Introduction

The relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure.

Joseph Roach, Cities of the Dead

Darwin and the Middle Passage

In the spring of 1836, in the waning months of a five-year, global expedition, the HMS Beagle, carrying the young but now-seasoned naturalist Charles Darwin, rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reentered the South Atlantic, en route to its home port of Falmouth, England. However, the ship’s temperamental captain, Robert FitzRoy, ordered a detour back along the Brazilian coastline, to reconfirm measurements he had taken in the ship’s earlier visit to Salvador at the start of their voyage in 1832. With its exhausted crew in tow, the HMS Beagle thus crossed the Atlantic from Africa back to Brazil, before heading home to Falmouth—a triangular path common to European traders and traffickers in human flesh for centuries, as part of the Middle Passage.\(^1\) The convergence of science and the triangle trade in Atlantic spaces was hardly a new phenomenon in this era. As scholars like Christopher Iannini, Londa Schiebinger, and others have noted, “science traveled predominantly along trade routes” from the eighteenth century onward, as European slave traders were also joined in Atlantic waters by “colonial bioprospectors” who sailed through the New World in search of botanical sources for medicine, food, and luxury goods along these same routes.\(^2\)

The crew of HMS Beagle was returning, however, from a very different, if parallel, kind of journey. As a survey barque of the Royal Navy, the Beagle had already completed one hydrographic survey trip through the Americas from 1826 to 1830, and had embarked on this, its second journey, in the fall of 1831. But hydrographic research was not the primary
aim of this second venture. Rather, it set out to conclude an earlier scientific experiment: the HMS *Beagle* was returning three captives from Tierra del Fuego that FitzRoy, erratic captain and copious “collector,” had kidnapped during its first surveying voyage, in an act of ransom-turned-Christianizing mission.3

After spending nearly fourteen months in British custody, as neither enslaved laborers nor free colonial subjects but as objects of scientific and cultural curiosity, the three Fuegians (originally four in number—one had died of smallpox upon arrival in England) were sent back to their homeland, under the auspices of setting up a missionary settlement. FitzRoy had actually struggled for funding from the Royal Navy for this second trip. The Admiralty was not particularly keen on the Fuegian mission and also felt that further research in the southernmost Americas was unnecessary. But FitzRoy finally secured support for the return voyage, in part through the help of his well-connected uncle, the Duke of Grafton, and through Francis Beaufort, a friend and mentor in the Hydrographer’s Office, who advocated for the modernization and colonial expansion of Britain through the merging of nautical and scientific exploration.4

Darwin’s incidental appointment to this journey—based on FitzRoy’s last-minute request for a scientific “traveling companion” (in part to keep him sane on a passage through this ominous portion of the New World that had led the *Beagle*’s previous captain to suicide)—and the subsequent birth of a theory that would fundamentally challenge perceptions of science and culture for centuries to come, was thus made possible, in part, by FitzRoy’s spontaneous act of kidnapping and the necessity of the Fuegians’ return—a significant recrossing which I will address at further length in chapter 1.

In the course of Darwin and Fitzroy’s five-year journey aboard HMS *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836, the Atlantic became an increasingly complicated space for both colonists and captives alike. The British had passed the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, which outlawed the practice of slavery throughout its empire. Darwin witnessed some of the changes prompted by the act, as he had contact with some mariners and other scientists (like astronomer John Herschel) in southern Africa who were there, in part, to ensure this empire-wide mandate.5 During his stay here, as well as in St. Helena (where emancipation had actually been ongoing, in a phased process, since 1827, and where Chinese and Indian laborers were brought in to supplement the newly indentured workforce), Darwin—an
abolitionist himself—commented on the recently emancipated slaves he saw, and how they seemed to “value fully” their freedom. This observation, of course, overlooked the fact that these emancipated persons were still bound to the land and to their former masters as indentured servants for at least another two years before they could count themselves as “free.” And despite Britain’s attempts to police the Atlantic waters, it had not managed to entirely abolish the trade or the practice of slavery. For from here, the *Beagle* continued west, crossing through the Middle Passage back into the Americas, where the trade in Brazil, and its practice, in the southern United States, continued to flourish.

As the ship traversed these Atlantic waters, portals of profound historic, economic, and cultural significance, Darwin’s notebooks already contained, in great narrative detail, his varied encounters with the slave trade throughout his five-year journey. From his witness of trafficking (both legal and illegal) to his observations of emancipated and maroon communities; from the swift and desperate escape offered by slave suicide to the slow, gradual debasement of physical and emotional character that accompanied the cruelty of auctions and torture, Darwin’s narrative journey is haunted, in part, by the practices, ghosts, and remnants of the Atlantic’s most prosperous and horrifying business.

Darwin’s earliest comments on slavery point to the cultural hypocrisy he saw as central to its practice. For example, on April 8, 1832, during his first visit to Brazil, Darwin wrote that as he and his party rode along granite hills from the village of Ithacaia to Lagoa Marica, they came upon a group of runaway slaves who often worked to “eke out a subsistence” in this area by “cultivating a little ground.” However, they were soon discovered, and when a party of soldiers was sent, “the whole were seized with the exception of one woman, who, sooner than again be led into slavery, dashed herself to pieces from the summit of the mountain. *In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy.*”

Darwin’s antislavery remarks often relied on this relativistic comparison that sought to break down the socially constructed barriers between one group of humans and another. As the HMS *Beagle* pulled away from the Brazilian coast for the last time, Darwin began this long, passionate, and graphic diatribe, from which I offer a generous excerpt:

On the 19th of August we finally left the shores of Brazil. I thank God, I shall never again visit a slave-country. To this day, if I hear a distant
scream, it recalls with painful vividness my feelings, when passing a house near Pernambuco . . . that some poor slave was being tortured, yet knew that I was as powerless as a child even to remonstrate. . . . Those who look tenderly at the slave-owner, and with a cold heart at the slave, never seem to put themselves into the position of the latter:—what a cheerless prospect, with not even a hope of change! Picture to yourself the chance, ever hanging over you, of your wife and your little children—those objects which nature urges even the slave to call his own—being torn from you and sold like beasts to the first bidder! And these deeds are done and palliated by men, who profess to love their neighbours as themselves, who believe in God, and pray that his Will be done on earth!

Darwin’s sympathetic yet helpless stance performs quite keenly the conflicted nature of his personal sense of guilt about slavery. His words above are pleading and melodramatic, almost expiatory, turning on him even as they work, on the surface, to repress and assuage his guilt of voyeurism and cowardice in the face of violence, a guilt which is replayed in the act of confessing this encounter in writing. He begins by assuring readers that he will never, in fact, return to a slave country, distancing himself immediately from this practice, as well as these people (including the enslaved) as an outsider. Instead he admits his desire to repress the “painful vividness” he feels when any scream—of his own children in distress, perhaps—transports him back to a moment when he actually had an opportunity to help his fellow man: He passed by the home of suffering, in Pernambuco, where a slave was being tortured, and simply kept walking, insisting now that he was “powerless as a child even to remonstrate.” It is here that his confession of cowardice turns upon itself, as Darwin now dons the role of priest, responding with shame that men (like himself) could “profess to love their neighbours as themselves,” yet allow their fellow men (“even” the slave, whom nature has also endowed with a love for his own children) to be treated like beasts.

