marina 260
- Warner, Michael 228
- Washington, George 185
- Westcott, Kathleen Delores 5–6
- Wey Gómez, Nicolás 180, 258–259
- whaling, associations with earthquakes and mining 259–261
- Whitman, Walt 208
- Wieder, Carlos 102–103
- Wigglesworth, Michael 142
- Wigglesworth, Samuel 169–170
- Wilson, Ivy 285–286
- Winthrop, John 148–153, 156, 167–168, 174–175
- witchcraft. *see* Salem witch trials
- Wood, Gillen D’Arcy 31–32
- Wynter, Sylvia 35–36, 86–87, 105–106, 254

Y

- Yusoff, Kathryn 8

