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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, people in many parts of the world see coral only on rare occasions. A visit to the aquarium or natural history museum brings coral reefs or coral specimens close. A snorkeling or scuba excursion briefly reminds us of the shocking vibrancy of the underwater world. An alarming environmentalist documentary or newspaper report confirms that coral is dying, as warming seas bleach the world's reefs beyond recovery.

Yet in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, coral was everywhere. Women and girls—wealthy, working-class, and enslaved—wore coral necklaces, pins, rings, earrings, and bracelets, jewelry far more accessible and affordable than gold or gemstones. A demand for these and other coral objects drove the global coral trade, then centered in Italy, where Mediterranean coral fishers brought yearly harvests of raw coral to “coral workshops” for workers to cut and polish and then prepare for packing aboard ships destined for foreign ports and markets. Reef ecosystems flourished throughout the Mediterranean Sea and in the warm, shallow waters of the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the Caribbean Sea, all of which were major sources of coral reef specimens retrieved from the seafloor by local divers to supply the curiosity cabinets of naturalists and tourists. Coral served as currency in the transatlantic slave trade; between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries Europeans exchanged coral for persons, capitalizing on the value of coral beads within certain cultures of Africa, such as in the Kingdom of Benin in what is presently southern Nigeria. Museum visitors peered at display cases of coral extracted from the Pacific by scientific expeditions. People were eager to learn about coral's natural history of defying taxonomic boundaries separating animal, vegetable, and mineral from the classical period through the Enlightenment. And children in wealthier families cut their first teeth on the “coral and bells,” a combination teething aid, toy, and talisman that evoked the classical myth of coral's “birth” from Medusa's blood and was believed to ward off maladies both physical and spiritual.

On the whole Europeans and North Americans not only saw and touched coral more often than we do today, but they also had good reasons to think

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more about the nature and growth of living, reef-building corals in particular. As a well-known cause of shipwrecks, reefs raised the question of where and how coral grows, a matter of economic concern to traders, of terror to navigators, and of sovereignty to any empire with oceanic ambitions. These and other reasons drove intense global interest in scientific theories of coral reef formation, such as those famously advanced by Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell during the 1830s and 1840s. And these theories, in turn, engaged a wide public during a time when the sciences were not yet the specialized domain of experts, but rather, as literary scholar Laura Dassow Walls explains, “part of the buzz and flux of the newspapers, parlors, and periodicals, right alongside—often the subject of—poems and stories and gossip fillers.”¹

Certainly the average person did not have a detailed understanding of coral biology.² Yet it was common knowledge that tiny polyps, discovered during the eighteenth century, somehow produce massive and ever-expanding structures by continually fusing together, while collectively making a reef from their bodies, over a timespan so vast that humans could scarcely fathom it. This process was popularly imagined as “labor” or “work.” Descriptions of polyps toiling away, “down, down so deep” in the sea—to quote the lyrics of one song especially beloved by generations of US schoolchildren—filled countless poems, short stories, novels, periodical essays, and other widely circulating media.³

For many reasons, then, people once encountered coral more frequently and knew and imagined much more about its nature, meanings, histories, and uses than most of us do today. These conditions set the stage for the particular phenomenon that this book explores: in the nineteenth century a powerful set of ideas about coral shaped US thinking and writing about politics, broadly defined as a system of managing and distributing finite resources and care. Thus, while this book tells the story of coral as at once a global commodity, a personal ornament, an essential element of the marine ecosystem, and a powerful political metaphor, it also asks us to consider what we of the Anthropocene might learn from the forgotten human lessons once encoded in coral, even as coral itself vanishes.

One of the most popular political analogies that coral inspired during the nineteenth century involved the comparison of human society to a coral reef. The analogy usually suggested the power of collective labor for common good. In a chapter on cooperative labor in *Capital* (1867), for example, Karl Marx borrows this analogy by comparing humans to reef-making polyps: to make the point that collective labor promotes collective thriving, Marx cites a contemporary textbook on political economy that describes “mighty coral reefs rising” from the work of polyps who, though individually “weak,” are strong in the aggregate.⁴ Marx’s point is that coral offers humans a better model of

labor and politics than capitalism, for the labors of coral serve not the “mastership of one capitalist,” but rather the sustenance of the whole, the work of each individual polyp ultimately enriching all.⁵ Variations on that political romance of the coral collective abound in nineteenth-century print culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

Yet in an enormous range of nineteenth-century US reflections on coral reefs, that bright romance collides with and founders on a darker vision of life-consuming labor performed by the many for the benefit of the few. In one of the most popular nineteenth-century US poems about coral, for example, reefs exhibit a system of production in which collective labor *appears* to yield collective thriving, while in reality it requires one group of workers to give their lives and labors in full to a robust and expansive foundation that they can never enter alive. An instant transatlantic success upon its 1826 publication in a Connecticut newspaper, Lydia Huntley Sigourney’s “The Coral Insect”—a popular term for the coral polyp—describes a “race” of beings that “toil” to “build” the massive reef. They do so collectively, ultimately producing a “vast” work of lasting “wonder and pride.”⁶ Thus far, just as in *Capital*, reefs are nature’s celebration of communal labor for the common good.