Darwin’s prose often vacillates throughout his work between these modes of distance and proximity, of witness and mastery, as if the larger political implications of his realizations about kinship are, in fact, too much to bear. As an abolitionist and member of the egalitarian elite class, Darwin did distance himself from a practice that he found barbaric and inhumane. However, as a European scientist aboard a vessel that had just released its own captives to their native homeland, and in a moment in which the Atlantic began to emerge as a space where the lines between
captivity and freedom, humanity and commodity, natural and cultured, native and migrant, became increasingly tenuous, Darwin’s journey and research were deeply intertwined with the legacy of Atlantic exploitations; a legacy as foundational to the new era of science as he was.  

As Darwin returned to England in the fall of 1836 and settled into his life at Down House to ruminate upon his findings, Atlantic persons had already begun to change the landscape of the New World: In Haiti, a successful slave revolt in the final years of the last century had already challenged deterministic notions of Africans’ so-called “natural” propensity for servitude and submission; the Native Baptists’ Christmas Slave Revolt in Jamaica (which began just as the HMS Beagle set sail on its legendary second voyage), though unsuccessful in its immediate aims, was a key factor in the British abolition of slavery; and although the 1830s marked a new kind of bondage to the West with indentured servitude in the recently emancipated British colonies (and a recent reparations deal made with France that would carry Haiti into its subsequent political and economic crises), the Atlantic space began, ever so slightly, to shift, as the routes of some ships offered new possibilities: to life in emancipated colonies, to Africa, to a sea that was rife with political uncertainty. Ships, then, became more opportunistic spaces than they once were for Africans who had not long ago been immediately transformed into cargo by setting foot inside their holds. There was a burgeoning realization along the shore-line that one’s status as subject or object was dependent on the permeable boundaries of conflicting nations and changing laws—clearly demarcated on land but murky in international waters. Movement offered a chance, for escape, and for reconstitution.

As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot famously noted, the Caribbean itself may have led the charge in these shifts in Atlantic space, as it had been an “undisciplined region” since Columbus landed there in 1492, refusing any categorization by Europeans to stand as its image of “the Savage Other.” Trouillot explains that “the swift genocide of the aboriginal populations, the early integration of the region into the international circuit of capital, the forced migrations of enslaved Africans and indentured Asian laborers, and the abolition of slavery by emancipation or revolution all meant that the Caribbean would not conform with the emerging divisions of Western academia.” Thus “the entire corpus of Caribbean cultural anthropology” can be read against this “basic incongruity between the traditional object of the discipline and the inescapable history of the region.”
My own title, *Undisciplined*, extends Trouillot’s formulation, tracing such incongruities in Atlantic spaces between the objects and parameters of disciplinary thought itself, and the historical and social processes that challenge, destabilize, or unravel them. It pairs the drama, for example, of Darwin’s transatlantic scientific journey that would eventually prove the speciousness of a hierarchical ordering of human beings (evolution), with the drama of economic and imperial enterprises built on that very premise of social hierarchy and purposeful design (colonization and slavery). I bring these stories together, performed as they are on the same stage, in order to add the magnifying lens of scientific inquiry to a critical examination of the Atlantic and the Americas first offered by scholars and writers like Paul Gilroy, Joseph Roach, Édouard Glissant, and James Clifford, and later honed by literary theorists like Sibylle Fischer and Laura Doyle. These earlier interrogations have taken on the problematic myths of national, cultural, and racial origins, and have argued the importance, instead, of reimagining the transatlantic space as an intercultural network that cannot be grasped, as Fischer has argued, by “teleological narratives.”

This book contributes to these interrogations by using Darwin’s own nonteleological narrative of human evolution—a narrative that emerged from his encounters with indigenous and enslaved American populations—as a starting point for reconsidering how Atlantic forms of personhood, culture, and nation continually disrupted European and Enlightenment categorizations. Darwin’s 1831 journey and the subsequent scientific articulations it provoked in biology, anthropology, and ethnography inaugurated a literary, cultural, and political era that effectively unsilenced an already active resistance to the European romance of origins. Darwin’s cautious title, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), in fact, belies his scientific narrative of a gradual, unceasing creolization.

The chapters that follow move through Darwin’s century through the varied journeys and archives of transatlantic scientific and literary border-crossers—from Darwin, Louis Agassiz, William James, and Pauline Hopkins in the first half, to Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Katherine Dunham in the second half. My emphasis, often on different kinds of writing or performance than that for which these particular figures are best known, also encourages a broader reading of how African American and Atlantic literature is counted as such, following in the spirit of scholars like Eric Gardner, whose urgent and astute remapping of the field of early
African American literature calls on readers to “broaden even further the list of authors and texts” that constitute this diverse canon. Crucial to my own book’s historical and generic frame is the formation, as well as the fault lines, of discrete disciplines in this period: the nascent fields of biology, anthropology, and psychology, tenuous and intertwined as they were, would offer theories that, in turn, modeled and mirrored the instability of other disciplinary categories like race and personhood. From notebooks to novels, letters to photographs, plays to dances, rituals to testimonies, the materials I use to investigate these fault lines themselves illustrate the overlapping terrains through which these ideas and disciplines traveled and unraveled.

When FitzRoy and Darwin returned to Tierra del Fuego in March 1834, thirteen months after depositing the three Fuegians in their homeland, they were astonished to find that their former charges had “reverted” back to their native way of life. Jemmy, York, and Fuegia (as these three persons had been renamed by FitzRoy and his crew) had abandoned the British customs they had so readily and successfully adopted during their brief stint abroad, and had fully reintegrated themselves back into Fuegian society. For the Fuegians, this reassimilation marked their successful reentry into their home communities. For the British, it stood as a mark of atavism.

Although Darwin and FitzRoy’s account (and the many that have followed, including my own) is admittedly a ventriloquized and limited filter for our knowledge of these three captive travelers, and while their true feelings will always remain unknowable, the record of subsequent encounters between the Britons and the Fuegians, especially with Jemmy, is particularly useful in our attempts to understand the malleability of cultural performance and the limits of interpretation, as I will discuss in more detail in chapter 1. In FitzRoy’s account of his reunion with Jemmy, the young man is described as initially ashamed to see his British counterparts again, but he soon opens up, reassuring them of his contentment. When FitzRoy expresses concern at Jemmy’s emaciated and unkempt appearance, the young Fuegian rejects this reading of his body, politely countering in English with the reassurance: “I am hearty, sir, never bet-... Plenty fruits, plenty birdies, ten guanacos in snow time, and too much fish.” When Jemmy later joins the captain for dinner aboard the Beagle, dressed and mannered as a proper Englishman, he assures his old British friend once again that “he did not wish to go back to England.”
He then introduces his British peers to the person who FitzRoy and Darwin hypothesize might be at the root of “this great change” in Jemmy: “his young and nice-looking wife.” FitzRoy’s Fuegian experiment thus seems to serve as profound a cultural lesson for the Britons as it was for Jemmy Button. In fact, Darwin wonders aloud whether this journey of defamiliarization had instilled in Jemmy a stronger sense of patriotism than before, writing that “I do not now doubt that he will be as happy as, perhaps happier than, if he had never left his own country.”

