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## THE TELEGRAPH IN BLACK AND WHITE

BY PAUL GILMORE

The opening lines of Stephen Foster's "O Susanna" (1848) are familiar to nearly every American: "I come from Alabama / Wid my banjo on my knee / I'm g'wan to Lousiana / My true love for to see." The second verse, though, is less well known: "I jumped aboard the telegraph / And trabeled down the ribber, / De 'lectric fluid magnified, / And killed five hundred nigger." As in most minstrel songs, this verse employs dialect in a racist caricature of blacks as ignorant.<sup>1</sup> More striking, however, is its fantasy of mass racial death. While the punchline of much minstrel humor, especially in earlier minstrel songs, involved violence to black bodies, the violence in "O Susanna" is rather anomalous in Foster's oeuvre. Foster's songs (and most songs of the more middle-brow minstrelsy of the late 1840s and early 1850s) tended to rely not on slapstick humor, but on images of sentimentalized homesick or lovesick blacks. A few of Foster's earlier comic songs, of which "O Susanna" is the best-known example, participate in the minstrel tradition of monstrous black (especially female) bodies—the title character of "Angelina Baker" (1850) "am so tall / She nebber sees de graound"; in "Away Down Souf" (1848), "My lub she hab a very large mouf, / One corner in de norf, tudder corner in de souf." But even among these earlier minstrel pieces, the violence in the second verse of "O Susanna" is startling. Instead of rendering black bodies grotesquely monstrous or sexual or tripping up black characters in farcical comedy, the second verse of "O Susanna" imagines the mass extermination of five hundred black bodies in one flash of electrical magnification.<sup>2</sup>

This essay takes this violent image from "O Susanna" as a starting point for reconstructing a technological racial logic which, I will argue, underlies and necessitates this violence. I flesh out the links between technology and race hinted at in Foster's song by focusing on how the telegraph, the body, and race came together in a variety of cultural forms—Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, magazine descriptions of the telegraph, racial science, abolitionist rhetoric on progress and technology, and Walt Whitman's poetry. By circulating through a number of texts from the 1840s and 1850s, I will argue that

telegraphic discourse of the antebellum period repeatedly returned to a racialized understanding of civilization, as most extensively illustrated in American racial science, to describe technology's role in the march of progress. While earlier advances in transportation and communication, such as canals and the postal service, had been celebrated, like the telegraph, for annihilating space and time, the telegraph alone made communication independent of embodied messengers. Because electricity was understood as both a physical and spiritual force, the telegraph was read both as separating thought from the body and thus making the body archaic, and as rematerializing thought in the form of electricity, thereby raising the possibility of a new kind of body. Recovering how race appeared in descriptions of the telegraph in literary texts, mass culture, and middle-brow scientific discussions, I describe how the telegraph's technological reconfiguration of the mind/body dualism gave rise to a number of competing but interrelated, racially-inflected readings.

By tracing these manifestations of the telegraph in black and white, I argue that because the telegraph and electricity seemed to confound the distinction between the physical and the spiritual, the body and mind, the racial distinctions between white mind and black body which the telegraph supposedly evidenced were occasionally placed in jeopardy. In antebellum slavery debates, telegraphic "commerce" (as it was most often denoted) was understood as uniting the different sections of the country into one "body." Simultaneously, though, in terms of race, the telegraph was celebrated for extending the conquest of a disembodied white mind over both the globe and the bodies of inferior, primitive peoples. In rendering bodies unnecessary, however, the telegraph's electric nature also gave rise to radically different interpretations that emphasized the disappearance of racial barriers defined in terms of bodily difference. This telegraphic breaking down of racial barriers was described not only as a spiritual or economic union, but as a bodily and, in fact, sexual one. Complicating notions of the relationship between progress, technology, and race by describing the multivalence of the telegraph in the antebellum United States, I want to suggest that while new technologies have been mobilized in the service of a progress dependent upon the oppression of racial others, they have also encouraged new conceptions of the body that enabled imagining progress in more emancipatory and egalitarian ways.<sup>3</sup>

## I. "THE WHOLE LAND ONE BEING"

As numerous historians have shown, the telegraph met with almost unanimous praise in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Yet "O Susanna" emphasizes and warns of the telegraph's destructive power, even as it invokes the telegraph as part of America's westward march of progress. This more pessimistic view finds its most famous articulation in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Thoreau complains that "[w]e are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." The telegraph is simply another one of those "'modern improvements'" that "are but improved means to an unimproved end."<sup>5</sup> As Thoreau puts it later in *Walden*, the problem is that "[m]en think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain" (92). The telegraph and railroads may provide the nation with a national commerce, but, instead of helping individual men, it may actually keep them from better living "like men."

These two accounts of the telegraph from very different cultural spheres illustrate the seldom noted prominence of concerns about the new technology. Rather than seeing these views as opposing dominant, unequivocal celebrations of the telegraph, I will argue that this skepticism emerges, in part, out of an equivocal racial logic that helped to underwrite the telegraph's veneration. Focusing on the states Thoreau cites in mentioning the telegraph can help to uncover the racial underpinnings of his comments. In the early 1850s, Maine and Texas were the farthest points in the United States linked by the telegraph (a transcontinental line would not be completed until 1861), but they represented much more than simply the northernmost and southernmost states. In an era of compromises designed to save the union from splitting apart over slavery, Maine and Texas represented the occasions for and results of those compromises. Maine was admitted to the union in 1820 as part of the Missouri Compromise; the admission of Texas in 1845 as a slave state under the terms of that compromise, and the Mexican War which followed, placed the question of slavery back on the political center stage and led to the Compromise of 1850.

Thoreau revised his comments on the telegraph in *Walden*, adding the notion of a national commerce and changing Louisiana to Texas,

while he was writing "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849).<sup>6</sup> In that essay, Thoreau attacks Massachusetts for its complicity in the events related to Maine and Texas becoming states—Northern compromise with slaveholders, the Mexican War, and the extension of slavery: "This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people. . . . [T]he opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity."<sup>7</sup> Just as the men in *Walden* think that the nation's commerce is more important than truly living "like men," the merchants and farmers of Massachusetts are more interested in a commerce which allows them to remain one "people" with the South than in maintaining their own "humanity."<sup>8</sup> Contemporary comments by Ralph Waldo Emerson further support linking Thoreau's dismissal of the telegraph to the question of slavery. In journal entries from 1851, Emerson speaks of the telegraph and the railroad as "great unionists," as "better unionists than 10 000 Websters." Emerson, of course, is referring to Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster, whose speech in favor of the Compromise of 1850 and its Fugitive Slave Law insured its passage and drew both Emerson's and Thoreau's wrath.<sup>9</sup> If the telegraph was indeed better than 10,000 Websters, then the commerce it produced between Maine and Texas not only would constitute "[an] improved means to an unimproved end," but also would, as Thoreau said of the Fugitive Slave Law, place the "influence and authority" of the North "on the side of the slaveholder, and not of the slave—of the guilty, and not of the innocent." Thus, the telegraph would become one of those instruments which makes commerce with the South possible, rendering the United States one "people," and thereby producing "a million slaves in Massachusetts."<sup>10</sup> In using Maine and Texas to delineate the false ends achieved by the telegraph's "improved means," Thoreau suggests that at least one of its "unimproved ends" is an immoral commercial union with slaveholders which true men will avoid.<sup>11</sup>

The idea that the telegraph was a "great unionist" was not limited to antislavery Concord transcendentalists. In fact, from its invention onward, numerous Americans argued that the telegraph was specifically designed for a nation like the U. S. because of its ability to unify ideologically and geographically distant sections. Samuel Morse foresaw this aspect of his invention as early as 1838: "the whole surface of the country would be channeled for those *nerves* which are

to diffuse, with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land, making, in fact, *one neighborhood* of the whole country." Even in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, George Prescott proclaimed that "its network shall spread through every village, bringing all parts of our republic into the closest and most intimate relations of friendship and interest." By uniting men (implicitly white men) of different regions together through a bond of "friendship and interest," the telegraph "emphatically" rendered the nation "ONE PEOPLE."<sup>12</sup>

