

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Anglo-Saxonist Theory of Despair

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# Ralph Waldo Emerson's Anglo-Saxonist Theory of Despair

## Introduction

There is an instructive moment in Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1854 address on the Fugitive Slave Act when the speech's focus shifts from the law itself to the conservative Northern attitudes that facilitated its passage. Reflecting on those "serious men" who feared the inevitable Democratic Party, who craved union and compromise, Emerson notes how "they threw themselves on the extreme conservatism, as a drag on the wheel: They knew Cuba would be had, and Mexico would be had, and they stood stiffly on conservatism, and as near to monarchy as they could, only to moderate the velocity with which the car was running down the precipice. In short, their theory was despair" (785).<sup>1</sup> According to this "theory of despair," the nation—hurtling toward an inevitable precipice—is a helpless actor in the cruel sweep of history. Individuals exert little force against the incalculable weight of destiny, and despairing compromises are all that can be rendered. In Emerson's view, at least in the context of this 1854 lecture, presumed historical inevitability is a false, dangerous ethos for democratic politics. And this particular representation of Northern Whiggish politics, which Emerson posits as a conservative theory of despair, is a direct characterization of Daniel Webster and his supporters, who enabled the passage of the Compromise of 1850 and its constituent Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>2</sup> In part galvanized by Webster's infamous pro-compromise March 7, 1850 Senate floor speech,

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of "Fate," "The Natural History of Intellect," "John Brown," and various journal entries, which are not included in the collection, all parenthetical references to Emerson's work refer to *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

<sup>2</sup> Webster's Seventh of March address earned him few supporters among Northern Whigs; however, by March 25, 1850, a group of at least 700 Bostonians signed a letter thanking Webster "for what this speech has done and is doing to enlighten the public mind, and to bring the present crisis in our national affairs to a fortunate and peaceful termination" (Webster 406-407; Johnson 552-553). Webster's supporters may have been a numerical minority in Northern politics, but they were not marginal. Signatories included T.H. Perkins, a correspondent of Webster's and one of the wealthiest men in Boston, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., a prominent intellectual and the father of the Supreme Court Justice of the same name, and Jared Sparks, an historian and president of Harvard College (Webster 406-407; Johnson 552-553; Bell 406-407; Porte 9-10).

Emerson increasingly began to frame his abolitionist rhetoric as a response to the forlorn, compromising politics of pro-slavery Northerners. Both his 1851 and his 1854 anti-Fugitive Slave Law speeches employ this rhetoric, and in journal entries between 1845 and 1852, he makes at least four references to the Whigs as the “party of despair” (*Journals*, Volume 7, 12; *Journals*, Volume 7, 501; *Journals*, Volume 8, 210; *Journals*, Volume 8, 311).

Years prior, Emerson had already proffered the antidote to this despairing resignation. In his 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance,” the self-reliant individual feels no obligation to board the wayward car in the first place; self-reliants do not subscribe to presumptions of inevitability or theories of destiny. The negotiation between self and history, as I’ve thumbnailed it here, is crucial to understanding Emerson’s politics, especially during the 1840s and 50s, when he became increasingly visible in national political discourses.<sup>3</sup> This was an era in which he resolutely theorized self-reliance, but also employed the same theories of despair he earlier derided. By 1860, when the essay “Fate” appeared in *The Conduct of Life*, he had jettisoned his earlier optimism about individual agency and begun contributing to emergent narratives of historical inevitability and destiny, narratives that worked against his vaunted advocacy for self-reliance.

For several decades now, scholars have been probing a particular narrative of history that appears in Emerson’s writings on race and political history: Anglo-Saxonism, the nineteenth-century race theory whose adherents promoted visions of national identity and fate tethered to mythic conceptions of Anglo-Saxon bloodlines and supremacy (Hall 134; Horsman 25; Kidd 97-

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<sup>3</sup> See Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero*, for an influential chronological account of Emerson’s political involvement, which highlights in particular the late 1840s as a period of “increasing involvement and, at times, depression and confusion for Emerson regarding the growing national debate over abolition, the means by which it might best be effected, and the particular role he would play in the process” (86). Gougeon identifies Emerson’s 1844 speech on the anniversary of emancipation in the British West Indies as a major turning point.

98). Notable evaluations of Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism have included Cornel West's 1989 *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, in which West contends that Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism structures his thinking on the individual's role in history, as well as Nell Irvin Painter's 2010 *The History of White People*, which documents and contextualizes Emerson's contributions to nineteenth-century white race theory, claiming him as the "philosopher king" of the subject (West 34; Painter, *History*, 151). Emerson did not invent Anglo-Saxonism and he was far from its most vocal advocate, but it nonetheless informs his understanding of political action, crucially cancelling his own advocacy for self-reliance. In the decades between the publications of "Self-Reliance" and "Fate"—when the U.S. waged imperialist war against Mexico, when James Buchanan deferred the question of slavery in the territories to the courts, when Roger Taney obliged the President and declared U.S. citizenship a white enterprise—Emerson's trust in the individual waned as his support for an Anglo-Saxonist narrative of domination grew.<sup>4</sup>

This paper charts the tension between self-reliance and historical theories of despair in two canonical Emerson essays, "Self-Reliance" and "Fate," as well as in his political commentary of the 40s and 50s. Modern scholars characterize Anglo-Saxonism by its obsession with virility, imperial expansion, and political liberty (Painter, *History*, 167; Reynolds 120-121). It is a racist, chauvinist brand of identity politics: "despair" is not the affect we typically associate with its adherents. But when Emerson forays into Anglo-Saxonist rhetoric, I argue that his despair over American social and political life and anxieties about the viability of the American democratic project propel him to embrace the very chauvinism he himself had

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<sup>4</sup> In his March 3, 1857 inaugural address—delivered just three days before the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision—James Buchanan defers the question of slavery in the territories to Taney and his court: "It is a judicial question, which legitimately belongs to the Supreme Court of the United States, before whom it is now pending, and will, it is understood, be speedily and finally settled. To their decision, in common with all good citizens, I shall cheerfully submit, whatever this may be."

castigated as a submission to political cowardice, a self-incapacitation that redounds to the body politic.