Jemmy’s sympathetic ability to read and reassure his British peers of his happiness and good health is not only a polite rejection of the British reading of his atavism but also a subtle but important example of the ways in which the studied subjects of scientific encounter worked to challenge the Enlightenment conception of self-determined personhood as a uniquely European trait. Neither Darwin nor FitzRoy could turn the Fuegians’ choice into a narrative of inevitability and determinism. Jemmy, York, and Fuegia had readily adapted to English culture when forced to do so, and just as easily reacculturated themselves to their home environment when given the opportunity.

This episode, a precursor to others like it that I will address in the chapters to follow, marks a pivotal moment in the crossing of disciplines and persons in Atlantic spaces that would shape the century to come. Through his exposure to this single-generation cultural transformation of the Anglicized Fuegians and their unassimilated counterparts at home, coupled with the “new way of seeing” and writing that his landscape and experiences demanded, Darwin’s journey through the Americas contributes to a burgeoning concept of cultural relativity, and bears witness to shifting practices of personhood in Atlantic spaces that would pave the way for a generation of others to link all humans “along the arc of culture.”

The narrative of the infamous second voyage of the Beagle and the tale of the three Fuegian travelers are by now well known. The effort to resituate Darwin’s travels, writings, and theories within a broader literary, historical, and philosophical framework (by scholars like George Levine, Cannon Schmitt, and Elizabeth Grosz, among others) has brought increased attention to his influence on nineteenth-century culture, his own racial politics, and the contemporary feminist implications of natural selection. Inspired by such cross-disciplinary investigations, I examine the ways in which the scientific and cultural entanglements of
Atlantic travelers in and beyond the Darwin era invite us to attend more closely to the consequences of mobility and migration on disciplines and persons.

New discourses and performances of personhood, culture, and nation emerged in the nineteenth century through these transatlantic crossings—of forced and voluntary migrations, and of scientific and colonial expeditions. Whether expressed as narratives of acculturation or as acts of resistance against the camera, the pen, or the shackle, the stories and assertions of the studied and stolen subjects of the Atlantic world add a new chapter to debates about personhood and disciplinarity in this era, in which biological and cultural kinship play a more dominant role in blurring the boundaries of racially determined personhood. These encounters and performances in Atlantic spaces—by observers and observed alike—also call for renewed attention to the creolization of the human sciences themselves, especially biology and anthropology, and the role they played—often in spite of their own purported aims—in challenging racial hierarchies.

Enlightenment discourse defined personhood in temporal and spatial terms of history and self-continuity. In John Locke’s well-known formulation, the person is a “thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places.” Despite conditions and circumstances, the possession of self-consciousness over time and space was the constitutive mark of personhood, according to Lockean philosophy. Thus even the prince who changes bodies with the cobbler, yet carries in his consciousness the memory of his princely past is still a prince, “accountable only for the prince’s actions.” By this extension, any embodied or material articulation of the prince—as animal, as machine, as oak tree—as long as it carries princely self-consciousness, may retain and claim his personhood as prince. But what happens to the princely self-consciousness in the slave body? Or in the body of an indigenous member of the Yamana or Arawak tribe?

As philosophers like Charles Mills have discussed, the abstract ideal of Enlightenment personhood assumed a racial polity that was white and male. Even the abstract, moral egalitarianism of Kant, which emphasized rationality and self-determination as the foundational markers of personhood rested on a dichotomy, or a “dark ontology,” as Mills calls it, characterized by the willful and naturalized exclusion of enslaved and colonized persons from a discourse of rights and personhood.
Thus when it came to personhood and the raced subject in the social and political discourse of the eighteenth century and beyond, the criteria of self-knowledge and self-assertion were replaced with the criteria of acknowledgment and recognition. Social personhood, in the case of the raced and colonized body, was an ontology not of self-determination but of other-determination, legitimated only through the granting power of a class that had already turned many of these persons into property. The willful omission of the raced subject from Enlightenment definitions of equality and personhood served to justify and perpetuate slavery, colonialism, and segregation well into the twentieth century and beyond.

In nineteenth-century legal discourse, too, enslaved persons, while counted as “natural” persons, were also demarcated according to their condition as property and “sometimes ranked not with persons but with things.”23 Like Locke’s anecdote of the prince and the cobbler, there was a difference in legal discourse between one’s natural status as human and one’s social status as person. Any man was a human, but only a man of social rank could be a person.24

But on both sides of the Atlantic and throughout the Americas, Afro-diasporic writers and activists fought back against this Enlightenment erasure through their participation in the public sphere. From the penning of slave narratives to the petition of freedom suits and land rights suits, these diasporic and native persons challenged their exclusion from the social polity by using the very technologies of print and public circulation of information that had marked, counted, legislated, hunted, and displaced their bodies (whether in slave ledgers, bills of sale, wills, land treaties, or fugitive advertisements) to instead now record and pronounce their socially recognizable, legally viable personhood.25

However, as scholars Jeannine DeLombard and Edlie Wong remind us in their important contributions to the role of print culture and legal discourse in the nineteenth-century construction of a diasporic “counterpublic,” the act of making a claim for personhood or freedom carried inherent risks and contradictions, especially for the enslaved. Slave plaintiffs “assumed the guise of free persons to bring petitions for freedom even as the outcome of the trial was to determine their status.” This “elliptical temporality” led to a performance of personhood that was always “belated and contingent” and that held within its very performance the potential of its negation.26

But in a strange yet predictable twist, it was often the charge of criminality against the slave that fully “activated his personhood,” as
DeLombard explains: “Having been transformed from human property into legal person,” the accused becomes a legible presence in the public sphere “through published trial transcripts, press accounts, scaffold orations, gallows broadsides, or pamphlet confessions.” Though it marked a punitive entry into political membership, the criminal justice arm of the law nevertheless had a socially transformative if ironic power, resuscitating the civilly dead human into the socially viable person. However fleeting and spectral this resurrection, it nevertheless laid the groundwork for alternative paths to African American civic presence, its constant circulation through newspapers and narrative inspiring activists like Frederick Douglass to learn to “talk ‘lawyer like’ about law” and to “seek reentry into the polity on more equitable, civil terms.”

Scientific narrative, I contend, played a similar role in this era, as a means of allowing a new, visible point of entry into social personhood, in part, as a result of its own accessibility and circulation, and in part, because of its emphasis on observation, experience, and encounter. When Darwin’s *Journal of Researches* hit bookshelves in 1839, it was an immediate, global best seller. Science, even as it increasingly emphasized professionalization, specialization, and objectivity as its main aims, remained a discipline that was not one. For it offered as much in the way of philosophy, literature, travel narrative, cultural study, and social theory as it did in the way of “pure” science. In fact, the term “science” did not become metonymous with “natural and physical science” until the middle of the century. Not only did the wide circulation of scientific narrative, even during these professionalizing years (from popular science magazines and travel narratives to atlases and ethnological field studies) produce readers who could learn to talk “scientist like” about the new science, but the range of its journeys and encounters with others also provided a new avenue for the viability and legibility of diasporic persons, sometimes against its very intent.