In this widely reprinted poem, however, as in so many other nineteenth-century US reflections on coral, the details of reef formation disclose another story. Coral insect work is ceaseless and unvarying: the poem opens with repetitive labor—“Toil on! toil on!”—and closes with its continuance in the rhythmic “Ye build,—ye build.” That perpetual toil goes unacknowledged, absent from human sight and memory: it is “secret,” “noteless,” and “unmark’d.” Generation after generation, from birth until death without leaving, the workers build a structure that excludes them, for they “enter not in” but rather “fade” into the “desolate main,” where they “die.”⁷ Meanwhile, the reef rises from their laboring bodies, which endlessly merge to become a coral island that supports those who did not produce it and do not remember who did.

Sigourney’s poem, unlike Marx’s treatise, does not directly compare polyps to persons or reefs to human polities. Instead, the poem explores a key conceptual question raised by coral’s natural history: How can countless small and finite beings create and sustain a single, massive, enduring, and growing structure? The poem was published in a historical moment when this question was of the most pressing political and cultural relevance to a polity dedicated to collective thriving and sustained by the labors of millions who could never fully belong to the structure that they built. It answers the question by imagining extractive labor as a necessary condition of the most robust foundations. And it shows just how easily such labor may exist alongside, become obscured by, and even promote celebrations of communal labor for common good.

Sigourney's poem is far from singular in that regard. Rather, it belongs to a vibrant tradition of nineteenth-century US accounts of coral reefs in which the vision of a cooperative coral collective can be sustained as long as one does not look beneath the waves to perceive that a reef can emerge into a robust island by continually and silently extracting the labors and bodies of countless millions of workers. By rehearsing that account of coral in innumerable texts in multiple genres across the long nineteenth century, Americans repeatedly described an extractive labor relation that strikingly resembled the chattel slavery that was then sustaining and expanding the US.⁸ Moreover, through repetition, that labor relation became familiar, and even routine.

Sigourney's poem vividly registers just one of several branches of US political thinking about coral that emerged in the polity's written and visual culture across the long nineteenth century. During this period, coral's "cultural biography"—briefly defined as the various histories and uses of coral that generate its social meanings—intersected with political pressures and debates specific to a culture formally dedicated to common good yet increasingly indebted to "slavery's capitalism," the unprecedented, entwined expansion of slavery and industrial capitalism between the 1790s and 1860s.⁹ Tracking these intersections across US writing and visual culture, accounting for why they recur, and explaining their political significance among different groups of Americans at different moments in the long nineteenth century is the central work of this book. For even, perhaps especially, when coral appears as mere ornament, curiosity, or romantic metaphor, it almost always also reflects and shapes complex conceptual thinking about labor and life, individual and collective, alternately generating visions of the common good *and* numerous forms of reckoning with or refusing characteristically US capitalist coercions and exclusions—sometimes within the very same text.

We already know that nineteenth-century Americans vigorously debated the benefits of industrial capitalism, broadly defined as a system of economic behaviors and relations that arose and expanded globally between 1790 and 1860 by mobilizing, and then rationalizing, very different kinds of unfree labor, among which slavery was by far the most exploitative, violent, and formative. We know that Americans continued to debate these behaviors and relations as they spread beyond the plantation and even beyond the legal end of slavery. Relatedly, scholars have documented significant popular contests over one of the most pernicious ideologies that arose to rationalize these coercive relations: biological essentialism, a strictly biological account of human life that ranks some persons as more naturally suited to bodily labor and others to a life of the mind.¹⁰ We know, in other words, that the US is founded in unfree labor relations of very different kinds—including slavery, wage labor, and the

unpaid reproductive and domestic work of women—and that many struggled to resist or rationalize such labor through various scientific, philosophical, and social discourses because coercive labor is at variance with the vaunted ideal of common good.¹¹

Coral, however, allows us to see how such a country and some of its most powerful and pervasive (yet elusive) colonial logics of race, gender, and class were alternately conceived, forged, circulated, normalized, rationalized, contested, and refused—not only in the period's more obviously political writings but also in a broad range of seemingly ephemeral musings on an everyday material that frequently appears to have nothing to do with humans at all.¹² As writers of various identities, political affiliations, intentions, and intended audiences considered coral, coral's material features and histories in turn shaped their thinking, producing new accounts of coral that are also infused with claims of striking political relevance. In some texts, that relevance is more apparent than in others because many US writers directly compare coral polyps to humans, and often to specific groups of people working to sustain and expand the nineteenth-century US. In other texts, that relevance emerges as an unmistakable continuity between the imagined labor conditions of coral reefs and the actual labor conditions in US society. In still other texts that relevance becomes visible only when we learn a specific history of coral's use and meaning—a particular part of coral's cultural biography—that was familiar to many nineteenth-century Americans yet is largely forgotten today.