Emerson's "drag on the wheel" metaphor for conservative politics offers a canonical example of Emerson using "despair" as a political descriptor. It also aptly portrays his postulation of despair as a political phenomenon. In his depictions of this phenomenon, he deploys tropes of surrender and inefficacy. While strife and sorrow may lurk in the background, a profound failure to rise to the proverbial occasion dominates the foreground. It is a phenomenon that is at once *of* despair and *driven by* despair. In the former sense, I refer to a politics whose principal outlook overstates historical destiny and abandons individual agency. In the latter, I refer to a politics that arises from pain and hopelessness. I have little doubt that there are concrete, biographical examples of pain and hopelessness that we might link to Emerson's own Anglo-Saxonist theories of despair—moments that *drove* him to conclusions of historical inevitability. In an 1850 journal entry written just weeks after the Seventh of March address, under the heading "Daniel Webster," he speculates that "[t]he badness of the times is making death attractive" (*Journals*, Volume 8, 112). Such despairing reactions to Webster's political betrayal were not uncommon (Johnson 581-582). In a late-career annotation to his famous poem, "Ichabod"—itself a direct response to Webster's speech—John Greenleaf Whittier notes that the day he "penned [his] protest" was "one of the saddest moments of [his] life" (186).<sup>5</sup> But these moments of sorrow are not the focus of this essay. Rather, the argument that follows documents how Emerson's Anglo-Saxonist interpretations of history and destiny—regardless of their

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<sup>5</sup> For an examination of Whittier's political poetry, in addition to other poetic responses to the Compromise of 1850—including works by Walt Whitman, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and George Lunt—see Bell, "Poetry's Place in the Crisis and Compromise of 1850."

precise origins—erode the robust estimations of self-reliant political action in “Self-Reliance” and his 1854 Fugitive Slave Act address.

By “despair,” then, I do not mean a psychological theory of racial supremacy. Rather, I use the term—as Emerson does in his criticism of compromising white Northerners in the 1850s—to signify a theory of politics that aggrandizes a particular narrative of historical inescapability and consequently minimizes individual action. When Emerson explains history and fate in Anglo-Saxonist terms, despair over the inadequacy of agency is often nearby. His recognition of this supposed inadequacy can manifest as a seemingly reluctant acceptance of historical narratives of Anglo-Saxon domination. Elsewhere it manifests as an energetic propagation of the untapped, mythological potential of the Anglo-Saxon race, a brash but anxiety-driven articulation of the U.S.’s postcolonial status in the world. If we divorce him from his own advocacy for self-reliance, we could categorize Emerson as a fairly typical Anglo-Saxonist—perhaps a bit wavering in his support of the cause, but nonetheless fascinated by the history and fate of those supposedly enduring medieval Germanic tribes. But if we read him in the context of his own theories of self-reliance, the despair latent in his Anglo-Saxonism becomes evident. In his work, Anglo-Saxonism frequently arises when the self-reliant individual is most confronted and restrained by the weight of history. In place of individual agency, Emerson substitutes justifications for domination—as well as mythic alternative realities. In the moments that I read as Anglo-Saxonist theories of despair, Emerson minimizes the power of the self and defines the world around him in terms of unavoidable hierarchy and domination.

I’m not suggesting we despair *for* Emerson or justify his or anyone’s use of white race theory. Readers of Emerson have interrogated and should continue to interrogate race theory wherever it appears in his work. By reading his Anglo-Saxonism as a despairing departure from his theory of

self-reliance, we not only gain new criteria by which we can evaluate the social and political force of Emersonian individualism, we can better appreciate nineteenth-century individualists who, when confronted with the car hurtling toward its precipice, did *not* despair.

### I. “Self-Reliance” and Ahistorical Selfhood

The crux of “Self-Reliance,” at least in regard to the individual’s place in and against history, erupts about halfway into the essay. This section starts by illustrating how self-reliance necessitates a profound skepticism of historical narratives and the myths and legends that underlie them. As he begins to position the self against historical narrative, Emerson isolates a culprit behind the phenomenon of losing ourselves to history: our imagination. “In history,” he writes, “our imagination plays us false ... Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderbeg, and Gustavus? Suppose they were virtuous; did they wear out virtue?” (140). Here Emerson identifies three kings whose legends are bound up in their nations’ founding myths—Alfred in particular being a central figure in Anglo-Saxonism, though Emerson does not present the Saxon king in such self-aware terms. That modern individuals continue to use these figures as guideposts for conduct is not the result of their magnificence or their historical weight. Rather, it’s the product of our imaginations “play[ing] us false”—the product of looking at ourselves and our societies, despairing at the view, and searching for answers in tired fables. As a counter-example, in the closing line of his January 1860 eulogy of John Brown, Emerson presents a figure whose imagination did *not* “play [him] false.” Brown’s radical abolitionism achieved this feat of self-reliance, in Emerson’s estimation, by channeling a force that was deeper in time and more internal in spirit than the legacy of any so-called great man of history: “For the arch-abolitionist, older than Brown, and older than the Shenandoah Mountains, is Love, whose other name is Justice, which was before Alfred, before Lycurgus, before slavery, and will be after it”

(572). To Emerson, Brown's actions are significant not because they existed in Alfred's supposed lineage; they matter because they drew upon sources of agency—love and justice—that are internal and actionable.

Emerson's eulogy also urges the nation's "blind statesmen"—an insult at least partly directed at despairing Northern Whigs—to learn from Brown's example. They should do so, however, only because Brown's actions arose from and exemplified love and justice, not because Brown himself was the progenitor of these virtues. He was heroic, but he did not "wear out" heroism. To Emerson, identity formation that relies on legends—be they as recent and historically grounded as Brown's or as distant and contrived as Alfred's—risks the manipulation and externalization of the self. A vicious cycle ensues, Emerson insists in "Self-Reliance," for political leaders can then capitalize on this externalized mode of selfhood and route individual sovereignty through exhortations of historical duty and inevitability.

The world has been instructed by its kings, who have so magnetized the eyes of nations ... The joyful loyalty with which men have everywhere suffered the king, the noble, or the great proprietor to walk among them by a law of his own ... was the hieroglyphic by which they obscurely signified their consciousness of their own right and comeliness, the right of every man. (141)

Monarchic sovereignty, under this view, is the stuff of symbol, myth, and illusion. Emerson argues that when we, as political actors, locate the self in the past, when we defer to figures like Alfred and Skanderbeg and Gustavus whose virtues we confuse with our own, we risk forming political identities entrapped by obscured commitments to loyalty. It perhaps goes without saying that most of the historical victims of kings and nobles and great proprietors suffered because of pervasive threats and spectacular displays of violence, not solely because they were somehow "magnetized" by seductive rhetoric. But my concern with Emerson's claim is not its broad historical accuracy. When it comes to nationalist theories of political loyalty, Emerson wants his

readers to scrutinize the falsities of the historical imagination. As I will discuss later in this paper, Anglo-Saxonism requires similar scrutiny. The Anglo-Saxonist's eyes are indeed magnetized by the allure of legend; as an ideology, it necessitates a forfeiture of self-sovereignty in its embrace of a racialized mythos of national sovereignty.