Like the vexed role of criminal personhood, initial stagings of diasporic and indigenous personhood caught or marked by science did not by any means translate into heroic or redemptive acts of social inclusion. These displays (like photographic documentation, for example) were typically manipulated by scientists, readers, and viewers to further hierarchize, exoticize, and disenfranchise those whose voices they purported to unsilence, and/or whose bodies they made visible, as in the case of Louis Agassiz’s South Carolina slave daguerreotypes and photographs of “mixed types” in Brazil, which I discuss in chapter 2.
Darwin himself, of course, participated in this staging of personhood, as he returned often (in his writings) to his encounters with native and diasporic people as he struggled with questions of species difference throughout his work, leading to several misappropriations of his overall theory of organic continuity. Darwin defined personhood through conscience or “the moral sense” (the ability to express sympathy, which is greater, even, than love), something that separated animals from persons. However, he remained conflicted by the differences he saw in behavior between “higher animals,” like dogs and monkeys, and the “lower men” he had met throughout his travels, as he so deemed the Australians and the unacclimatized Fuegians. Yet despite the fact that he would rather see himself as descended from “that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper . . .—as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies,” Darwin had to admit that these were behavioral differences, not fixed biological—or even fixed cultural—traits. He experienced the relativity of these differences from the outset of his journey, of course, traveling with his fully acculturated Fuegian shipmates, who displayed as much moral sense when offering sympathy to the perpetually seasick Darwin aboard the Beagle as they did when comforting FitzRoy that they were doing quite well back home again. Personhood, in Darwin’s scientific theory, as well as in his vexed social encounters, was a designation free of biologically determined gradations between humans.  

Such accounts, conflicted as they are, work to expand the archive of debates about personhood in this period and beyond. Scientific travel, as an always-already creolized project that merged a study of the diversifying natural and cultural spaces of the New World with the strict social order of the metropole, reflected and responded to these debates through its journeys and encounters in the Atlantic world. The artifacts and narratives of these scientific encounters with indigenous and diasporic persons represented and contributed to the reality of a world of cultures and peoples in flux. As I will show in the chapters that follow—through the transatlantic encounters of Charles Darwin; through the experiences of William James in Brazil and Pauline Hopkins’s fictional Reuel Briggs in Ethiopia; and through the twentieth-century ethnographic performances of Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay in Jamaica, and of Katherine Dunham and Langston Hughes in Haiti—Atlantic persons continually participated in the construction of a scientific “counterpublic” that dislodged personhood from an Enlightenment definition rooted in teleological concepts of origin and self-continuity, emphasizing instead the dynamic process
of change common to both biological and cultural life. This transatlantic personhood, as a status rooted in (or rather, routed through) movement, reflected far more accurately (and inflected with more political possibility) the performative, both/and dynamism inherent in Locke’s example of the prince and the cobbler, of the “retractable personhood” of slaves in legal and literary discourse, and the ceaseless becoming and unbecoming at the heart of evolutionary theory.32

Undisciplined follows, as it progresses, the work of those raced subjects who stepped out from behind the lens of observation to become transatlantic observers themselves, performing the inherent interdisciplinarity and codependence of scientific and cultural inquiry. For even as scientific practitioners emphasized specialization and discrete boundaries for their work, scientific practice and its results had always drawn on multiple, overlapping fields and were unbound from any overdetermined narrative of singularity.33 From the desire to build a static program of documentation and order, then, emerged a mobile and mobilizing language of the other, as observed subjects in the post-Darwin era slowly began to professionalize and move into the role of observers, effectively manipulating the performative nature of scientific inquiry by wresting the tools and strategies of observation and analysis away from their captors. In doing so, disciplinary border crossers like Hopkins, Hurston, McKay, C. L. R. James, Dunham, and Hughes also reveal the ways in which race is not simply a “fictional” category in the development of human societies but, far more crucially, a central factor in the formation, struggle, and dismantling of disciplinary thought.

Performance is critical to my raced interrogation of persons and disciplines in this era, as it is to all studies of race and diaspora.34 But it takes on a particular resonance for a project concerned with ethno-scientific discussions of raced personhood, as a primary definition of “person” is itself rooted in performance. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “person,” first, as “a role or character assumed in real life, or in a play, etc.; a part, function, or office; a persona; a semblance or guise. Hence: any of the characters in a play or story.”35 Such a definition brings to light the malleability, contingency, and, of course, the co-optability of personhood.

While performance theory in the past has been criticized for its links with anthropological projects tied to the perpetuation of imperialism, “in which the raw materials of the world (including its cultures and peoples) were and are grist for the colonial mill of western industry and capitalist production,” theorists like Ric Knowles and others have introduced
“a new kind of rhizomatic (multiple, non-hierarchical, horizontal) intercultural performance-from-below,” which makes it an important part of my own methodological apparatus. The “embodied practice” of performance offers a very particular way of knowing and seeing that emphasizes movement, presence, and exchange, mediating, as it does in my own work, between the “collective memory” of history, and the “new, potential, and virtual.” We see this, for example, in the work of Katherine Dunham, who brings together the diasporic histories of Haitian and U.S. culture in both her ethnography and her dance choreography, or in the dramatic representations of the Haitian revolution staged by Langston Hughes and C. L. R. James. This performative personhood is not always a celebratory position, nor does it always translate into legal and social legibility or reparation, but neither does it ask for permission or risk negation—it simply is and does. Confirmed by science and performed throughout the Atlantic world, this diasporic personhood brought increased attention to the hypocrisies of enslavement and colonization.

The Creolized Atlantic

Before the 1800s, the British Atlantic was a much more disciplining space, especially for the human commodities shipped across its waters. “Unlike the ship, which plied back and forth,” explains historian Stephanie Smallwood, “the human commodities followed a relentlessly linear course: the direction of their transatlantic movement never reversed. Ships traced circles. Commodities traveled in a straight line.” But, in part because the New World African diaspora had been “nourished . . . by the perennial flow of captives on the slave ship’s one-way route of terror,” there was a gradual shift in subsequent generations of captives who stood on the shoreline of their now-native New World and watched new tides of ships come back in the historic wake of their parents’ journeys. For them, the act of looking was not a backward glance to captivity but a forward vision that could promise escape and freedom. Also, as the African trade route became less populated by midcentury, more of these ships traveled within and across colonial coastal waters, transporting captives back and forth between colonial territories. These ships and the ocean upon which they traveled—once charting a singular course to captivity—now became more malleable spaces, fraught not simply with fear but opportunity. The Atlantic itself, then, was an undisciplining space that could, through the
sheer act of movement across its waters, allow a status shift in the legal and social constitution of one’s body.