Making the nation one people was not simply imagined in political terms, however, but, as Morse's "nerves" suggests, in terms of creating a national body. Other technologies such as the steam engine, the railroad, and canals were similarly described as suturing the nation together. But the telegraph tended to evoke more potent, specifically bodily metaphors because its medium, electricity, was a "subtle fluid . . . [of whose] essence or substance, we know nothing."<sup>13</sup> While "[t]he mysterious workings of the telegraph [were] but little known to the public," other technologies which linked the nation might be easily understood: "It is easy to understand the steam-engine . . . but not so the workings of the telegraph machines, or the nature of the subtle fluid by the agency of which they are actuated."<sup>14</sup>

Morse's notion of telegraphic "nerves" making the nation into one neighborhood rapidly became a nearly ubiquitous way of understanding the new technology: "The Electric telegraph is to constitute the nervous system of organized societies. . . . [I]ts functions are analogous to the sensitive nerves of the animal system." This connection to the nervous system was more than figurative; scientists theorized that electricity's "subtlety and property of almost infinite expansion" indicated that it was "identical with the nervous fluid" of the human body.<sup>15</sup> This mysterious electric medium allowed the body and communication to be separated for the first time and thus seemed to augur the transcendence of the body, but at the same time, in its mysterious nature, its ability to be at once material and immaterial, it seemed to be the very materialization of thought.<sup>16</sup> On a national level, the telegraphic nervous system "will so bind men together, that, in a great degree, one thought and one feeling shall fill all minds and pervade all bosoms." But the telegraph will unite more than "thought" and "feeling"; it will also make the nation into one body of flesh and blood: "[The telegraph] leaves, in our country, no elsewhere—it is all here: it makes the pulse at the extremity beat—throb for throb and in the instant—with that at the heart. . . . In short,

it will make the whole land one being—a touch upon any part will—like the wires—vibrate over all.”<sup>17</sup> In rendering the United States “ONE PEOPLE,” the telegraph, through electricity, made that people into one being, one body whose throbs and beats all Americans would feel instantaneously and simultaneously.

Through its annihilation of space (“no elsewhere”) and time (“in the instant”), telegraphic “commerce” was imagined to all but eliminate bodily boundaries through a nearly sexual union of individual American bodies into one national body. “Commerce,” the term most often used to describe the telegraph’s province, referred not simply to business transactions, but, as the *Webster’s Dictionary* of the era euphemistically phrased it, “Familiar intercourse between the sexes.” This sexual aspect of the telegraphic union, its ability to unify the nation in “closest and most intimate relations” through a “subtle fluid,” is underlined by the frequency and popularity of anecdotes about couples who married over the telegraph.<sup>18</sup> Uniting the nation into one great body, by annihilating space and time and the bodily boundaries insured by the separations of geography and history, the telegraph conjured up images not simply of the nervous system, but of blood and semen, of a flow of all sorts of bodily fluids. Through its subtle fluid, telegraphic commerce created a national body that would eradicate regional difference and thus underwrite the continuation of slavery. While most commentators applauded the union of (white) Americans into one mind and body, Thoreau and others pointed to the ways in which the telegraph, through its union of North and South, spread the destructive contagion of slavery, a contagion which was both moral and physical.<sup>19</sup> As Thoreau argues in “Resistance to Civil Government,” the national commerce in slavery would simultaneously decimate the individual man, whose “real manhood and immortality flow out, [as] he bleeds to an everlasting death” (77), and render the state “timid as a lone woman” (80). For Thoreau, the telegraph does not allow the transcendence of the body; rather by rendering both national and individual bodies frail and emasculated, the telegraph and its commerce in slavery would make us nothing more than mindless bodies or “machines” (66).

## II. “OBEDIENT SLAVE OF CIVILIZED MAN”

The telegraph was imagined to unite the nation into one body, a body that Thoreau warned would be a mindless slave to Southern slave power. Far more often, however, the telegraph was described not as enslaving a million men in Massachusetts, but as enabling a

disembodied Euro-American mind both to conquer the natural power of electricity and to enslave the bodies of blacks and other “tropical” races. Moderates on both sides of the slave question equated the telegraph’s enslavement of the dangerous power of electricity with the Euro-American conquest (or civilizing) of other more natural, primitive peoples. As an anonymous poem in *The Atlantic* phrased it in celebrating the first transatlantic cable, “Through Orient seas, o’er Afric plain, / And Asian mountains borne, / The vigor of the Northern brain / Shall nerve the world outworn”; the disembodied Northern (i.e. European) brain, through electricity, will reinvigorate and become master of the physical features (and implicitly the peoples) of the Orient, Africa, and Asia.<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, the telegraph, through its mixed nature as spiritual and physical medium, would eliminate the need for individual white bodies, in doing so, creating one (white) national body. The telegraph’s power to free thought from the body, however, encouraged doing away with even this one united body as in its place appeared a white mind freed from particular bodies (and the political divisions of region) through the spiritualizing power of telegraphic “nerves.” For most antebellum commentators, the telegraph’s spiritual conquest of the material world occasions the disappearance of the white body altogether as it grants a disembodied white mind dominion over the natural, physical force embodied in both electricity and African-American labor.

Early racial science, especially the American school of ethnology, more fully theorized this racial hierarchy based on technological achievement. Although racial science had been evolving for over one hundred years, from Linnaeus’s classification of mankind along biological lines in 1758 through Blumenbach’s first delineation of five races, the American school marked the apogee of mid-nineteenth-century applications of scientific methodology to race and became “one of the first theories of largely American origin [to win] the attention and respect of European scientists.”<sup>21</sup> Culminating with J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon’s massive *Types of Mankind* in 1854, the American school emerged out of work indebted to Samuel George Morton’s *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptica* (1844)—in turn indebted to Blumenbach—which posited the eternal difference of races by measuring the cranial capacity of ancient and modern skulls. As it developed, the American school embraced a theory of polygenesis, the idea that God had created eternally different races at different times and in different places with very different qualities and abilities. These ideas found acceptance by



both antislavery and proslavery advocates and were celebrated and promulgated by a number of famed scientists, most notably Harvard scientist and Swiss émigré Louis Agassiz.

In a series of lectures in Boston in 1849, Swiss scientist Arnold Guyot most prominently and popularly linked the ideas of racial science to a celebration of technologies like the telegraph. Guyot defends European superiority on the basis of the idea that civilization emerges out of the commerce of ideas, goods, and peoples: “it is the exchange of products by the commerce of the world, which makes the material life and prosperity of the nations.”<sup>22</sup> Because Europe was particularly well positioned, with its temperate climate and long seashores, for the development of commerce and thus the development of civilization, Europeans have advanced further than any other peoples. For Guyot, technology is an especially apt representative of “the spectacle presented by European civilization”: “Who shall describe the thousand applications of the science of nature . . . those ingenious and mighty machines obeying without pause the orders of man, and under his watchful eye accomplishing, with the same ease, the most gigantic works and the most delicate operations?” (*E*, 291–92). The railroad and the telegraph in particular represent European and American conquest of nature: “Space is annihilated by railroads; the word of man, borne on the wings of electricity, outruns in its course the sun himself; distances vanish, obstacles are smoothed away. Man thus disposes at will with the forces of nature, and the earth at last serves her master” (*E*, 292). Technology, in other words, both enables and becomes the supreme expression of man’s subjection of nature, of civilization and progress.