In the paragraphs that follow, Emerson expands on the claim that the rhetoric of the historical imagination, in addition to being dusty and illusory, actually deactivates the principle source of self-reliance: self-trust. He does so by repurposing the trope of magnetism. Whereas the metaphor initially refers to the force of monarchic political power, Emerson proceeds to channel it inward:

The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. (141)

I call this passage the crux of “Self-Reliance” because it signals the essay’s most defiant break from history. Redirecting the metaphor, it traces the magnetic force of self-reliance to an inward and ahistorical source: “the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct.” The agent in this passage is not Alfred or Gustavus or any other rendering of the historical imagination, it is the individual of the present—the trustee of original action who can and must undergo the rigorous work of self-reliance. I call it rigorous because, in Emerson’s conceptualization, self-reliance does not signify solipsistic autopilot. “Inasmuch as the soul is present,” Emerson explains several pages later, “there will be power not confident but agent. To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is” (144). To speak of reliance, Emerson instructs, is to speak of the type of

confidence we can only have in something false and external. To trust ourselves is to trust in something powerful but developmental, foundational but unmappable.

The quasi-mystic, quasi-scientific contours of Emerson's poetics in this passage are vast and slippery, but the passage's metaphors for selfhood and individual agency demand elevated scrutiny. I've already mentioned that part of the significance of this passage rests with its redirection and co-option of the "magnetic" power of political history, which Emerson transfers to and locates in the self. We should not shrug off the scientific importance of magnetism in nineteenth-century individualist thought or in Emerson's work specifically. In 1831, a decade prior to the publication of "Self-Reliance," British scientist Michael Faraday executed his famous induction ring experiment, in which Faraday, using an electromagnet, iron ring, wire, and a galvanometer, demonstrated that magnetism could generate electricity (Williams 28). Electricity, then, was not just something that could be *conducted*; active agents could *induce* it. And for Emerson, the connection between electromagnetism and "[t]he magnetism which all original action exerts" was natural. As Mark Noble explains, "Emerson's enthusiasm for Faraday's electrified atomism" allowed him to "reimagin[e] the relationship between experiences of being a person and the sublime forces that underlie being as such" (19). Electromagnetism, with its inductive power, allowed individualists like Emerson to articulate a compelling command of self over circumstance.

Prior to the proliferation of electromagnetic discovery in the nineteenth-century, Newtonian gravitational theory—which was not so conducive to individual agency—was the dominant field theory adopted and metaphorized by liberal individualists, notably by Locke and Voltaire (Downing 286-291). In a 1699 letter, for instance, Locke explains that "[t]he gravitation of matter towards matter, by ways inconceivable to me, is not only a demonstration that God can,

if he pleases, put into bodies powers and ways of operation above what can be derived from our idea of body ... but also an unquestionable and everywhere visible instance, that he has done so” (qtd. in Downing 290-291). Gravitational theory, as taken up by liberal philosophers, endowed the executors of gravity—be they religious or secular—with all-encompassing physical power. Emerson, as we learned in the opening metaphor of this paper, disparages theories of history that are overwhelmed by its gravitational force. Once the car has driven off the precipice, of course, there is no mitigating its fall. What Emerson takes issue with, however, is history’s supposed hijacking of the car in the first place—here he rejects the notion that “history” exerts physical force.

Years before his 1854 remark on politics of despair being a mere “drag on the wheel” of history, he formulated a similar metaphor in a July 1852 journal entry: “Whiggery has found itself a new formula in Boston, this, namely that when we go to drive, the breeching is as indispensable as the traces. Its claim is that it blocks the wheels; that the Democratic party goes with a rush for Cuban Invasion, Mexico, Canada, and all: that the Whig party resists these ... But all this despair comes of incapacity” (*Journals*, Volume 8, 310-311). In this rendering of his metaphor for conservative politics of despair, there is no precipice—making the conjured situation less dire than the version presented in the 1854 address—but Emerson nonetheless characterizes “Whiggery” by its fatalist stance toward the forces driving history. When considering the driving momentum of political action, the Whigs in question value the breeching—the part of a horse’s harness that allows for braking—as much as the trace—the part that connects the horse to the carriage. Obviously, every car, and every political actor, must be able to brake and accelerate. Emerson’s carriage trope, in both its 1852 and 1854 incarnations, demonstrates the danger of a politics that requires individuals to make peace with uncontrollable

acceleration. In gravitational pull, John Locke saw an “unquestionable and everywhere visible instance” of God’s omnipotence. In the Democratic Party’s increasing legislative majorities and quest for territorial expansion, the Whigs—in Emerson’s rhetorical casting—saw omnipresent reminders of the difficulty of self-reliance and they despaired accordingly.

In electromagnetic field theory, on the other hand, Emerson identifies a natural metaphor that is amenable to agency. As Noble maintains, “Emerson’s distribution of the properties of Faraday’s atom onto the properties of the person thus enables him to imagine, as in the 1844 ‘Nature,’ that as we become aware of the electric field of power that networks things together, we learn to draw upon ‘the fathomless powers of gravity and chemistry’ already ‘preëxisting within us in in their highest form” (19). The will of the individual, as Emerson explains near the end of his career in “The Natural History of Intellect,” “is the advance to that which rightly belongs to us, to which the inward magnet ever points, and which we dare make ours” (46). The magnetism of the self is “ours,” Emerson insists, and we are obliged by neither gods nor kings nor illusions of the past to surrender it. This textual crux in “Self-Reliance” and its scientific contexts are helpful signposts in any discussion of agency and circumstance in Emerson’s work. As Laura Dassow Walls maintains, for Emerson, “the law of nature that governed both science and poetry was the same with the moral law that ruled every individual human being,” and as such, “the key working conceptions of nineteenth-century science”—including magnetism—“became so much a part of [his] familiar, accepted and unquestioned working vocabulary that they dropped virtually out of view” (6). That electromagnetism is a metaphor, drawing on the most influential discoveries of matter and energy available to Emerson in his historical moment, makes it all the more significant to understanding self-reliant activity as it exists with and against externality.