In acts of shipboard rebellions, the ship, much like the ocean itself, transformed from a holding cell to a prosthetic extension of the fugitive slave’s body—a vehicle of mobility and possible reconstitution—demanding recognition in its deliberate provocation of international conflict. In the case of the Creole (1841), U.S. slave rebels took over a ship en route from Virginia to New Orleans and demanded to be taken to a free Caribbean island. Although the rebels were taken into British custody when they arrived in Nassau, they were released weeks later. The other 116 slaves aboard were granted immediate freedom. It seems “The 19” rebels, and their leader, Madison Washington, were well aware that, under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British recognized African captives as colonial subjects, even if they had been deemed property under another nation’s jurisdiction. Britain’s decision not to extradite these men to the United States, as Maggie Sale details in her history of both the Creole and Amistad (1839) rebellions, “asserted a definitive position on an institution whose status was both changing and ambiguous.”

The rebels tested the legal enforcement of Britain’s Slavery Abolition Act on international waters and also exposed the adaptability of a diasporic personhood whose “retractability” could work in a politically radical way. Donning British subjectivity as a strategic assertion of resistance to commodification, the rebels on the Creole illustrate the ways in which Atlantic spaces invited more complicated performances of personhood that mirrored, the (albeit, much more gradual) chaos of evolutionary performance—not always a progressive, teleological journey to freedom or liberation, but always a space of continual change, movement, and reconstitution.

While the fate of the freed Africans in Nassau has been lost from the historic record, their intra-Atlantic journey reminds us of the importance of the New World itself in the shaping of nineteenth-century science and personhood. Just as the Atlantic became an increasingly contested space in the nineteenth century, so the Americas had long been a space of cultural reconstitution—a space where kinship ties were constantly made anew and generations of creolized enslaved persons from across various parts of the Atlantic moved about and converged with new generations of voluntary and involuntary settlers alike. As anthropologists have noted, in regions where established creolized slave populations, as in the Carolina Lowcountry, were suddenly inundated with new Africans in the
eighteenth century, “African culture was not surviving—it was arriving.”

The space of the Americas continued to rehearse conflicting dramas of New World arrival for the repeated cycles of immigrants, settlers, and captives still crossing over and through its boundaries.

Creolization, like personhood, is a term with a long and ironically territorial disciplinary history, in part because of its increasingly capacious geographic and intellectual terrain. Contemporary scholars have correctly criticized this very gesture of American societies and diaspora scholars to “recast creolization as a more fortunate process productive of cultures and individual abilities distinct from, and possibly superior to, those found in the Old World.” Creolization has had various overlapping and oppositional meanings for Caribbean and Atlantic world scholars, for postcolonialists, for anthropologists, and for literary theorists. From its rich history in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world as a term that articulated the fusion of European and African languages and persons in Caribbean spaces, creolization soon came to stand for the pan-African solidarity that shaped the Négritude movement of the 1930s.

By the mid-twentieth century, historians and anthropologists Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Sidney Mintz, and Richard Price worked to extend this term to include and recover the traces of indigenous people wiped out by European contact and to embrace the presence of those outside the Afro-European diaspora who also contributed to Caribbean créolité, such as Asians and Middle Easterners. As Martinican writers Jean Barnabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant wrote in their 1989 declaration *In Praise of Creoleness*, “Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles.”

Later, postcolonial Caribbean scholars like Édouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez-Rojo insisted on a broader, yet unintentionally limited definition of creolization as an infinite and ceaseless process that does away with the notion of “fixed being” as a concept imposed by the West. In Glissant’s formulation, colonial travel first instantiated the need to “fix” the notions of the rooted identity in the metropole. Conquerors became “the moving, transient root of their people,” and the West is “where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world.” This confluence of colonial travelers, their (human) cargo, and the legacies of devastation, prosperity, or restructuring they wrought on those other continental points of the triangular trade carried the very contradiction to the fixed and rooted identity it so staunchly asserted. The desire to extend European personhood
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abroad led to its very disavowal in diaspora. Emerging from a European desire to expand, know, and fix the world into discrete and legible categories, the mission of colonial enterprise instead witnessed and contributed to this infinite process of creolization. But what such postcolonial readings often leave out is the role of interculture already at work in these sites, long before and well after European contact, and just as importantly, the continued significance of bounded local histories and identities in these spaces that cannot and should not be wiped out or dismissed in the wake of narratives of incessant change that are dangerously teetering on a tacit, if unintentional, acceptance of the neoimperial force of globalization—one that is already wreaking an all-too-reminiscent havoc on local communities. Such a reading—one that uproots notions of fixity and belonging from the Old World only to replant them in the New World—also risks denying the coevality of contemporary Africans, Indians, Asians, and indigenous groups across the globe.47

Thus, as contemporary historians and anthropologists have rightfully protested, creolization, as a term with such a complex and sometimes oppositional cultural history, has often been diluted of its specificity to simply stand as a synonym for cultural mixture, or worse, as a teleological narrative that is tinged with Herskovitzian celebrations of African continuities in the New World (a problem I take up, historiographically, in chapter 3). But the process of creolization—of disciplines and persons—is neither a teleological movement nor some fixed product of cultural fusion. Rather, it is a pattern of dynamic and ceaseless change, or perhaps, as Charles Stewart has suggested, a pattern of “restructuring.” Stewart’s more cautious formulation is attentive to the historical baggage of the term and moves us away from utopian and unidirectional understandings of it. “Restructuring can involve mixture,” Stewart grants, but “it can also occur through the internal reorganization of elements or through a simplification of features without the addition of any exogenous elements.” Creolization, in this sense, as I also read it, is the always-already there and elsewhere of intellectual and organic matter.48

The period under examination offers a moment in which this process was first articulated systematically in and as scientific practice, and eventually given a name: evolution. This scientific theory helps us to move away from an Enlightenment model of personhood rooted in a static and singular concept of self-continuity. It encourages, instead, the embrace of a diasporic model of personhood routed in the migration, multiplicity, and shifting relations and boundaries across cultures and territories alike.
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Undisciplining the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century has historically been figured as the disciplinary moment in the modern history of the West, when the cataloguing and classifying of the natural world, and the regulatory structures of institutions and the state, imposed order and manufactured uniformity, offering a narrative teleology—perhaps even a kind of cultural caesura—to rapid societal and demographic changes. The nineteenth century was a pivotal moment in the instantiation of the catalogue and the state, as theorists and anthropologists like Michel Foucault and James C. Scott have outlined, and in the discursive transformation of “living beings” into “life” itself; a moment when events became the constitutive markings of History, and when historical documents, from passbooks to birth certificates, became the markings of legibility and state control—“the authoritative tune to which most of the population must dance.”

In Discipline and Punish (1975), Foucault points specifically to the nineteenth-century penal system, and the slow extension of its “penitentiary technique” onto the entire social body, spreading outward like a “carceral archipelago” from prisons to charitable societies to workers’ lodgings, until “this great carceral network reaches all the disciplinary mechanisms that function throughout society.” This “calculated management of life,” as Scott, Foucault, and others have traced, was a necessary function of power and order, a symptomatic reaction to the uncontainable proliferation of bodies and ideas. The emergence, then, of both biopower and modern statecraft was not a natural consequence of scientific or social change but an imposed project of colonization and control, glossed, as Scott reminds us, “as a ‘civilizing mission.’”