But it is only the “historical race” (*E*, 277), the whites originating in Europe, who have succeeded in conquering nature; elsewhere, “man gives to nature power over himself, submits to it, and thus are traced and distinguished, a race of Eastern Asia, an African race, an Australian race, a Polynesian race, an American race” (*E*, 245). Because only white men have conquered nature, “An important work remains, then, to be done; the work of diffusion and of propagation”; “Tropical nature cannot be conquered and subdued, save by civilized man, armed with all the might of discipline, intelligence, and of skillful industry” (*E*, 292, 306). Through inventions like the telegraph and the railroad, Europeans will bring civilization to the tropical world, and “[i]n this way, alone, will the inferior races be able to come forth from the state of torpor and debasement into which they are plunged, and live the active life of the higher races.” Yet, although

they will become “brothers with the civilized man,” “the people of the tropical continents will always be the hands, the workmen, the sons of toil,” while “[t]he people of the temperate continents will always be the men of intelligence, of activity, the brain of humanity” (*E*, 307). According to Guyot, technologies like the telegraph will at once raise up “inferior races” into a more active life and at the same time retain them as “the hands” working under “the brain of humanity.”

Guyot, Morton, Agassiz, and many other supporters of the American school rejected slavery, but Southerners such as Nott used this technologically inflected racism to defend the peculiar institution.<sup>23</sup> This racism becomes explicitly linked to the telegraph in 1853 and 1854, when the Southern mouthpiece *DeBow's Review*, an ardent advocate of polygenetic racial science, published a four part article by Pennsylvanian J. W. Moore. Like other commentators on the telegraph, Moore argues that, by “operating to facilitate commerce and international intercourse,” it will unite people together and “underlay the whole physical structure of society with a basis of peace, rendered durable by the cements of the arts and sciences.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike most other commentators, however, he explicitly elucidates a racial logic to the telegraph's commerce. For Moore, the telegraph's commerce, like commerce for Guyot, specifically relates to its ability to “civilize” the uncivilized multitudes. With the help of a series of charts, Moore first delineates the five races—Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, African, and American aboriginal—and the percentages of each who have actually beheld “the lights of truth and civilization . . . the arts of peace and the sciences” (*T*, 16:258). While only a fourth of the Caucasian race are “enlightened,”

The Mongol race, as a whole, is degraded below the lowest classes or tribes of the Caucasian race. . . . Their traffic is conducted on no system: it partakes of the character of the trade of savages. . . . The Malayan race is distinguished for its barbarity, its ferocity, its godlessness, its licenses in morals, and its hatred of the Caucasian race. Its commerce is a series of depredations and thefts . . . [and] [o]f the African and American races, it need only be said, that their ignorance is only equalled by their degeneracy; their superstitions by their fidelity to pagan rites; their honesty by their superb disdain of labor; and their commerce by their total want of enterprise. (*T*, 16:257)

In Moore's schema, what specifically distinguishes these races from enlightened whites is their lack of true “commerce.” Moore argues

that while conquest by the sword and by the Bible have largely failed, commerce, which “conquers, not for the purpose of establishing demoralizing empires,” but rather whose “aim is peace, its end is happiness” (*T*, 16:261), will succeed, through the telegraph’s agency. He reasons that “in order to overcome the prejudices of nations, cause them to abandon their non-productive modes of life, their superstitions, their idolatries, instil into them habits of industry, and raise them to a parity in knowledge and general refinement with ourselves, we must first of all invent means to reach their defects” (*T*, 16:256). The telegraph accomplishes this project by establishing a universal language, or at least producing the same “collateral results”: “commercial intercourse has just assumed the sceptre of the world. Now the telegraph is invited to complete what has been so auspiciously begun—it is required to bring nations into hourly conference—to assimilate all languages to a common understanding” (*T*, 16:255).<sup>25</sup> While, like other commentators, Moore envisions the telegraph’s unifying capacities, he makes clear how the telegraphic dream of unifying mankind through commerce fits within a violent, racially-based imperialism of “conquest”: “[By] bring[ing] pagan countries into closer proximity with the enlightened Caucasian race . . . the universal establishment of the telegraph . . . will be a mortal *stab* to their political relations and domestic adolescence” (*T*, 16:259, my emphasis). The telegraph will unite the world by violently destroying the cultures of “pagan countries,” making their inhabitants disciplined laborers under the “sceptre” of “enlightened” commerce.

Guyot and Moore suggest the ways in which the telegraph was imagined to promote the conquest not simply of the natural world, but of natural or primitive men; technology conquers the earth, thus making *her* “at last serve her master,” but it also enslaves, or at least disciplines by civilizing through commerce, the possibly disruptive bodies of primitive peoples. For both of them, the telegraph’s potential lies in its ability to raise blacks and other “inferior races” up to a level where they can function properly as the “hands” under the “watchful eye” of the “brain of humanity.” This link between telegraphic technology and slavery becomes manifest in Moore’s description of the telegraph as “fetter[ing] the hoary potentate of storms on his very throne . . . [to] do the weak bidding of man” (*T*, 15:109). Again and again, in fact, both Northern and Southern commentators drew upon the idea of the telegraph as enslaving the mysterious power of electricity: “The invisible, imponderable substance, force, whatever it be . . . is brought under our control to do our errands, like

any menial, nay, like a very slave"; "It holds the terrible slave [electricity] toil in the empire of a master."<sup>26</sup> The telegraph was imagined as uniting white Americans into one body that would maintain the slave system, but at the same time, it separated white Americans from the body by making them the disembodied "brain of humanity." In both cases, however, as the metaphors of the telegraph rendering electricity the "obedient slave of civilized man" emphasize, the telegraph was understood not only as furthering the "empire of man over nature," but also as enabling the conquest of primitive peoples by Euro-American commerce.<sup>27</sup> In the context of the United States, the telegraph might render the nation one body, but within that body, the whites would be the controlling brain, while blacks, whether slaves or not, would be the subordinate hands.<sup>28</sup>

### III. "THE ONENESS OF MANKIND"

Moore presupposes racial distinctions in his discussion of the role of technology in civilization, but then circularly uses that technology to demonstrate those racial differences. Guyot, on the other hand, argues that technological achievement "trace[s] and distinguish[s]" the different races, offering perhaps a more environmentalist understanding of race, but recurs to essentialist differences—the fact that "inferior races . . . will always be the hands"—in the end. This circularity demonstrates the ways in which racial difference during this period was understood simultaneously as biological essence and as a marker of progress towards civilization. Michael Adas, in reference to nineteenth-century European ideas about race and technology, has argued that "racism should be viewed as a subordinate rather than the dominant theme in European intellectual discourse on non-Western peoples."<sup>29</sup> According to Adas, "A survey of nineteenth-century works dealing with racial categories suggests that only a minority of writers used the term 'race' to differentiate between and rank human groups on the basis of hereditary biological differences." In Adas's understanding, ideas of technological difference and hierarchy—of civilization—preceded and prevailed over those of racial difference and hierarchy. But Moore and Guyot seem to suggest that, at least in America, biological notions of race, specifically those envisioned by racial science, were at least as important as ideas of technological difference, that the two conceptions of difference depended upon one another.<sup>30</sup>

This fusion of civilizational/environmentalist and biological discourse proved doubly powerful in substantiating racial lines, but

these two distinct ways of defining race did not always fit together neatly, thus creating fissures within racial ideology. Because of the centrality of ideas of progress and civilization to racial definitions, even strict essentialists like Nott readily embraced ideas of racial change and mutability to support white superiority: "what we term Caucasian races are not of one origin: they are, on the contrary, an amalgamation of an infinite number of primitive stocks, of different instincts, temperaments, and mental and physical characters. . . . Such commingling of blood, through migrations, wars, captivities, and amalgamations, is doubtless one means by which Providence carries out great ends. This mixed stock of many primitive races is the only one which can really be considered cosmopolite. Their infinite diversity of characteristics contrasts strongly with the immutable instincts of other human types."<sup>31</sup> In acknowledging the fluidity of the Caucasian races, Nott necessarily places other racial definitions in question because of the fact that race must be defined differentially. If the boundaries of the Caucasian race shift, through forces like "migrations, wars, captivities, and amalgamations," as part of some Providential plan, the boundaries of other races defined as non-Caucasian necessarily also shift. Like Guyot, Nott attempts to limit racial mutability and progress to the "Caucasian races," but his argument slips into the idea that all "progress" in fact turns upon "the introduction of new blood and novel influences" (M, 53). And this introduction is not simply one-sided; rather, while "[a] small trace of white blood in the negro improves him in intelligence and morality . . . an equally small trace of negro blood, as in the quadroon, will protect such individual against the deadly influence of climate which the pure white-man [whom we have already seen is not "pure" to begin with] cannot endure" (M, 68).