Under these terms of individual agency, the autonomy of the self may appear absolute. But central to Emerson's theorization of self-reliance is a recognition of external contingency, an acknowledgement that any given individual exists in historical, social, and political circumstances beyond their control. I introduce this caveat to emphasize the rigor of self-reliant political activity—as it is speculated in “Self-Reliance”—and to foreshadow the role of external circumstance in the despairing, determinist logic of the later essay, “Fate.” This paper is not the venue to ascertain the innate properties of human agency; however, it is necessary, as I interpret Emerson's initial exaltation and later departure from a theory of self-reliance, to consider how *he* viewed the limitations on and contingencies of selfhood. Branka Arsić's 2010 book, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson*, is a crucial reference point for these questions about “Self-Reliance.” *On Leaving* interprets self-reliant activity as being shaped by radically passive experiences, including “moods” and “involuntary perceptions,” each of which “constitutes the interiority of the ‘I,’ rather than being constituted by it” (134). Arsić's reading locates Emerson's conception of self-reliant agency firmly within the challenges of historical, social, and political circumstance. Individual agency is inseparable from external circumstance; it is relentlessly plunged into it without any say in the matter. Pointing to Emerson's lamentation in “Self-Reliance” that “perception is not whimsical, but fatal”—a line that appears just sentences after Emerson's declaration of magnetic self-trust—Arsić notes that the “fatality of perception lies in the fact that I am chosen by it, exposed to it, and forced into it” (140-141). Agency exists, but always in delayed response to the “fatality of perception.” Arsić continues: “it is on such a will—which cannot rely on itself—that a self-reliant person is invited to rely. This invitation, then, marks the most profound tension in Emerson's concept of self-reliance, since it admits that the basis of our reliance, the will, is not adequate to itself” (141). The contingencies of self-reliance,

as Arsić elucidates, might give any individual, including Emerson himself, good reasons to succumb to theories of despair.

Despairing or not, Emerson insists that individuals must process and endure the fatal perceptions that structure their lives. Doing so is the difference between yielding to reality-altering theories of despair and accepting the challenge of externally contingent selfhood, for, as Arsić further argues, “[n]o new perception or truth can be turned into knowledge unless it transforms the one who acquires it. To know or to grow is thus to suffer self-transformation, which, each time it happens, can turn us into different persons who no longer recognize their previous duties as worth satisfying ... Our growth is therefore elegiac” (142). In every perception—every moment of experience that enables self-actualization—there is loss and departure. Self-awareness and self-work, therefore, are the constant processes of elegy and transformation. It is difficult, solemn work; the only alternatives to it are intractable despair or illusory rationalization. And this practice of “ideologically induced illusion,” Arsić contends, “is based on insisting on an adequate relation of our notions with the ‘world.’ But it is this insistence that imposes the ideology of a stable reality, not vice versa. Our theory of truth is illusion” (143). Anglo-Saxonism, in my view, is an “ideologically induced illusion.” It refuses to acknowledge the unending, sorrowful process of self-transformation and situates selfhood in a mythology of power, stability, and vitality. The actual “power” of the self, Emerson writes several paragraphs after describing the fatality of perception, “resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*” (144). To Emerson, the “becoming” soul at once signifies the vulnerability and the resolve of self-reliant activity; the world hates and despairs at fact that this activity is neither consistent nor inevitable. This understanding of self-reliance, which Emerson theorizes

and Arsić analyzes, provides a critical framework for the discussion about Anglo-Saxonism that follows. Self-reliance, in this sense, represents the difficult but necessary alternative choice—one that is “not confident but agent”—to the myriad ideologies that superimpose narratives of stability, domination, and inescapability over the contingencies of existence. Adopting this critical framework, I argue, compels readers of Emerson to view self-reliance as a mechanism for countering and critiquing Anglo-Saxonism, rather than a precursor or enabler of it.

## II. “Fate,” *English Traits*, and Emerson’s Racial Fatalism

“Fate”—Emerson’s 1860 deliberation between “power,” his term for individual agency, and “circumstance,” his aggregate term for historical legacy, natural condition, and destiny—presents a more compromised vision of the self than does “Self-Reliance.” While “Fate” stops short of endorsing any comprehensive theory of history—beyond the polar opposition of fate and free will—it suggests that those types of theories may exert more force against the individual than the subscriber to self-reliance cares to admit. In order to understand the essay’s moments of despair, we must first comprehend the poetic structure that undergirds these moments. At the essay’s opening, Emerson considers the unknowability of circumstance: “We are incompetent to solve the times. Our geometry cannot span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return and reconcile their opposition. We can only obey our own polarity” (346). Emerson’s remarks on the vastness of circumstance and the importance of trusting one’s internal compass align with the readings of “Self-Reliance” that I argue for above. When externality is unknowable, the powerful-but-inadequate self remains the only viable guide for action. But when describing the power of the self, Emerson now refers to “polarity,” not “magnetism”—a subtle but important shift in metaphor that signals Emerson’s own shift away from self-reliance as it posits the inability of individual power to work with and against circumstance.

In Walls's analysis, polarity offered Emerson a seductive theory of comprehensive (dis)unity, forcing him to grapple with "the impossible agony of a universe split through its equator into Fate and Power, Nature and Mind," a dilemma "that by then had crystallized around his figure of the magnet" (128). Whereas the metaphorical power of electromagnetism is transferred from the monarch to the self in the space of a paragraph in "Self-Reliance," magnetic polarity mostly signifies the irreconcilability of power and circumstance in "Fate." Walls contends that this bipolarity is absolute: "[t]he poles of a magnet can never be joined. They repel each other with infinite force. Emerson's Man makes the torment of Sisyphus look like a half-time job, for at least Sisyphus could rest while the stone rolled back downhill. But there was no rest and no escape once Emerson rejected Chance for single and all-generative law" (128). Walls's allusion evokes the unavoidable futility of pushing against gravity and, in doing so, demonstrates how the polarity metaphor that introduces "Fate" imperils selfhood in many of the same ways as the precipice metaphor that undergirds the theory of despair presented in Emerson's lecture on the Fugitive Slave Act.

But within the diminished power of selfhood under this bipolar model of power and circumstance, Emerson still leaves room for individual agency. To see how, we can return to Arsić's interpretation of Emersonian self-reliance as the constant departure from, transformation of, and grief for past selfhood. This theory of self is grave but not hopeless; it recognizes the severity of external circumstance—the painful unknowability of that which is to come—without ascribing prophetic explanations to it. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson cautioned against these ascriptions. He insists: "If a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not" (142). Self-reliant individuals should be wary, then, of anyone who situates the fate of an

individual or nation amid the myths of and nostalgia for nations long past. And during Emerson's lifetime, perhaps no "mouldered nation" was as thoroughly mined for hints of destiny and signs of superiority as Anglo-Saxon England. This core principle of "Self-Reliance" is why Emerson's own Anglo-Saxonism can seem so puzzling. Sure, the self is often inadequate and almost always externally contingent, but the response of the self-reliant individual to this dilemma should never be to seek justification or solace in the mythic history and fate of "some old mouldered nation ... in another world." This dilemma, as discussed in "Fate," brings us to Emerson's most despairing—brash as it has taken to be—abdication of agency: his theorization of race and, specifically, of the racially determined destiny of the individual.