FitzRoy’s own Fuegian “civilizing mission,” coincident with Darwin’s last-minute appointment to the journey, thus provides a fitting example, on a single ship, of the contrasting impulses to capture, discipline, and make legible, as FitzRoy wished to do with his Fuegian shipmates, and the impulse to absorb and experience the movement, change, and disorder of the organic world, as Darwin did on that same journey.

It is important to note, of course, that such a juxtaposition is not meant to assign a heroic or positivist role to any of the scientists and writers I engage in my work. While I do believe that evolutionary science challenged disciplinary logic by providing profound insight into the pro cessual, networked, and disordered nature of living systems, this book does not privilege a phenomenological or subject-oriented approach. Like
Foucault, I believe that “the historical analysis of scientific discourse should . . . be subject, not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice.”

Elizabeth Grosz, whose work also parallels this new era of science with shifting understandings of cultural and social life, explains the ways in which Darwinian science “transformed the concept of life, in quite dramatic but commonly unrecognized ways, from a static quality into a dynamic process.” Darwin’s writings offered a new expression of ontology for the nineteenth century and beyond, one in which “being is transformed into becoming, essence into existence,” and “life is now understood, perhaps for the first time in the sciences, as fundamental becoming, becoming in every detail.” Evolutionary thought thus also offers a new way of thinking about historical movement as unpredictable becoming, as “related species in the past prefigure and provide the raw material for present and future species but in no way contain or limit them.”

Unlike the ordered History that Foucault discusses and that has become synonymous with Enlightenment personhood and nineteenth-century concerns with classification, surveillance, and fixity, the historical movement to which Grosz alludes, and that I take up in my analysis, mirrors the “excessive productivity” of the evolutionary process, “with each culture an expression of its excessive and multiple possibilities of transformation and elaboration, each culture a surprise to and a development of nature itself.” Evolutionary process is not synonymous with the “natural history” that is the product of discourse and taxonomy as posited by Foucault, nor can it be tied (incorrectly, as it often is) to the imperialist rhetoric of racial superiority. Rather, this movement—dynamic, complex, shifting—is a reflection of both nature and culture in the modern era.

“This dynamism of life,” explains Grosz, “is not only cultural existence but also cultural resistance.” Darwinian science, then, “provokes a concern with the possibilities of becoming, and becoming-other” which are vital to both biological and cultural life. This dynamism was not a new process, but Darwin and other transatlantic travelers and writers offered, for the first time, a new articulation of this constant, dynamic movement of change, this ceaseless becoming and becoming-other. It is through such articulations and movements that we may begin to look at the Atlantic and the Americas as spaces that challenged the disciplining logic of the nineteenth century.
This disciplining logic works in two different but interrelated ways in my readings, as I am concerned with both the disciplining of persons (particularly through the legacy of enslavement, displacement, and racial classifications) and the concurrent rise of disciplinary fields like anthropology and biology from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Both of these concerns incorporate Foucault’s dynamic understanding of “discipline” as both an act and a category that contains difference—carrying it as well as policing it. While this was, indeed, a period marked by the emergence of disciplines that sought to manage, name, and fix difference, they nevertheless reflected in their epistemic and literal boundaries a recognition of difference that threatened the static figure of the (white, male) human subject as the fiction upon which this disciplining logic was built, and the fiction that evolutionary theory actively unraveled.57

These disciplinary and regulatory forces were, indeed, forming, growing, legislating, cataloguing, and fixing others in their places. However, they were doing so as a symptomatic and anxious response to the proliferation of difference, a germ of resistance that could not, as the human sciences began to prove at this time, be contained or quelled. For “the real, geographic and terrestrial space” in which these disciplinary forces worked, as Foucault points out, “confronts us with creatures that are interwoven with one another, in an order which, in relation to the great network of taxonomies, is nothing more than chance, disorder, or turbulence.”58

Yet discipline aims to neutralize even the effects of “counter-power” that may result from the imposition of order itself, from “the forces that are formed,” as Foucault outlines in later work, “from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity,” like slaves, for example (though Foucault doesn’t specify), who may “form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions—anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions.”59

The problem with this view of resistance is that it is still grounded in collective order, and privileges human desire—it is a horizontal conjunction, a human-centered, end-driven resistance. My focus, instead, is on the kind of ontology offered by Darwin’s science, one that links his writings most directly with a non-subject-oriented humanities, and a prosternal but nonteleological vision of life, as Grosz once again also advocates in her most recent work.60 This ontology is centered not on human life, but instead on “the relentless operations of difference, whose implications we are still unraveling.”61
The aim of my own study is to prioritize these “operations of difference” over disciplinarity. For it is difference that compels disciplines and gives them their regulatory power, but it is also the key to their unraveling, as it is always moving and can never be contained. Although my analysis is necessarily human-centered, prioritizing racial difference and diasporic movement across the Atlantic as central to the destabilization of disciplines in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I am interested, like Grosz, in the broader “inhuman work” this difference can do.

Thus my conception of personhood, though significantly and deliberately tied to the lived experience of persons, is meant to extend beyond human notions of subjectivity and disciplinarity. In this sense, it is like Darwinian conceptions of life itself as elaborated above; it is neither a fixed nor stable category of identity but can be understood only and always as a process of movement and mutability.

**Personhood**

As with disciplinarity, we may think of personhood as a term still entrenched in eighteenth-century European philosophies of self-knowledge and self-continuity, and the politics of legal fixity, surveillance, and control that came to define the century that followed. Scholars like Colin Dayan have referred to the legal acts of “making and unmaking persons” as a kind of “negative personhood,” in which slaves, criminals, animals, and other detainees are “disabled by law.” The meaning of “person” in legal terms, especially during this era, was “shifting and tentative” in similar ways to those I engage. From freedom suits in the United States like those of Marguerite Scypion (1805) and Dred Scott (1857), to the Negro Seamen Acts (1824–26) and the second Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, personhood was a term bound directly to the regulation and disciplining of bodies in space. Yet the fraught, uncontainable nature of this term is precisely what necessitated its constant legislation, especially when its meaning could be challenged, and sometimes transformed, through acts of movement. Personhood could not function as a universal performative utterance, as “I am” did not hold up in a legal court for persons like Dred Scott and the 575 others who had sued for their freedom, in U.S. courts alone, by midcentury. Within the legal and classificatory discourse of the nineteenth century, one had to be interpellated and made legible by others as a person in order to be recognized and legally constituted as a person.
As a result, the human claims of identity, individualism, and embodied knowledge of the self had little bearing on a rights-based bestowal of social and political personhood.

I encourage, therefore, an alternate understanding of personhood, one that emerges not from legal or classificatory discourse but from evolutionary discourse. Just as Darwin himself struggled to map, in words, a process that could not be contained, and yet had to settle on evolution—a word that has been so misconstrued since then—so personhood becomes, for me, a similar rhetorical placeholder for a shifting, unbounded process whose very articulation in language fixes it in place, thereby contradicting what it does in practice. I track this parallel trajectory of personhood and science through an examination of encounter in the Americas—between European naturalists and indigenous, creolizing groups; between immigrant and African American artist-ethnographers from the United States and the native and diasporic peoples of the northern and southern Americas. By making encounter, not agents, the locus of political possibility in social, literary, and scientific discourse, Undisciplined interrogates the constructed ideologies of race and subjectivity in the modern West. By extracting the influence of science and scientific inquiry from a particular brand of European individualism steeped in fixed notions of race and progress, my interrogations reveal how a more open, transformative consideration of science and diasporic movement in this period can work to undermine not just disciplinary thought, but the very logic of slavery and imperialism itself.