Although Nott explicitly sets out to prove the essential and permanent differences of race and to demonstrate the abomination of amalgamation, he ends up, at points, celebrating the "commingling" of "primitive races" which now, "In the present mixed state of the population of the earth" (M, 72), makes it impossible to determine "what each type originally was" (M, 67). It is, in fact, a "repugnance towards other people" to which "we [must] mainly attribute the fixedness of the unhistoric types of man" (M, 69). Nott argues finally that whites "are fulfilling a law of nature" (M, 77), "written in man's nature by the hand of his Creator" (M, 79) in conquering and "supplanting inferior types" (M, 77), through "becoming intermingled in blood" (M, 80), but then, in order to

resubstantiate the strict distinctions at the core of this argument, he must argue that this progressive conquest actually goes against both “the Law of nature” and progress: “When the inferior types of mankind shall have fulfilled their destinies and passed away, and the superior, becoming intermingled in blood, have wandered from their primitive zoological provinces, and overspread the world, what will be the ultimate result? May not that Law of nature, which so often forbids the commingling of species, complete its work of destruction, and at some future day leave the fossil remains alone of man to tell the tale of his past existence upon the earth?” (M, 80). Because of the ways in which his biological (pseudoscientific) definitions of race rely upon demonstration through progress and civilization, and because of the very slipperiness of the term “race” during this period, Nott’s argument of white racial superiority proven by technology, civilization, and progress turns in against itself, dismantling first the idea of strict racial difference, and then, in response, the very idea of progress.

Returning to Moore, we can see this tension between understanding progressive civilization, specifically manifested in the telegraph, as reinforcing racialized bodily boundaries and understanding it as dismantling those boundaries by making everyone share “one thought and one feeling.” While Moore begins with strict racial distinctions, enumerated as characterological traits (specifically in reference to commerce) and quantitatively defined through his charts, his essay ends by troubling those same distinctions. Telegraphic commerce will act as a “mortal stab to [the] political relations and domestic adolescence” of primitive peoples, but this violent commerce will simultaneously “raise them to a parity in knowledge and general refinement with ourselves.” Even in Moore’s implicitly proslavery reading of the telegraph, the telegraph not only distinguishes between civilized and uncivilized races, but also, in its march of progress, offers the possibility of erasing the very distinctions separating those races. Despite the brutal racism of such logics of civilized uplift, Moore’s essay, like Nott’s discussion of progress and amalgamation, suggests that the telegraph may bind more than white Northerners and Southerners together, that it may unify all peoples, including those of different races, together in a telegraphic union of common “knowledge” and “refinement.”

The completion of the first functioning transatlantic cable in 1858 (it worked for less than a month) produced an outpouring of such commentary.<sup>32</sup> Anticipation and reaction to the cable became a “celebration of the union of all the families of man under the

dominion of one science and one art, made visible in steam locomotives and electric wires." Even *DeBow's Review* lauded the cable for encouraging the "consciousness of the oneness of mankind."<sup>33</sup> Often, these tributes singled out the telegraph's ability to dismantle racial barriers:

[The telegraph] effect[s] a revolution in political and social life, by establishing a more intimate connexion between nation and nation, with race and race . . . [through] the free and unobstructed interchange of each with all. How potent a power, then, is the telegraphic destined to become in the civilization of the world! This binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth.<sup>34</sup>

Here, as in other commentary, the telegraph promotes the "civilization of the world" by encouraging the free exchange of thought and unifying human "consciousness" "under the dominion of one science and one art." This passage indicates, however, that the telegraph's "civilization of the world" will include the dismantling of the "prejudices and hostilities" which have separated "race from race." The authors' two references to "all the nations of the earth" suggests that they have in mind not simply the American and English "races" (as George Stocking notes, this was a "period when almost any human group . . . might be called a 'race'"), but, as Moore's racial charts indicate, the emerging pseudoscientific, biological notion of "race."<sup>35</sup>

Whether all these writers understood race in terms of essential, epidermal, biological difference, in terms of white and black, it was certainly taken up that way by antislavery writers. In particular, antislavery thinkers celebrated the telegraph for the way it "made visible" a more spiritual, already existing "union of all the families of man." This understanding of the telegraph comes to the forefront in a chapter entitled "The Telegraphic System of the Universe," from Amherst College president and respected scientist Edward Hitchcock's *The Religion of Geology* (1852). Hitchcock describes how new technologies make visible the mysterious forces underlying the moral order of the universe: "*Our words, our actions, and even our thoughts, make an indelible impression on the universe . . . convert[ing] creation 'Into a vast sounding gallery; / Into a vast picture gallery; / And into a universal telegraph.'*"<sup>36</sup> He reasons that while "[i]t seems to us a marvelous discovery, which enables man to convey and

register his thoughts at the distance of thousand of miles by the electric wires," we should not be surprised that "by means of this same power, all our thoughts are transmitted to every part of the universe. . . . It is as if each man had his foot upon the point where ten thousand telegraphic wires meet from every part of the universe, and he were able, with each volition, to send abroad an influence along these wires, so as to reach every created being in heaven and in earth."<sup>37</sup> Much of the public, including scientists such as Hitchcock, saw the telegraph not so much as a physical invention, but as Nathaniel Hawthorne's Clifford Pyncheon puts it in *House of the Seven Gables*, as "[a]n almost spiritual medium" which makes the world "nothing but thought, and no longer the substance we deemed it."<sup>38</sup> In making the world and the people in it lose substance, becoming nothing but thought or spirit, the telegraph undermines the racial mind/body dualism, thus uniting "all the nations of the earth" in a spiritual and intellectual commerce of ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

These more spiritualist interpretations of the telegraph attempted to erase the body altogether, and in doing so, suggested the possibility of a cross-racial spiritual union supposedly prevented by bodily difference. This cross-racial potential appeared in mesmerism, where, as Werner Sollors has shown, the idea of the atmospheric telegraph was used to conjure up Native American figures.<sup>39</sup> For Hitchcock, this spiritualist racial union takes a different shape. He turns to Charles Babbage's description of the eventual punishment of slave traders to illustrate the telegraphic spiritual community: "The soul of the negro, whose fettered body, surviving the living charnel-house of his infected prison, was thrown into the sea to lighten the ship . . . will need, at the last great day of human accounts, no living witness of his earthly agony . . . every particle of air still floating over the unpeopled earth . . . will record the cruel mandate of the tyrant."<sup>40</sup> Even dismissive accounts of the "atmospheric telegraph" illustrate how the telegraph's erasure of the body in creating a spiritual union troubled racialized boundaries: "Were one of these 'Atmospheric Telegraphs' in operation any where near Mason and Dixon's Line, it would doubtless prove a powerful competitor with the 'Underground Railroad' in facilitating the flight of 'colored gemmen' on their way to Canada."<sup>41</sup> The spiritual nature of the universal telegraph, conducted through the magnetic forces found in every physical and spiritual thing, insured that mankind was already one (or soon would be), that the families of man were already unified and telegraphically in touch with one another through a spiritual "unpeopled" realm.