After establishing the polar opposition between power and circumstance in "Fate," Emerson outlines the rudeness and cruelty of circumstance. Rather than being a specific or definable force, circumstance comprises a constellation of random and violent limitations on self-actualization. Most violent of all is the way in which Emerson situates inherited racial identity in this constellation. He commences this situation of identity with a despairing reflection on the limits of identity formation: "An expense of ends to means is fate;—organization tyrannizing over character. The menagerie, or forms and powers of the spine, is a book of fate: the bill of the bird, the skull of the snake, determines tyrannically its limits. So is the scale of races, of temperaments; so is sex ... Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit" (348). Whether Emerson classifies "the scale of races" as among the limitations contained in the "book of fate" is unclear, as his usage of the term "race" is inconsistent throughout the essay. Just paragraphs prior, he refers to races "living at the expense" of other races, but in what appears to be a literal food chain of carnivorous species of animals thriving at the expense of the lives of other species: "You have just dined, and, however

scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity,—expensive races,—race living at the expense of race (347).” Considering that his predominant usage of “race” is to refer to nation and ethnicity—and that “race” is an exceedingly rare synonym for “species”—we can, with a reasonable degree of confidence, read his claims regarding human limitation as evidence of racial determinism. And the fact that, through his inconsistent usage, he conflates species with race, ethnicity, and nation suggests a connection between his interest in racial destiny and his interest in evolutionary phenomena.

Before discussing his claims of evidence for racially constrained human agency, however, it is worth dwelling on the “house of the spirit” passage for a moment longer, as its textual history illustrates the inseparability of Emerson’s thinking on inherent racial identity and his despair over the inadequate power of the self. Emerson first theorized the “house of the spirit” decades before the publication of “Fate,” even several years before “Self-Reliance.” In the concluding paragraph of his 1836 book, *Nature*, he writes: “Then shall come to pass what my poet said: ‘Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven. Know then that world exists for you’” (39). In “Fate,” the line reads chiasmatically: spirit structures house, house structures spirit. But in *Nature*, the scope of the spirit’s construction is transcendent: it envelops external circumstance, which in turn waits for the individual to exercise agency upon it. As Gertrude Hughes observed nearly forty years ago, Emerson scholars have long observed the increasing fatalism and despair in the interval between early texts like *Nature* and later ones like “Fate,” an interval in which he lost his son Waldo and became increasingly conscious of his country’s violent repression of indigenous and enslaved people (273). Drawing

a strict chronological line from the optimistic individualism of *Nature* to the bleak determinism of “Fate,” however, would be a difficult and ineffective task. His 1854 Fugitive Slave Act address, after all, both inveighs against politics of despair and was published after many tragic moments in his life. Once more, then, analyzing Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonism requires the differentiation of a theory *driven by* despair from a politics *of* despair. Emerson certainly lost hope in national politics at various points in his career. His resultant theories of Anglo-Saxonism, and their betrayal of self-reliant political action, however, are more instructive than the biographical data points that may have sparked these theories.

In notable ways, Emerson was a heterodox thinker on race. *English Traits*—his 1856 ethnography of the English—contains his most direct effort to define race, and the result is a theory that both rejects contemporary scientific racism and acknowledges, as “Fate” does, the supposed historical weight belonging to “race.” Emerson was consistently skeptical of categorical attempts to define race, as, for example, when he maintains that “though we flatter the self-love of men and nations by the legend of pure races, all our experience is of the gradation and resolution of races, and strange resemblances meet us everywhere” (491). This claim ran counter to the influential scientific racism of the day, including that of Scottish scientist Robert Knox, whose theory of “imperishable” races earns Emerson’s derision in the opening line of *English Traits*’ chapter on “race” despite Emerson calling him “an ingenious anatomist” (Emerson 489; Castillo 108-109). Emerson’s definitions of racial identity in *English Traits*, which reject models of strict categorization and broadly support cultural hybridity, would have been even more objectionable to the influential American School of Ethnography, whose views on strict polygenism and racial hierarchy were ascendant in American scientific racism at the time of *English Traits*’ publication (Harvey 19-20).

Emerson's heterodoxy with regard to influential views of racial purity does not absolve him of racial essentialism and determinism. As Bruce Dain explains, nineteenth-century American scientific racists, such as American School leader Josiah Nott, sought to reconcile their views on polygenism and racial purity with support for the notion that "amalgamation among what [Nott] considered separately created European 'local races' had made the Anglo-Saxon race—or 'hybrid,' as he put it—great" (228). While *English Traits* demonstrates that Emerson objected to ethnographic methodologies like Nott's, the flexibility of these methodologies—based as they were on myth, legend, and prejudice—nonetheless demonstrates that Anglo-Saxonism can exist parallel to, without outright supporting, categorical classifications of race. Note, for example, the evolutionary language Emerson employs in *English Traits* to explain the supposedly sustained supremacy of the "Saxon" race: "the Saxon had the most bottom and longevity... and, step by step, got all the essential securities of civil liberty invented and confirmed. The genius of the race and the genius of the place conspired to this effect... The strong survived, the weaker went to the ground" (504). Emerson blends inherent racial characteristics with racial environmentalism and, if it weren't written before *On the Origin of Species*, what we might call a "survival of the fittest" mentality. This is why he can so readily dismiss concerns of the "imperishability" and "purity" of races. Manifest in his references to the inevitable "gradation and resolution of races" is the claim that this ultimate resolution will, at least in part, prove the endurance of the Anglo-Saxon race. By way of this context, it would seem that when Emerson references the house that confines the soul in "Fate," he is limning a model of human limitation that is at least partly racial in construction.

Emerson's ideation of racial determinism, as articulated in *English Traits* and "Fate," has been the object of critical scrutiny for decades, with the prevailing interpretation suggesting that

it is a triumphalist vision of Anglo-Saxon domination. In his 1981 book, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Reginald Horsman documents Emerson's private thinking on expansionist policy and describes Emerson as an Anglo-Saxonist who, despite being somewhat tepid in his rhetoric, viewed the "innate, vital force" of Anglo-Saxons as the inevitable reason behind American imperialism in the West (177). In *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Cornel West takes up "Fate" and considers how Emerson's thinking on inevitable domination localizes in the individual, suggesting inherent, racially determined, limits on human potential. He contends that "Emerson's conception of the worth and dignity of human personality is racially circumscribed; that race is central to his understanding of the historical circumstances which shape human personality; and that this understanding can easily serve as a defense of Anglo-Saxon imperialist domination of non-European lands and peoples" (34). In West's reading, individual action—the central unit of analysis in Emersonian philosophy—is "racially circumscribed." Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism in West's view, then, does not just counterbalance the magnetic potential of the self, it defines it.