I call on new materialist approaches that emphasize the importance of merging philosophy and history, natural and social science, to fully engage with an embodied but nonagential understanding of the material world. “Ontological commitments,” as Stephen White has emphasized, are “entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively.” But if we privilege articulation over function, we risk prioritizing a subject-oriented, positivist approach to science, which is precisely what my work seeks to overturn. Indebted to but departing from a Cartesian divide between matter and agency, new materialist philosophy insists instead on “describing active processes of materialization of which embodied humans are an integral part, rather than the monotonous repetitions of dead matter from which human subjects are apart.” In my own work, the static figure of the (white, male) human subject is the fiction upon which narratives of racial subjection are built, and the fiction that evolutionary theory actively unraveled.
But how might we begin to think about issues of nineteenth- and twentieth-century personhood and racial politics outside the realm of the subject? How can we engage what Denise Ferreira da Silva defines as an “analytics of raciality”—one that does not aim to transcend or obliterate racial difference, but prioritizes the productive centrality of race in the construction of globality—without fully attending to the constitution and function of personhood and subjectivity as fixed categories within the history of slavery and colonialism?

To supplant a disciplinary understanding of personhood with a processual one enables a more radical politics of difference that moves beyond the management and ordering of it, the obliteration of it, or transcendence of it, all of which are by-products of a disciplinary order that privileges hierarchy and stasis. To undiscipline personhood is to recognize it not as the originary moment of being, but as a constant ontological process of becoming, which has powerful implications for a critical race theory that reimagines subjects, as theorists like Nikolas Rose, Gilles Deleuze, and Alexander Weheliye have articulated, as racial and technological assemblages, which have the ability to “change their properties as they expand their connections, that ‘are’ nothing more or less than the changing connections into which they are associated.”

The premodern era of the human sciences advanced boundaries between the human and the animal, the natural world and the social world that were “much more uncertain and fluctuating” than they became in the nineteenth century, after the formalization of the human sciences. The pre-Socratic Heraclitus, for example, also advocated a theory of becoming over being, postulating that “change is the fundamental reality rather than something derivative to be explained.” But by the nineteenth century, taxonomy had become the key to situating oneself amid the chaos of change, and self-recognition became the distinguishing feature of man—the exceptional animal who was human because he knew himself to be human. Modern anthropology worked dangerously alongside this premise, functioning “by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human.”

Biology and anthropology emerged and traveled in a parallel trajectory in this era, struggling to assert the premise of human exceptionality in spaces that refused to yield to such disciplining categories as the subject and the self. Even postmodern anthropology struggled to come to terms with these more fluid notions of personhood it encountered in the field.
As anthropologist Clifford Geertz has famously stated: “The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures.”

Yet from E. B. Tylor in 1871 to Rane Willerslev in 2007, anthropologists have long noticed that personhood was a variable concept in the cultures they studied: “Rather than being an inherent property of people and things,” personhood was constituted in and through relationships, a “potentiality” of “being-in-the-world” that could be granted as freely to animals as to people, depending on the context.

Thus if we look at how the practice of biology and anthropology work together, not by prioritizing the end result of classification, nomination, or cultural translation but by examining the actual events to which its practitioners are exposed—different cultural practices, rituals, forms, and different organic processes, all in flux, transforming and transformative—we gain insight into the way difference works, in these spaces. For “it is hard to impose a notion of progress, of superiority and inferiority,” as Grosz notes, and as Darwin found aboard the Beagle, “when the only criterion of success is the ingenuity of adaptation, and the only necessary proof of adaptation is our current existence.”

Darwin’s writings, often cited for their dangerous alliance—through acts of manipulative misinterpretation—with social programs that used them to back their racist claims, actually provided a much more fluid, intertwined vision of nature and culture. The Darwinian moment thus becomes a vital mirror, as I will argue, for what had already been happening in the Atlantic space for generations; for the transformative change articulated in his science is based, in part, on his cultural encounters with Fuegians, Africans, and others. This theory of a world in flux contributed to a growing and diverse transatlantic archive—anthropological, literary, and political—that may now provide contemporary literary theorists, historians of science, and anthropologists with a fresh angle of approach to old narratives of nineteenth- and twentieth-century science and anthropology. Troubling as these narratives remain, we may now look upon them evolutionarily (that is, non-teleologically), with a broader understanding of race and difference as networked, mobile, and ontologically foundational to the construction of modernity and globality.
The mimetic acts inspired by the evolution of the human sciences alongside the continued experiment of colonial encounter also implore us to examine more closely the space between representation and authenticity. More specifically, they ask us to consider how (or whether) we can transform these stories of narration and representation into the so-called truth of personhood and experience, or into an active politics of justice. This has been the struggle of all disciplines of representation, including anthropology, which has historically been criticized, as Michael Taussig diagnoses, for engaging in the “redemptive” work of “rescuing the ‘voice’ of the [Other] from the obscurity of pain and time. From the represented shall come that which overturns representation.”

Such acts of mimetic encounter often appear as moments of literal or symbolic mirroring throughout my own work (as in the paragraph just above), but they offer neither redemption nor rescue. Rather, they exemplify the presence of an ongoing dialectic of disorder and undisciplining through and against ordered observation. Some of these “mirror moments,” jarringly, even if fleetingly, did force observers to face the colonial violence of their gaze in the moment of encounter, yet also enabled them to justify their redemptive presence. However, if we attend carefully to these porous borders between disciplines and persons, between observers and observed, across the development of the human sciences, we increasingly find that the power of the representational moment—the moment of the mutual glance in the studied encounter—lies in its imminent potential to take down the hierarchical scaffold upon which it so precariously teeters.

In myriad examples of such moments throughout this work, both observers and observed move promiscuously through the looking glass of observation, often exchanging places as well as (and sometimes through their) glances, exposing this “colonial mirror of production” as the fun-house mirror of performative conceit it has, in fact, always been. Thus the function of mirroring throughout this text is a deeply political one, in which the act of representation is overturned not by a validating, voice-granting presence but through the persistent subversion of the assumed order, authority, and stability of the representational lens.