This more transcendental understanding of the telegraph as a medium for linking different peoples of different times and places and races together returns us to Thoreau. While Thoreau worries that the national telegraphic body, by protecting slavery, would render Americans nothing more than mindless machines or slaves themselves, he at the same time celebrates the spiritual understanding of the telegraph as uniting different peoples. Thoreau understands the telegraph in atmospheric terms upon the occasion of the first telegraphic message being conveyed through Concord: "The atmosphere is full of telegraphs equally unobserved. We are not confined to Morse's or House's and Bain's line."<sup>42</sup> In particular, Thoreau locates the possibility of telegraphic intercourse with other people and their ways of life in his repeated celebrations of telegraphic wires becoming an Aeolian harp: it "prophesies finer senses, a finer life, a golden age" (*J*, 3:342) and thus produces "the sound of a far-off glorious life, a supernal life, which came down to us, and vibrated the latticework of this life of ours" (*J*, 2:450). Like Moore, Thoreau applauds the telegraph's civilizing influence: "How strange to think that a sound so soothing, elevating, educating, telling of Greece and the muses, might have been heard sweeping other strings when only the red man ranged these fields! might, perchance, in course of time have civilized him!" (*J*, 3:224). Unlike Moore, however, Thoreau conceives of the telegraph as offering real access to those others and their beliefs at the same time that it is civilizing them. In other words, Thoreau figures the telegraph as a two-way form of communication to "a finer life" located in the ways of life of ancient Greeks, Indians, and others, and, thus, despite his own racist thinking, offers the possibility of a more progressive, antislavery telegraphic racial politics similar to that of Hitchcock.

Thoreau specifically hints at this possibility in relation to helping fugitive slaves. A day after one of his eulogies to the telegraphic harp, Thoreau recorded helping Henry Williams: "The slave said he could guide himself by many other stars than the north star. . . . They frequently followed the telegraph when there was no railroad. The slaves bring many superstitions from Africa. The fugitives sometimes superstitiously carry a turf in their hats, thinking that their success depends on it" (*J*, 3:37–38). Whereas Moore sees the telegraph as acting "to overcome the prejudices of nations, cause them to abandon their non-productive modes of life, their superstitions, their idolatries," Thoreau sees the telegraph as acting as a medium for gaining access to those "superstitions." The telegraph may be designed to aid

in an immoral commerce between Maine and Texas which protects the institution of slavery; but “like the sparrows, which [he] perceive[s] use it extensively for a perch,” Thoreau and fugitive slaves can “make [their] own use of the telegraph, without consulting the directors” (J, 2:298). Thoreau’s atmospheric telegraph both grants him contact with beliefs and superstitions which can possibly “vibrate the lattice-work of this life of ours,” and, like the one mentioned above, enables slaves to escape to freedom by doing away with the geographic boundaries which enforce the racial distinction between the enslaved and the free. While Guyot and Moore celebrate the telegraph for separating mind from body in racial terms, Thoreau and Hitchcock find in this bodily transcendence a way of bursting the prison-world of slavery apart and binding all men together through a progressive, spiritual, or intellectual commerce between all peoples. Because the telegraph acts spiritually, eliminating both space and time, and the bodily determinants of race dependent upon temporal and geographic distinctions, it can link together “all the families of man,” thus dismantling the “prejudices and hostilities” which have separated “race from race” and fostering the “consciousness of the oneness of mankind.”<sup>43</sup>

#### IV. “AS BRIDES AND BRIDEGROOMS HAND IN HAND”

Dominant telegraphic discourse imagined the telegraph as an instrument which united white, civilized minds in their conquest of brute nature and brute peoples; antislavery thinkers, on the other hand, used the telegraph’s spiritual nature to argue for a common humanity based upon minds or spirits abstracted from bodily limitations and united together in civilization through technology. In both cases, for all their discussion of commerce, commentators omit the economic ground of the expansion of the telegraphic network and its consolidation into the Western Union monopoly by the late 1860s.<sup>44</sup> Underlying the rhetoric of both, however, is another kind of materiality, the way in which nerving the nation (and the world) at once freed it from particular bodies and at the same time re-embodied it. While the telegraph was described as an instrument both demonstrative and productive of the dominance of white mind over brute nature, as specifically figured in black bodies, it was at the same time understood as making the distinction between mind and body nonsensical. The telegraph freed thought from space and time, the determinants of bodily existence, but simultaneously rendered mind and thought, or spirit, physical in the form of nerves or wires criss-crossing and

creating the national body. It established the white mind's dominion over brute nature but did so by producing a national body. This dual movement away from and towards the physical body arose, in part, because the actual nature of the telegraph and its medium, electricity, was, as we have seen, a point of some dispute: "It is a perpetual miracle, which no familiarity can render commonplace . . . more properly be called a spiritual than a material force." Again and again, in fact, commentators noted the way in which the telegraph "seems to connect the spiritual and the material."<sup>45</sup>

In collapsing the boundary between mind and body, the spiritual and the physical, through its annihilation of space and time, the telegraph, as Thoreau, Hitchcock, and other antislavery thinkers indicate, troubled lines between black and white as understood in terms of excessive body and rational mind. Because the two reigning paradigms of race posited it in terms of either space (geographical determinism as biological essentialism) or time (cultural difference in terms of progressive, civilizationalist history), the telegraph's annihilation of space and time threatened to annihilate the very determinants of racial difference. By annihilating space and time through the medium of a spiritual yet physical fluid, the telegraph was imagined to make not just geographic boundaries fluid but also bodily and, specifically, racial boundaries fluid. Frederick Douglass suggests this collapsing of racial distinctions through progressive technology in his critique of American ethnological science, "the Notts, the Gliddens, the Agassiz[es], and Mortons" whose "various theories, have, of late gained attention and respect in many quarters of our country."<sup>46</sup> Douglass implicitly invokes technology's unifying project as evidence against the division promulgated in the name of a false science: "It is somewhat remarkable, that, at a time when knowledge is so generally diffused . . . *when time and space, in the intercourse of nations, are almost annihilated*—when . . . a common humanity can meet in friendly conclave—when nationalities are being swallowed up—and the ends of the earth brought together . . . that there should arise a phalanx of learned men—speaking in the name of *science*—to forbid the magnificent reunion of mankind in one brotherhood."<sup>47</sup>

The telegraphic discourse of uniting nations through commerce suggests that Douglass, writing this speech while a resident of Rochester, one of the centers of telegraphic industry and journalism, specifically had the telegraph in mind when he connects the annihilation of space and time to the creation of "a common humanity." But whether referring specifically to the telegraph or more generally to

technological progress, improved communications, and true science, Douglass points to the ways these improvements will (or should) bring all the peoples of the earth together, thus counteracting the theories of racial science which posited the essential division of mankind. Yet because of the bodily, in fact sexual, nature of telegraphic commerce, the collapsing of racial and national boundaries through the telegraph did not simply create a disembodied, abstract democratic citizenry of near angels, as Hitchcock envisions, but simultaneously created the possibility of a cross-racial bodily union. Linking humanity in “one thought and one feeling,” engendering a “consciousness of the oneness of mankind,” conjured up the possibility of linking the bodies containing those thoughts and feelings, an image of sexual union perhaps hinted at in Douglass’s idea of “intercourse of nations,” of “nationalities . . . being swallowed up.” Finally, then, by collapsing bodily boundaries in creating one national body, telegraphic discourse encouraged the possibility of a mulatto American identity, the chance that the national body it produced was a multiracial body, a threatening possibility already staged in the cultural practices surrounding minstrel songs like “O Susanna.” In closing, I will focus on the bodily implications of telegraphic union, drawing upon Whitman’s poetry to suggest how the telegraphic reorganization of the racial mind/body dualism could underwrite a racial politics that imagined a more equitable union of embodied peoples. Celebrating the cross-racial erotic potential of the telegraph, Whitman provides a more material counter-reading to Thoreau’s spiritualized understanding of telegraphic racial union, a more powerful and threatening possibility which, finally, the violence in the second verse of “O Susanna” seeks to obviate.