This critical response—that racial determinism signifies an actualization, rather than a betrayal, of Emersonian individualism—remains influential. In an analysis of Emerson's 1844 address on the decennial of emancipation in the British West Indies, for example, Larry Reynolds argues that Emerson imbues his abolitionist rhetoric with "his own ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and racial determinism" (133). Reynolds isolates the speech's uses of racist domination narratives and tethers them to a vision of self-reliance that appears inseparable from Anglo-Saxonist bootstrap-pulling mythology. More recently, in her book, *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter reads Emerson's determinism as a natural and congruent extension of his racialized philosophy of progress. Responding to the "guano" passage

from “Fate”—which will be discussed in greater depth momentarily—Painter argues that Emerson’s representation of Anglo-Saxon supremacy “was nothing other than the working out of inevitable—and salutary, because inevitable—laws of Nature. ‘Fate’ transformed national opportunism into the destiny of races” (133). These are vital critical contributions, for Anglo-Saxonist theories of history appear with some frequency in Emerson’s work, and the degree to which they compromise his commentary on history and human potential must be evaluated. Moreover, documenting Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonist fatalism—or triumphalism, as it is often interpreted—offers an illustration of how, among mid-nineteenth-century progressives, positions such as abolitionism and hostility toward scientific racism readily coexisted with racist theories of inevitable conquest.

But to read Emerson’s trafficking in these theories as an extension or actualization of self-reliance is to lose sight of the ahistorical promise of selfhood and the difficult, mournful project of self-work. At least two negative interpretive consequences arise from this type of reading. First, the critical effort to draw a straight line from Emersonian self-reliance to Anglo-Saxonism is susceptible to the same inevitability discourses that spark these criticisms in the first place. If a critic’s analysis of “Self-Reliance” were that Emerson was, all along, plotting an Anglo-Saxonist program of political domination, based on the rhetorical exaltation of white American Anglo-Saxon individualism, I would welcome that research and reevaluate my own reading of “Self-Reliance” accordingly. Without making that case, however, the argument that Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonist turn in *English Traits* and “Fate” represents the inescapable endpoint of his political individualism reads too much inevitability into his intellectual career. It suggests that his true Anglo-Saxon heart was always going to dominate the other aspects of his thought. Now, I realize that I have erected a strawman; the scholars of Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonism cited

above all approach his theories of individualism and racial domination with considerably more nuance than I have just suggested. That said, I intend my hyperbole to underscore the *second* potentially dangerous consequence of this mode of Emerson scholarship. In light of literary studies' perpetual centering of Emerson—a phenomenon to which this paper admittedly contributes—the conflation of nineteenth-century political individualism with Anglo-Saxonism and other strains of racial determinism may have a chilling effect on the study of other individualists who either abstained from or outright rejected these race theories. Momentarily, I will turn to the Anglo-Saxonist exclamations of “Fate,” which contain some of the most violent and dehumanizing imagery in Emerson’s oeuvre—despairing departures from any meaningful program of self-reliance. As this discussion proceeds, I urge readers to consider individualist thinkers who embraced the rigorous work of self-reliance *throughout* their lifetimes, rather than cowering away from it during moments of despair.

In “Fate,” Emerson presents what he sees as concrete examples of racial determinism as chapters in the book of fate—chapters not unlike “the superposition of strata” (354). As if they were minerals in the ground, gradually but inevitably displacing one another, he alleges:

We know in history what weight belongs to race. We see the English, French, and Germans planting themselves on every shore and market of America and Australia, and monopolizing the commerce of these countries ... The German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, and carted over America, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie. (354)

In this dehumanizing description of global capitalist racial destiny, immigrant and enslaved life and labor is the “guano”—the manure—of the nation’s soil, while the “English, French, and Germans” provide its seed. Emerson’s use of organic metaphor here contrasts starkly with the metaphorical electromagnetism with which we began our discussion of selfhood. This passage

also evokes the closing chapter of *English Traits*, in which Emerson describes the recent imperialist history of the English people as an “explosion” of colonizers who “have sailed and rode and traded and planted through all climates ... carrying the Saxon seed, with its instinct for liberty and law, for arts and for thought ... to the conquest of the globe” (612). Importantly, these tropes of planting and germination are more conducive to classification and hierarchy than magnetism or even gravity, which signify universal physical forces, be they internally or externally governed. And even though Emerson’s grouping of these three northern European nations does not suggest a strictly Anglo-Saxonist view of racial destiny, it does hearken the influential eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European white race theories of which Anglo-Saxonism was a prominent offshoot. These theories, which gained strong support in Germany, France, and England, espoused varying accounts of Germanic and Scandinavian origination, martial conquest, and civilizational supremacy (Arendt 170; Painter, *History*, 195-196). More concerned with genealogies and legends of tribal succession than unified national identity, nineteenth-century white race theories allowed for transnational racial identification, as simply demonstrated by Emerson’s concern with the “Anglo-Saxon” American.

Later on, in “Fate,” Emerson returns to the theme of racial destiny in a passage that at once endeavors to restore the imbalance between power and circumstance and includes strong rhetoric of Anglo-Saxonist-defined racial fatalism. Whereas earlier in the essay, the book of fate appeared inaccessible to human contribution, Emerson here explains that fate is just “a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; for causes which are unpenetrated” (363). In this framing, circumstance is indeed inevitable, but to blame our experiences on circumstance alone is to overlook the power of self:

[E]very jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us, is convertible by intellect into wholesome force. Fate is unpenetrated causes. The water drowns ship and

sailor, like a grain of dust. But learn to swim, trim your bark, and the wave which drowned it, will be cloven by it, and carry it, like its own foam, a plume and a power. The cold is inconsiderate of persons, tingles your blood, freezes a man like a dew-drop. But learn to skate, and the ice will give you a graceful, sweet, and poetic motion. The cold will brace your limbs and brain to genius, and make you foremost men of time. Cold and sea will train an imperial Saxon race, which nature cannot bear to lose, and, after cooping it up for a thousand years in yonder England, gives a hundred Englands, a hundred Mexicos. All the bloods it shall absorb and domineer: and more than Mexicos,—the secrets of water and steam, the spasms of electricity, the ductility of metals, the chariot of the air, the ruddered balloon are awaiting you. (363-364).

In some ways, this passage returns Emerson to a poetics of self-actualization. The relentlessly self-reliant individual depicted here greets the freezing North Atlantic sea—representative of the cruel, admonitory qualities of external circumstance—with self-transformation and eager discovery of the agential “wholesome force” that is actionable in each phenomenon. This optimistic representation of self, which marries the magnetic power of self-trust and the necessary confrontation of external contingency, may not strike us as a theory of despair, especially if we read it as an explanation of fate that prioritizes action over historical inevitability.