Unraveling Subjects: A Narrative Overview

Undisciplined brings together four diverse but representative journeys across the Atlantic that reveal personhood as a diasporic process that
reflected and influenced changes in scientific practice. I begin my investigations with Charles Darwin’s encounters and travels with the native tribes of Tierra del Fuego, which helped to launch his theory of the living world in constant flux. Of course, this was not a novel concept in the natural sciences by the time of Darwin’s journey. Geologists like William Buckland and Charles Lyell, and naturalists like Alexander von Humboldt, Georg Forster, Georges-Louis LeClerc Buffon, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Thomas Huxley, and Darwin’s famous contemporary, Alfred Russell Wallace, had been hinting at geological and biological continuities, for many years. What was new about Darwin’s moment, and the century that followed, is the influence such scientific theories would come to wield on modern political understandings and cultural performances of raced personhood. As I move through the century, I also move back and forth across the Atlantic, from Tierra del Fuego to London, from Brazil to Boston to Ethiopia, from Harlem to Jamaica, and from Chicago and Harlem back to Haiti. This movement brings Darwin’s journey into relationship with the exploitative photographic experiments performed by naturalist Louis Agassiz in Brazil, artist-ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston in Jamaica, and Katherine Dunham in Haiti, among other important figures (like Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, Claude McKay, C. L. R. James, and Langston Hughes).

Chapters 1 and 2 thus chart a transformative moment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which scientific disciplines were in flux, emerging and merging with one another as they shifted from truth-to-nature forms of pure observation to an interest in objectivity, to an emphasis on psychic experience. I trace these transitions through the effects of cross-cultural encounter between Euro-American scientists and local inhabitants, from Tierra del Fuego to Brazil to Ethiopia. I begin with a history of European encounter in Tierra del Fuego, and its influence on Darwin’s re-vision of the human. From there, I move to Louis Agassiz’s documentation of the differences between “pure” and “hybrid” human types in Brazil, and the counterinfluence this journey had on the eventual political and scientific life of his own traveling companion, a young William James. Agassiz’s attempted documentation of alleged degeneration through race mixture, in the form of portrait-style photographs, was aimed at proving that interracial union led to dangerous mongrelization and eventual extinction. Instead, this photographic archive offered a stunning narrative of resilience, survival, and a resistant refusal of the pseudoscientific gaze. It also had a lasting influence on the professional
life of William James, then a medical student of Agassiz at Harvard, who
signed on to the Brazilian expedition as an incidental traveler and collec-
tor, much like Darwin had done thirty years prior. James’s own experi-
ences with illness and recovery on the journey, and his encounters with
the people of Brazil, inspired a very different kind of hybridity than the
kind Agassiz sought in vain to document: a professional hybridity that
went on to influence the work of W. E. B. Du Bois—quite directly—in his
theories of double consciousness. James went on to work at the disciplin-
ary boundaries of the psychic and the scientific, joined by contemporaries
like Martin Delany, and influencing the work of other race scholars, too,
like Pauline Hopkins, who found in his explorations of dual conscious-
ness and the transpersonal, the transformative potential to shift the race
“problem” into a race solution. Hopkins’s Of One Blood (1903) takes up the
work and path of James most directly, as it follows the journey of a mixed-
race medical student at Harvard, secretly passing as white, who eventu-
ally learns that he is heir to the throne of a hidden but thriving Ethiopian
kingdom. Hopkins’s protagonist, Reuel Briggs, is a kind of composite fig-
ure of Delany and James, a medical student with mesmeric powers, whose
own journey of double consciousness, self-discovery, and “second sight”
comes through an archaeological expedition across Atlantic waters. The
competing narratives of raced personhood at play in this chapter—of an
ethnological exploration that linked racial mixture with degeneration and
extinction, and a literary-psychological exploration that instead priori-
tized interracial union as the key to a noble, global future that merges the
best of America and Africa in a single body—reveal the central impor-
tance of race in scientific and literary narratives of this period, and even
more specifically, how the suturing of literature and science during this
period encouraged an undisciplined and otherwise unimaginable por-
trayal of personhood as transhistorical, transpersonal, and inherently
diasporic.78

Chapters 3 and 4 explore twentieth-century ethnographic encounters,
alliances, and mentoring relationships that alternatingly encouraged and
discouraged the study and assertion of personhood as a practice that pre-
cedes and exceeds taxonomies of self and nation. The creole performances
of rebels involved in the Jamaican Christmas Revolt of 1831 highlight the
broader historical shifts in the definition and performance of culture in
the foundational, if controversial, work of ethnographers like Franz Boas,
Melville Herskovits, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston. This sec-
tion investigates the position of culture as both a shifting practice and
an object of scientific study. As anthropology charted its course for the new century, its practitioners struggled to capture authentic moments of cultural practice without giving in to a Eurocentric approach to observation and study (often willfully resisting such approaches mandated by mentors and patrons), employing instead the basic tenets of a relativistic approach that was accidentally inaugurated by a British naturalist (Darwin) and retranslated for their field by a New World immigrant (Boas). But culture, like personhood, proves too elusive for any kind of capture, as ethnographers like Hurston would learn in their encounters with American peoples.

The book concludes with a backward glance at the long nineteenth century through the rich and vexed history of Haiti, and its profound influence on the larger diasporic consciousness of the Atlantic world. From the 1791 slave revolt that led to its eventual nationhood, and the ensuing refusals and exploitations that led to its eventual occupation by the United States from 1915 to 1934, Haiti’s nationalism is nourished on narratives of displacement and belonging, revolution and accommodation. Focusing attention on the efforts of U.S. African American artist-ethnographers like Katherine Dunham and Langston Hughes to study Haiti illuminates the centrality of ethnographic performance to a more diffuse and global understanding of diasporic political formation. Haiti’s precarious balance between indigeneity and foreignness, and its continued lore as central or exceptional to the New World story, helps us reconsider the very concept of “nation” itself, moving from a rooted understanding to a routed, diffracted one that revises European narratives of national unity.

I invoke writers like Édouard Glissant, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, António Benítez-Rojo, C. L. R. James, and J. Michael Dash to help frame this discussion, as they are the first to offer a vision of the Caribbean archipelago as an open-ended global network with neither boundaries nor a center; one that resists fixed narratives of nation, and whose lens removes the space between observer and participant. I employ this vision to reveal the continuous relationship between indigeneity and foreignness as both constitutive of nationhood and threatening to its utopian logic of unity. Moving from personhood to culture to nation, this book ends with a claim that even amid the problematic, celebratory primitivism of the Harlem Renaissance, and the equally problematic nostalgia for Africa as the unrealizable myth of origin instead of a vibrant, contemporary partner in the struggle, what these twentieth-century artist-ethnographers actually performed was a narrative of common descent/dissent, bound not by
captivity and linearity but, rather, a diasporic multiplicity of New World cultures and races. The ethnographic and literary components of Darwin's proto-evolutionary observations carried within them the logic that challenged Enlightenment notions of subjectivity. This, I claim, was the unique, inaugural dilemma of a new scientific modernity: nineteenth-century science both proposed a new theorization of the discrete Western subject and also confirmed—through the performance of its ethnographic others—the theory of its epistemic demise.

For Darwin, as for others in my study, narrative production is central to the construction and assertion of a subjectivity that is disproved in the moment of encounter. It is through an interrogation of these transatlantic encounters that this project intervenes in the constructed ideologies of race and subjectivity. Through a closer analysis of this space, I show how the Othered presences that reclaimed Atlantic waters have come to hail and dismantle disciplinarity, often using the same epistemic models that inaugurated the discourse of Western subjectivity to dethrone it.