While the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass*, especially “I Sing the Body Electric,” celebrates the possibilities of cross-racial identification, and perhaps even cross-racial sex, and describes “the procreant urge of the world” as “electrical,” these possibilities become explicitly linked to technologies like the telegraph in the postbellum poems, “Passage to India” (1871) and “Years of the Modern” (1865).<sup>48</sup> In “Years of the Modern,” Whitman eulogizes the technologies of imperialism, “the steamship, the electric telegraph, the newspaper, the wholesale engines of war,” through which the average man “colonizes the Pacific, the archipelagoes” and “interlinks all geography, all lands.” He goes on, however, to ask if this technology will not end in “the solidarity of races”: “Are all nations communing? is there going to be but one heart to the globe? / Is humanity forming en-masse?”<sup>49</sup>

Where Thoreau, Hitchcock, Guyot, and Moore emphasize the telegraph's ability, as Hawthorne put it, to make "the round globe . . . a vast head, a brain," its ability to separate mind and body, Whitman celebrates the telegraph for re-embodying the world "en-masse" through "one heart" which unites the entire world "throb for throb."<sup>50</sup>

The sexual nature of "humanity forming en-masse" becomes more prominent in "Passage to India." There, Whitman again envisions the world linked together through "The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires," which not only transmit European progress to its colonies, "But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables" back to Europe and America.<sup>51</sup> Like Thoreau, he imagines the telegraph as offering him access to the "myths and fables" of other peoples, but here, he suggests a more material, in fact, bodily union of different peoples: "The earth to be spann'd, connected by network, / The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage, / The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near, / The lands to be welded together" ("P," 32–35). Whitman repeats this matrimonial image later in the poem: "Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans. . . . Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World, / The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festive garland, / As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand" ("P," 118, 120–22). While *The Atlantic* poem, "The Telegraph" (1858), imagined the "The vigor of the Northern brain" "nerv[ing]" the "outworn" geographies of Asia and Africa through the telegraph, and Guyot imagined a global telegraphic body racially divided into the brain and the hands, Whitman represents the ways in which the nerving of those geographies became consummate with sexual consummation, with the marriage of bodies physically linked by the subtle "procreant" fluid of electricity. Whitman then illustrates how the technology of electricity and the telegraph became a vehicle for imagining not simply a cultural and spiritual exchange between races which would unite them in brotherhood, but also a bodily, sexual exchange which would link the nation and the world in one blood.<sup>52</sup>

Returning to "O Susanna," we can see that its invocation of the telegraph doubles the possibility of uniting the elements of blackness and whiteness already at play in blackface and thus renders the telegraph all that much more powerful and all that much more threatening and attractive. Through its staging of white men taking on blackface, the song suggests the kind of cross-cultural, possibly "lattice" shattering effect that the telegraph could have, the possibility of uniting whites and blacks into essentially one body. In the first

verse, the black/white singer, seemingly of his own volition, “come[s] from Alabama . . . g’wan to Lousiana,” his racially indeterminate “true love for to see.” Being sung by a white man in blackface, this verse hints at a cross-racial bodily “commerce,” of a break-down of somatic boundaries separating black and white, which is doubled by the song’s implicit identification of its white audience with its “black” singer. If we take Frantz Fanon’s suggestion that the black man in essence symbolically becomes the penis, the first verse of “O Susanna” presents the possibility of a (black) penis, rampant black sexuality, released from the restrictive structures of both slavery and dominant white ideas of decorum, penetrating both into the southwestern frontier (“Lousiana”) and into the Northern space of minstrel halls and their nearly all-male, white audiences.<sup>53</sup>

But in their attempt to “trabbel down the ribber” via new technologies, blacks do not get to see their “true love[s]”; rather they are electrocuted, rendered permanently impotent and immobile by white technology as punishment for their own excess sexuality and desire for mobility. The dead body of Uncle Tom a few years later would become the literary and theatrical site for the sympathetic union of whites in opposing slavery, but here the second verse of “O Susanna” imaginatively links its Northern white audiences with Southern whites in an implicitly proslavery bond through five hundred dead black bodies. By projecting technical ignorance onto black characters and turning the destructive possibilities of those technologies onto black bodies, by graphically and violently depicting its black singer(s) as incapable of differentiating between, let alone understanding, new technologies, “O Susanna” enabled its white audience members to experience the vicarious pleasures of embodiment and technology, the thrill of jumping aboard the telegraph to go see one’s true love, while securing them from the dangers of the intersection of fragile bodies and technology. By re-establishing dominion over the overly-mobile black male body in a mass cultural register, the telegraph in “O Susanna,” like ethnologically-influenced analyses of the telegraph such as Moore’s and Guyot’s, helped to consolidate a notion of white American identity by making black bodies part of the nature conquered and controlled by (white) technology rather than actual manipulators of that technology. While the standard Foster minstrel tune, with its sentimental but still racist idealization of slaves and slavery, foregrounded a sympathetic identification with the blackfaced characters’ pathos, the second verse of “O Susanna,” because of the multiple racial meanings of the telegraph, must more

forcefully and brutally defuse such possibilities by insisting on racial distinctions through five hundred dead black bodies.<sup>54</sup>

In reconstructing the relationship between mind and body, a dualism already formulated in terms of race in the American imaginary, and in contributing to a racialized view of progressive civilization, telegraphic discourse necessarily invoked racial categories. But in doing so, it often fissured the lines it was re-establishing by troubling boundaries between mind and body, black and white. Because of the ways in which the indeterminacies of race (as civilization and as essence), progress (as demonstrating superiority and as leveling out difference), and the telegraph (as both mind and body, spiritual and material) came together during this period, telegraphic discourse like electricity itself was subtly fluid. Writers might begin with ideas of racial superiority and the conquest of mind over body, but the fluid seemed to escape "her master," yielding up the possibility of new combinations of races, minds, and bodies that hint at the more emancipatory possibilities engendered by new technologies. In other words, the violence of the second verse of "O Susanna" does not simply derive from (or display) racial hatred; rather it emerges as a reaction to the possibilities of cross-racial commerce of all kinds which the minstrel show and the telegraph both invoked. Even as we should remain wary of these writers' universalist claims that omit the economic power structures underlying the telegraph industry, we need to recover the possibility that such imaginative unions might lead to structural change. While the racist technological imagination of "O Susanna" depends upon an idea of technological achievement proving racial superiority, within it lie the seeds of a universalism as invoked by Douglass and Thoreau, which, despite its own racialism, could provide the basis for radical social change and the imagining of a more egalitarian racial order in the United States.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, ed. Steven Saunders and Deane L. Root, 2 vols. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 1:41–43. As Ken Emerson has pointed out, the *Telegraph* was a well-known steamboat of the era (*Doo-dah!*:

*Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997], 130–31). Yet in “O Susanna,” this steamship for the black songster takes on the properties of its namesake before then becoming a train later in the second verse, thus underlining both the singer’s inability to keep new technologies straight and the way new technologies were metaphorically linked together in the culture at large.

<sup>2</sup> *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, 1:89, 1:47. See William W. Austin, “Susanna,” “Jeanie,” and “The Old Folks at Home”: *The Songs of Stephen C. Foster in His Time to Ours* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), for the best overview of Foster’s career. Eric Lott, in his magisterial treatment of antebellum minstrelsy to which my discussion is indebted, devotes a chapter to “O Susanna.” See his *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993). He suggests that the immense popularity of “O Susanna” may derive from its compression of “so many of the minstrel show’s favorite themes” (204)—“lost love, separated families, death, home, nostalgia” (203)—into a song which became the soundtrack for western expansion. “O Susanna” became “a racialized mediator of northern conflicts in southern guise” (199) by displacing anxieties about western expansion onto a Southern landscape: “From behind the mask of a slave determined to overcome the peculiar institution’s breakup of families, they celebrated America’s move west” (206). My focus is on a different set of anxieties and uncertainties that find voice in Foster’s song, namely those surrounding new technologies like the telegraph.

<sup>3</sup> Numerous critics of the Enlightenment and modernity have examined the connection between scientific dominance of the world through technology and the oppression and exploitation of the labor and resources of so-called inferior races by Europeans and Euro-Americans. As Ronald Takaki puts it, “Technology, both as ideology and as economic development, had an enormous impact on culture and race in America: It served as metaphor and materialist basis for the domination of mind over body, capital over labor, and whites over Indians, blacks, Mexicans, and Asians” (*Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* [1979; reprint, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990], 148). Most prominent in this tradition are the Marxist-influenced critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, beginning with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and continuing through Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. Stanley Aronowitz summarizes this work as arguing that “[t]he domination of nature fulfills a human project, the domination of people by people. Science and technology are practices that mirror the social world” (*Science as Power: Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society* [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988], 7). While I am indebted to this work, and while we need to be aware of the economic structures of domination underlying the propagation of technology, I think it equally behooves us to recover how science and technology, as semi-autonomous spheres, could fracture and refract ideas of dominance in their mirroring of the social world. In this way, my work, like that of Donna Haraway and Walter Benjamin, attempts to recuperate the egalitarian possibilities of new technologies and the new forms of subjectivity they might create. See, in particular, Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–81; and Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–52.