But then arrives the “imperial Saxon race, which nature cannot bear to lose.” Here, suddenly, Emerson lets go his grip on universalizable self-actualization, deploying instead a fatalist logic to explain the relationship between self and history. A generous reading of the treatment of Anglo-Saxon destiny in this passage might suggest that Emerson is simply using a familiar form of nationalist rhetoric to demonstrate the human capacity to thrive in difficult circumstances and to empower his audience, whom he addresses in the second person.<sup>6</sup> Divorced

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term “Anglo-Saxon” here because, even though Emerson refers here and elsewhere to a specifically “Saxon” race, I think his heightened ethnic specificity is at least a poeticization and at most a ratcheting-up of more general Anglo-Saxonist rhetoric. Painter notes how, despite his preferred racial referent being the “Saxons,” his race theory aligns with a much broader trend of Anglo-Saxonism (“Ralph,” 985).

from a theory of domination, it would follow that Anglo-Saxonism is what former Ohio Governor, Emerson contemporary, and anti-Anglo-Saxonist Charles Anderson had termed “an excusable and generally a harmless form of monomania” (6). But as Emerson has already explained, the “planting” races exist at the expense of the “guano” races. In order for Anglo-Saxons to plant themselves on every shore and market, in order for them to absorb and domineer the identities of other races, in order for them to harness the power of steam and electricity, a cycle, a dynamic, of racial domination must exist.

In his direct charge to the “imperial Saxon race”—organized as it is by second-person pronouns—Emerson offers a racially specific answer to the universal question of how to reconcile power and circumstance. By doing so, he reconsiders his own theorization of universalizable self-reliance. The imagery that precedes the charge, while suggestive of specific North Atlantic geographies, conjures the omnipresent tension between individual action and circumstance, between the desire to thrive and the natural chaos that defines human existence. As such, when Emerson channels this universal struggle into a specifically Anglo-Saxonist narrative of conquest, he is—as Horsman and West and Painter suggest—presenting mythic racial determinism as the natural realization of individual will. And if it were indeed the case that “Fate,” on the whole, was a triumphant individualist text, then it would be difficult to read the supposed feats of the “imperial Saxon race” as anything *but* the inevitable outcome of racially circumscribed individualism. Reading Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonist theory of history as an extension of self-reliance, however, at once misrepresents the radical, ahistorical core of “Self-Reliance” and the fatalist, anti-individualist motifs of “Fate.” In “Self-Reliance,” the individual redirects the magnetic power of the monarch; they disregard the legends of long-irrelevant nations; they look inward and draw upon the instinct to improve. In “Fate,” magnetism gives

way to polarity, the boundless spirit is confined in a house of its own making, and historical circumstance crushes the possibility of genuine self-work. Emerson's Anglo-Saxonism is a theory of despair: it relies on a racist, contrived rationalization of history, one devoid of selfhood. "To talk of reliance," Emerson maintains in "Self-Reliance," "is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is." The self works and is. Anglo-Saxonism dreams that it were.<sup>7</sup>

### III. Political Despair and the Anglo-Saxonist Abdication of Agency

To understand Emerson's racist self-capitulation more fully, we need better to understand the moments in individualist thought and political action where self-reliance doesn't fold under the weight of history. What are some of those moments, then, when self-reliance refused to despair? We can start with the 1854 address on the Fugitive Slave Act, where this paper began. Emerson structures the essay as an exploration of how a nation supposedly committed to liberty came to enact such a law. He locates the problem not in any centralized source of cruelty, but rather in a sweeping indifference toward self-reliant activity and a critical lack of respect for individual liberty. In assigning blame, he condemns the fatalist notion that pro-slave Democrats possess some sort of transcendent political power—beyond the structural, representational advantages afforded in the Constitution—that is driving the country in the car "running down the

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<sup>7</sup> Recent studies of nineteenth-century U.S. citizenship, including Carrie Hyde's 2018 *Civic Longing: The Speculative Origins of U.S. Citizenship* and Derrick Spires's 2019 *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States*—have paid close attention to the role of imagination and romance in the challenges to and defenses of exclusionary citizenship in the early U.S. Hyde, considering the fact that a concrete, federal definition of citizenship did not exist until the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, theorizes "the political subjunctive"—an "aspirational mode of politicking" that leveraged speculative forms such as literary romance and religious destiny in order to imagine how citizenship "might or should be defined" (16). In *The Practice of Citizenship*, Spires—referencing a column by *Anglo-African Magazine* contributor S.S.N.—formulates the concept of "fugue citizenship," a type of white identity politics that employs romantic narratives such as Anglo-Saxonism to harmonize discordant views. In light of my own description of Anglo-Saxonism as a politics that despairingly dreams of things as they might be, both Hyde and Spires's studies are helpful to consider. In effect, Anglo-Saxonism employs the reality-altering rhetoric of the political subjunctive in order to conjure a vision of fugue citizenship that uses racist mythology to whitewash the oppressive, inadequate state of American politics.

precipice” (785). Theirs is not the only form of politics available, Emerson insists. And that compromising conservatives—as exemplified by Daniel Webster and his defenders—resign themselves to this most restricting view of history tells us as much about their own understanding of power and circumstance as it does about the politics itself. The pro-slavery Whig, in Emerson’s view, confuses that which *may* happen for that which *must* happen: “In vulgar politics the Whig goes for what has been, for the old necessities—the Musts. The reformer goes for the Better, for the ideal good, for the Mays” (786). He presents the same question that drives “Fate”—how can we as individuals reconcile “May” and “Must,” “power” and “circumstance”—but in this speech, the self does not relent. Every day, we face a thousand musts; perception is fatal, and each act of selfhood is interconnected with external circumstance. Yet self-reliance requires the capacity to endure the unknowability of May and accept the grave responsibility of Must. “Let us know that,” Emerson pleads, “over and above all the *musts* of poverty and appetite, is the instinct of man to rise, and the instinct to love and help his brother” (786). Just moments after framing Whiggish politics as a theory of despair, Emerson returns to the imperative of instinct and agency, to the magnetism of self-trust and original action.