<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Robert Luther Thompson, *Wiring A Continent: The History of the Telegraph Industry in the United States, 1832–1866* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), 97; and Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854; reprint, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 52. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Lyndon Shanley, *The Making of Walden, with the Text of the First Version* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 127, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849), in *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 68.

<sup>8</sup> This connection is further substantiated by the fact that the Mexican War not only reopened questions about the extension of slavery, but also spurred the expansion of telegraph lines to the South, including the recently admitted Texas. See Thompson, 217–20.

<sup>9</sup> *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, chief ed. Ralph H. Orth, 15 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–1982), 11:374, 524. See, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law: Lecture Read in the Tabernacle, New York City, 7 March 1854, On the Fourth Anniversary of Daniel Webster’s Speech in Favor of the Bill,” in *Miscellanies, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904), 11:219; and Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854), in *Reform Papers*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” 94, 91.

<sup>11</sup> “Men” here, for both celebrants of the telegraph and for Thoreau, is gender specific. Although the length of this essay precludes exploring the links between race and gender in discussions of technology in any depth, commentators generally imagined a masculine European mind exploring and conquering nature, in the form of women and primitive others, through technology and scientific inquiry. For more on scientific images of women during the period, see Ludmilla J. Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Samuel F. B. Morse: *His Letters and Journals*, ed. Edward Lind Morse, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 2:85. George B. Prescott, *History, Theory, and Practice of the Electric Telegraph* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), 215. Donald Mann, “Telegraphing of Election Returns, Presidential Messages and other Documents,” *American Telegraph Magazine* 1 (1852): 76.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred Vail, *Description of the American Electro Magnetic Telegraph* (Washington: J. and G. S. Gideon, 1845), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Taliaferro P. Shaffner, *The Telegraph Manual: A Complete History and Description of the Semaphoric, Electric and Magnetic Telegraphs of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, Ancient and Modern* (New York: Pudney and Russell, 1859), 460; Alexander Jones, *Historical Sketch of the Electric Telegraph: Including its Rise and Progress in the United States* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1852), 5.

<sup>15</sup> William F. Channing, “On the Municipal Electric Telegraph; Especially in its Application to Fire Alarms,” 2nd ser., *American Journal of Science and Arts* 13 (January, 1852): 58–59. “Extraordinary Electrical Experiments on the Human System,” *American Telegraph Magazine* 1 (1853): 210.

<sup>16</sup> James W. Carey argues that it was the telegraph’s very lack of materiality (as compared to other new technologies) that “made electricity and the telegraph powerful impulses to idealist thought both in religious and philosophic terms. It

presented the mystery of the mind-body dualism and located vital energy in the realm of the mind, in the nonmaterial world" ("Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," *Prospects* 8 [1983]: 307). The telegraph, however, while encouraging idealist thought, also became a site for materializing thought, a way of making spirit and thought visible and material precisely because of the way it seemed to "present the mystery of mind-body dualism." In this way, I want to argue, the telegraph fostered new conceptions of the racialized mind-body dualism.

<sup>17</sup> "The Atlantic Telegraph, Ancient Art, and Modern Progress," *DeBow's Review* 25 (1858): 509. "The Nerve of the Continent," quoted in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Edward Highton, *The Electric Telegraph: Its History and Progress* (London: John Weale, 1852), 175; and the discussion in Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet: The Remarkable Story of the Telegraph and the Nineteenth Century's On-line Pioneers* (New York: Walker and Co., 1998), 127–44.

<sup>19</sup> See Ronald G. Walters, "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 177–201, for a discussion of how the South was viewed as a den of fleshly sinfulness which threatened the whole of the United States on a moral and bodily level. For a discussion of how the conservation of male fluids (Thoreau's fear of manhood "flow[ing] out") was seen as essential to individual and national health, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes Toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> "The Telegraph," *Atlantic Monthly* 2 (1858): 591–92.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981), 42. Also see William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815–1859* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), for a history of the American school.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold Guyot, *The Earth and Man: Lectures on Comparative Physical Geography, in its Relation to the History of Mankind* (Boston: Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1849), 77. Hereafter abbreviated *E* and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Guyot argues that the "internal contrasts" between the North and the South "will be further softened down, when slavery, that fatal heritage of another age, which the Union still drags after it, as the convict drags his chain and ball, shall have disappeared from this free soil, freed in the name of liberty and Christian brotherhood, as it has disappeared from the fundamental principles of its law" (275). Implicit to this description is the idea that slavery, a relic of the past, will be done away with by the technological march of progress. See Stanton, 36; and Gould, 43, 69–70, for more on antislavery polygenists. Gould argues that "the polygenists' argument did not occupy a primary place in the ideology of slavery in mid-nineteenth-century America" (69). Gould may be correct about polygenesis *per se*, and racial science certainly had equivocal use in the slavery debate; however, as I hope to suggest, the diffusion of racial science influenced racial attitudes in a wider circle than Gould's statement would indicate. As Stanton puts it, "America, with its Indians, its Negro slaves, and its varied population of whites, tended to make every citizen, if not an ethnologist, at least a speculator on matters of race" (10). See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 139–57, on the diffusion of racial science at mid-century. Whether in explicitly biological and scientific terms or not, the kind of racial thinking underlying the American school (the positing of essential,

eternal, biological racial difference) was diffused throughout American culture and society, in mass cultural artifacts such as "O Susanna," technological tracts like Moore's, and considerations of the self like *Walden*.

<sup>24</sup> J. W. Moore, "The Telegraph," *DeBow's Review* 16 (1854): 254. Hereafter abbreviated *T* and cited parenthetically by volume and page number. Moore's article appeared in four installments: 15 (1853): 109–28; 15 (1853): 460–71; 16 (1854): 159–70; 16 (1854): 251–62.

<sup>25</sup> Numerous other commentators on the telegraph echoed this idea of a universal language: "in them the peculiar and local idioms of each language are to a large extent discarded. . . . The idea of a common language of the world, therefore, however far in the future it may be, is no longer a dream of the poet nor a scheme of a conqueror" ("The Telegraph," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 47 [1873]: 360). See also "Influence of the Telegraph upon Literature," *Democratic Review* (1848): 409–13. As Carolyn Marvin argues, underlying this dream of a universal language is a type of chauvinistic racism (*When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988], 193–200). Clearly this kind of universalism depended upon the exportation of Euro-American values and ideas as the measure of all of mankind. My point, however, is that despite the ways in which it harbored the worst sort of cultural imperialism, this fantasy did hold the potential for, and was used in, imagining more equitable cultural and economic exchange. As Miriam Hansen puts it in her discussion of the dream of film as a universal language in early cinema, "The universal-language metaphor . . . [not only] harbored totalitarian and imperialist tendencies" but also "more egalitarian and utopian instances" (*Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991], 78).

<sup>26</sup> Reverend Ezra S. Cannett, *Discourse on the Atlantic Telegraph* (1858), quoted in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 9; "Morse's Electro-Magnetic Telegraph," *DeBow's Review* 1 (1846): 134.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Henry (1859), quoted in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind*, 4; "Morse's Electro-Magnetic Telegraph," 133.

<sup>28</sup> Abolitionists used this link between enslaving men and enslaving nature to argue that the South had become dependent upon slavery because of its lack of technology. In 1854, for example, Theodore Parker pointed out that "[w]hile South Carolina has taken men from Africa, and made them slaves, New England has taken possession of the Merrimack, the Connecticut, the Androscoggin, the Kennebeck, the Penobscot, and a hundred smaller streams. She has caught the lakes of New Hampshire and holds them in thrall" (quoted in Perry Miller, "The Responsibility of Mind in a Civilization of Machines," *The American Scholar* 31 [1961–1962]: 62). Emerson made a similar point in 1847, noting the particularly (white) American and masculine quality of this "progressive" desire to enslave either other men or nature and commenting on the ways in which feminine sentiment affected those desires: "[Americans] are an ardent race and are as fully possessed with that hatred of labor, which is the principle of progress in the human race, as any other people. . . . So they buy slaves where the women will permit it; where they will not, they make the wind, the tide, the waterfall, the stream, the cloud, the lightning, do the work, by every art and device their cunningest brain can achieve" (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10:102–3).

<sup>29</sup> Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 12.

<sup>30</sup> Adas, 273. This is not to agree completely with historians like Reginald Horsman who have posited that ideas of biological difference had displaced environmentalist conceptions in American racial discourse by mid-century. Rather, my point is that these notions of biological and civilizational/environmental difference were necessarily entwined. Anthony Appiah and Walter Benn Michaels have pointed out how cultural (sociohistorical) notions of race return to biological ideas of difference in reference to early twentieth-century texts. See, in particular, Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn, 1985): 21–37; and Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1995). Telegraphic discourse suggests the obverse, the way in which emerging biological notions of race constantly returned to ideas of racial evolution (or environment) even as they tried to posit race in terms of eternal, essential difference. As Robert Young has argued, "the significance" of the American school was the way it "brought the scientific and the cultural together in order to promulgate an indistinguishably scientific and cultural theory of race" (*Colonial Desire Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* [New York: Routledge, 1995], 124). As I point out below, this marriage led such scientists to "make a double, and in fact, contradictory argument" (Young, 131). This union of culture and science created fissures in the new theories of race.

<sup>31</sup> J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1854), 67. I will be referring to arguments set out in the introduction and first chapter, which were written by Nott. Hereafter abbreviated M and cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>32</sup> As Hugo Meier has pointed out, the Atlantic telegraph became "in the popular mind the keynote of peace and international brotherhood. . . . The laying of the Atlantic telegraph . . . challenged American imaginations in a manner almost unprecedented" ("American Technology and the Nineteenth-Century World," *American Quarterly* 10 [Summer 1958]: 126). My point is to flesh out the racial implications of this technological, democratic brotherhood.

<sup>33</sup> "Telegraphs and Progress—The Cause," *Littell's Living Age*, 3 January 1857, 58. "The Atlantic Telegraph, Ancient Art, and Modern Progress," *DeBow's Review* 25 (1858): 508.

<sup>34</sup> Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph, and A History of the Great Atlantic Cable* (New York: Rudd and Carlton, 1858), 21–22.

<sup>35</sup> George Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 65.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Hitchcock, "The Telegraphic System of the Universe," in *The Religion of Geology and its Connected Sciences* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1852), 410.

<sup>37</sup> Hitchcock, 439.

<sup>38</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851; reprint, Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1965), 264.

<sup>39</sup> Werner Sollors, "Dr. Benjamin Franklin's Celestial Telegraph, or Indian Blessings to Gas-Lit American Drawing Rooms," *American Quarterly* 35 (1983): 459–80.

<sup>40</sup> Hitchcock, 413, quoting Charles Babbage, *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise, A Fragment*, 2nd ed. (London, 1838).

<sup>41</sup> "Atmospheric (Subterranean) Telegraph vs. the 'Underground Railroad,'" *American Telegraph Magazine* 1 (1853): 277.

<sup>42</sup> *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey, 14 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 2:442. Hereafter abbreviated *J* and cited parenthetically by volume and page number.

<sup>43</sup> See H. L. Wayland, "Results of the Increased Facility and Celerity of Inter-Communication," *New Englander* 16 (1858): 790–806. In 1858, Wayland described the antislavery potential of the telegraph in more material terms. Wayland, like Moore, lauds the telegraph's civilizing influence, the fact that "[i]t gives the preponderance of power to the nations representing the highest elements in humanity" (800), but locates that civilizing influence in terms of encouraging "the peaceful termination of slavery" (797): "the horrors of slavery chiefly exist . . . on remote and unvisited plantations. . . . The extension of the means of rapid and universal communication gives every man who is injured an appeal to the tribunal of the whole civilized world" (798–99). For Wayland, like Thoreau, the telegraph not only links the slave to the "civilized world," but also encourages men of different nations "to palliate the faults and to appreciate the virtues of each other" (802).

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the emergence of the Western Union monopoly, see Thompson. Most recent histories have focused on how the telegraphic industry played a central role in the emergence of American monopoly capitalism and its forms of economic and political domination. In focusing on another imagined bodily kind of materiality, I am, like the thinkers I discuss, omitting the ways in which the economic structures of the telegraph's expansion led to continued (and expanded) economic and political domination, especially of those conceived of as racially other, in preference for recovering the imaginative possibilities arising with the new technology that might serve to transform those material structures. For a history of workers in the telegraphic industry in the second half of the nineteenth century, see Edwin Gabler, *The American Telegrapher: A Social History, 1860–1900* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988). For a history of the impact of the telegraphic industry on the transformation to corporate sponsored research, see Paul Israel, *From Machine Shop to Industrial Laboratory: Telegraphy and the Changing Context of American Invention, 1830–1920* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992). For the importance of the telegraphic industry on legal issues, see Lester G. Lindley, *The Impact of the Telegraph on Contract Law* (New York: Garland, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Briggs and Maverick, *Story of the Telegraph*, 13. Jones, *Historical Sketch*, vi.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio, on 12 July 1854," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ser. 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, vol. 2: 1847–1854, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), 503, 505.

<sup>47</sup> Douglass, 503–4, my emphases.

<sup>48</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 28.

<sup>49</sup> Whitman, "Years of the Modern" (1865), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 18 ("steamship"), 17 ("colonizes"), 19 ("solidarity"), 21–22 ("nations").

<sup>50</sup> Hawthorne, *House of the Seven Gables*, 264.

<sup>51</sup> Whitman, "Passage to India" (1871), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 7, 20. Hereafter abbreviated "P" and cited parenthetically by line number.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the telegraph's use as a tool of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, see Daniel C. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press,

1981). As Takaki puts it, in Whitman's version of the imperial march to Asia, "the poet sings of an America where people of all colors come together, mixing indiscriminately in a great democracy yet respecting each other's rich cultural heritage and diversity" (281). This reading of Whitman differs significantly from those of Wai Chee Dimock and Philip Fisher, who have separately pointed out how Whitman achieves his ability to contain multitudes and thereby take on different racial personae through a type of abstract personhood that flattens out any true differences. Unlike Dimock and Fisher, I want to suggest that through his fluid poetic form and the metaphoric uses of the fluid electricity, Whitman is able to enunciate, or at least hint at, a kind of egalitarianism that recognizes difference. See Dimock, "Whitman, Syntax, and Political Theory," in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 62–79; and Fisher, "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 60–101. For a discussion of Whitman and fluidity, see Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991). For a discussion of Whitman's racial politics which is more similar to mine, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "To Stand Between: Walt Whitman's Poetics of Merger and Embodiment," in *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 50–82. As I will discuss in regards to "O Susanna," this union of multifarious bodies through electricity excited concerns of contagion. The telegraphic possibilities of miscegenation come to the forefront in a scandal in 1883 when a black man and white woman, who did not know each others' racial identities, married each other over the telegraph (see Marvin, 93–94, 200–1). Unlike Marvin, I want to underline the profound possibilities of communication that the telegraph encouraged and suggest that the intensity of racist responses to the telegraph derives from the very attraction of those possibilities.

<sup>53</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 170.

<sup>54</sup> See Sánchez-Eppler, 14–49, for a discussion of the tortured black male body in antislavery discourse. For a more general discussion of how the tortured body is used by repressive political regimes, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985). For more on the minstrel show's cultural work of uniting white Northerners and Southerners, see Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy," in *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 165–82. See Lott, for the best overview of the sexual dynamics of the antebellum minstrel show.