Having already surveyed “Fate,” we as readers may be rightly skeptical of what Emerson categorizes in the realm of “must,” and specifically whether he situates race inside of it, as he does when articulating the house of the spirit in “Fate.” He may be using similarly loose terms of racial essentialism in this earlier speech, but here, race is peripheral to the question of what can actually be achieved in politics. He invokes the “Anglo-Saxon race,” to situate it *as* a theory of despair:

The national spirit in this country is so drowsy, preoccupied with interest, deaf to principle. The Anglo-Saxon race is proud and strong and selfish. They believe only in Anglo-Saxons. In 1825 Greece found America deaf. Poland found America deaf, Italy and Hungary found her deaf. England maintains trade, not

liberty; stands against Greece; against Hungary; against Schleswig-Holstein; against the French Republic whilst it was a republic. (789-790)

Condemning an Anglo-American conspiracy of indifference, Emerson draws on a half-dozen examples of *non*-Anglo-Saxon nations vying for liberty only to receive a drowsy, self-interested response from England and America—undercutting Anglo-Saxonist narratives of political exceptionalism.<sup>8</sup> By referencing the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, he evokes the political legacy of Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian political leader who rapidly became a symbol of democratic will after the Revolution. In an 1851 essay, for example, the physician and political individualist James McCune Smith reflects on Kossuth’s legacy: “But the fun of it is that Kossuth, the ideal of the American nation, *is not a white man* ... He is not a Caucasian, and thank God, he is not an Anglo Saxon. Put that in your pipe and smoke it” (81-82). That Emerson’s critique of Anglo-American political inaction decenters Anglo-Saxonist exceptionalism is significant unto itself. Moreover, considering the appearance of this critique after the speech’s earlier articulation of “drag on the wheel” conservatism, Emerson places Anglo-Saxon inaction firmly in the trajectory of political despair. Later on, in texts such as *English Traits* and “Fate” in which Emerson espouses Anglo-Saxonism—an ideology that prioritizes self-obsessed mythology over the instinct to rise and to love and to help one’s brother—he has already demonstrated the deep political inadequacy of such an outlook.

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<sup>8</sup> As Painter notes, the notion that Anglo-Saxons have always been a free and freedom-loving people is deeply flawed: “When Emerson describes liberty and freedom as English or Saxon racial characteristics, he overlooks not only the slavery issue then roiling American politics but also recent history on both sides of the Atlantic. After all, American indentured servitude, one form of bondage, reached into his own lifetime, and English convicts were still being forced into exile overseas while Emerson studied at Harvard in the 1820s (*History*, 174). Even around the time Emerson was writing about Anglo-Saxon political liberty in *English Traits* and “Fate,” commentators pointed out the irony of the allegedly “freedom-loving” Anglo-Saxon race. In 1859, for instance, *Anglo-African Magazine* contributor “S.S.N.” outline this irony in their essay, “Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Africans.” Mocking the essentialist genealogies of Anglo-Saxonism, they write: “The Angles and the Saxons—historians tell us, were both barbaric German tribes, who stole the country of the Britons, and appropriated it to their own uses; and herein is the only coincidence we see, that allies the present conglomeration called the American people, with their claimed illustrious ancestors. It does seem to prove one thing, namely—that it runs in the blood to steal” (247).

At the close of the speech, drawing on its earlier commentary on fate, free will, and despair, Emerson suggests that the American and English disrespect for liberty does not have to be inevitable.

To faint hearts the times offer no invitation, and torpor exists here throughout the active classes on the subject of domestic slavery and its appalling aggressions. Yes that is the stern edict of Providence, that liberty shall be no hasty fruit, but that event on event, population on population, age on age, shall cast itself onto the opposite scale, and not until liberty has slowly accumulated weight enough to countervail and preponderate against all this, can the sufficient recoil come ... Therefore mountains of difficulty must be surmounted, stern trials met, wiles of seduction, dangers, healed by a quarantine of calamities to measure his strength before he dare say, I am free. (790)

In a return to a poetics of universal force, he insists that the weight of human agency can indeed tip of the scales of circumstance. There will always be “musts” standing in the way, but it is a despairing departure from self-reliance to view American society’s ever-present injustices—slavery, imperialist expansion, legal and extralegal declarations of racial determinism—as the unactionable results of a fatalist dynamic of Anglo-Saxon domination. Here lies the unforgivability of Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonist betrayal of self-reliance in his later essay, “Fate”: it assesses circumstance, despairs at what it sees, and responds by deactivating the self via destructive theories of inevitability. Emerson’s individualist contemporaries recognized this unforgivable flaw. Take, for example, Charles Anderson in the conclusion to the same 1850 speech against Anglo-Saxonism cited earlier: “These questions [of destiny], my friends, should be answered without any overweening and self-satisfied confidence in our own inevitable and endless supremacy. And they must be solved too,—I repeat it—by something more than words;—by our lives and deeds” (47). Or note how, in an 1859 *Anglo-African Magazine* column, contributor “S.S.N.”—rejecting “Anglo-Saxon” and “Anglo-African” as descriptors for any American—articulates a model of Black political organization that rejects identifying with some

old moldered nation in another other world: “We know that these views will be looked upon as heterodox,—as sentiments breathing disaffection and disunion; but we insist nevertheless, that when we do marshall our energies under a national name, we have no higher one, poor as it is to use, than ‘American’” (251). The self is forever inadequate, but in the torpid theories of history that imperil individual agency, we find nothing better.

We can’t take the Emerson we encounter in the Fugitive Slave Law address as the *definitive* Emerson when it comes to questions of self-reliance, history, and race. I don’t believe that such a claim is possible. After all, Emerson opens the Fugitive Slave Law speech by declaring, “I have my own spirits in prison—spirits in deeper prisons, whom no man visits if I do not” (779). By the same logic, however, it is likewise impossible to take the author of *English Traits* and “Fate” as the definitive Emerson—an approach that has been common among scholars of Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonism. Yet it would be a rather unproductive conclusion to suggest that the “true” Emerson is locked up in the prisons of time and authorial intention. Instead, as Emerson’s thought continues to course through American political life, we must tally the force his despair. Anglo-Saxonism’s threat to self-reliance is existential, but is it delegitimizing?

As I’ve argued previously, Emerson’s Anglo-Saxonism is a departure from, or at the very least a distortion of, self-reliance. Both theories—one marked by its despair and violence, the other by its difficult but necessary program of self-work—grapple with the painful contingencies of external circumstance and try to make sense of them. Each theory is devastatingly insufficient in its approach. The self encounters innumerable, potentially fatal perceptions on a daily basis. But the actualization of inadequate selfhood, as Branka Arsić elucidates, is elegiac growth. That is, we have every reason to fear that we will lose or change something about ourselves when we confront that which seems out of our control, but confront we must. The actualization of

inadequate Anglo-Saxonism, as Horsman, West, and Painter demonstrate, has been an entrenchment of violence, hierarchy, and illusions of racial supremacy. We can debate endlessly which theory represents the definitive Emerson, but as participants in democratic politics, it is worth remembering that self-reliance is a compelling antidote to theories of despair. A significant interpretative takeaway from this conclusion is that we can and should read Emerson as both a powerful theorist and an inconsistent practitioner of self-reliance. Yet even more so, we as critics need to take up democratic individualists who managed to theorize self-reliance without despairing at its difficulty. This, if anything, is a self-criticism.

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