The political claims that emerge from manifold intersections of coral and US politics are familiar, unsettling, and surprising by turns. In some cases, coral abetted well-documented forms of colonial thinking by lending new force to various logics of race, gender, and class that rationalized the polity's ongoing dispossessions and exclusions. In other cases, coral generated challenges to these logics from unlikely quarters, since many who benefited socially and economically from the combined rise of slavery and industrial capitalism also questioned these interlinked systems through coral. And more hopefully for our present world, coral frequently prompted writers, artists, and activists to imagine more just political arrangements and social possibilities that remain to be put widely into practice.¹³

Whatever form the country's political thinking with coral took, our attention to it reveals that a broad cross section of the population, across boundaries of race, gender, and class—poorer and richer, worker and employer, union leader and lawmaker—repeatedly and tacitly confronted a reality that was too rarely stated explicitly: a country formally dedicated to unprecedented liberty required marginalized persons to labor in the service of a polity that refused to incorporate them politically and socially. That acknowledgement was once a

ubiquitous, widely shared, familiar part of everyday life in the US, as close as a coral specimen or a song about coral reefs. And it speaks to a complex problem that persists at the center of US life: our longing for the collective runs deep and too easily elides the coercions sustaining it.

METHODS AND APPROACHES TO REEF THINKING

How did coral, of all materials, come to quietly carry complex political imaginings of labor and life, individual and collective—even when coral appears to be merely ornamental? Which particular groups of humans and forms of labor did Americans tend to associate with coral, and why? How can we recover the varieties of political imagining once encoded in coral as a result of coral's manifold histories? And why do those past imaginings matter now? While it will take an entire book to answer these questions in full, they require a preliminary explanation of my methods for uncovering the polity's political thinking with coral.

This book began in earnest when I began to take a biographical approach to coral, seeking to understand the social meanings of coral in the nineteenth-century US, as those meanings emerged and changed across time and location, among different groups of people, and in response to various sources of knowledge about coral—whether scientific, literary, economic, cultural, or otherwise—in tandem with contemporary social and political exigencies.¹⁴ This approach has required closely reading texts about coral by numerous nineteenth-century US writers, artists, and activists, and then trying to follow wherever their representations of coral pointed.¹⁵

One part of that project has involved becoming conversant with many sources of knowledge about coral that were more familiar to nineteenth-century Americans than they are to most people living in the US today. These sources, which I discuss at length in chapter 1, include the natural history of coral from the classical period through the Enlightenment; Enlightenment debates about coral taxonomy and coral polyps among prominent European naturalists from Trembley to Linnaeus; nineteenth-century scientific studies of reef formation by Darwin and others; British poetry about Pacific coral reefs; British and American travel writing about Pacific coral reefs and islands by scientists and explorers; the European medicinal and spiritual practice of wearing red coral to ward off the “evil eye” and protect the bodies of mothers and children; the industry of Mediterranean coral fishing that supplied red coral to the global coral trade before 1900; oral traditions and ritual practices surrounding red coral within specific cultures of early modern Africa, and later

within particular communities in the Black Atlantic diaspora from Jamaica to New Orleans; the role of coral as currency in the transatlantic slave trade from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century; and the practice of coral diving among free and enslaved populations in the Caribbean to supply coral specimens to tourists and naturalists. All these practices, uses, and meanings produced knowledge about coral that informed nineteenth-century American conceptions and representations of it.

But another part of that project has involved realizing that the cultural biography of coral is inseparable from colonial violence at almost every turn—and then using that realization to uncover some particular conceptual and material relations between coral and colonial violence and letting them guide my interpretations of imaginative reflections on coral. While no domain of human experience or knowledge is fully legible apart from the history and ongoing legacies of colonial violence—as scholars working in Black and Indigenous studies have established—there are several specific reasons that Western knowledge about coral is especially imbricated with that history.¹⁶

First, as is the case with many types of natural specimens that European natural historians turned into their objects of study, local Black and Indigenous persons, both free and enslaved, frequently supplied coral specimens, alongside useful knowledge about coral itself, to naturalists working in the Caribbean and the Pacific.¹⁷ These local populations also supplied decorative coral specimens to US tourists, who would then display them on mantles, bookshelves, and curiosity cabinets in their homes and classrooms and frequently use them to teach or speculate about the nature of coral. Nineteenth-century knowledge of coral, both scientific and popular, was thus quite literally indebted to the skills, knowledge, and labor of Black and Indigenous persons.

Second, the practice of eighteenth-century natural history provided a ready logic to nineteenth-century racial scientists, while the particular Enlightenment debate about coral taxonomy shared specific conceptual terrain with nineteenth-century debates about human taxonomy. Biological essentialism, a biological account of human life that nineteenth-century American racial scientists embraced and developed under pressure to rationalize the expansion of slavery and other colonialist projects, borrowed heavily from systems of taxonomic classification proposed by earlier generations of natural historians such as Linnaeus.¹⁸ The enormous epistemological shift that attended the nineteenth-century emergence of the life sciences, and involved the transformation of earlier taxonomic systems into rigid tools for hierarchizing humans, has been exhaustively documented.¹⁹ I raise it here, first, to remind us that American reflections on natural history during the period under consideration were never uninformed by the emergent

scientific racism that rationalized slavery, and second, to introduce a more specific relation between racial taxonomy and coral taxonomy that developed during the period. For biological essentialism turned on the claims that race and gender are visible, and that they are visible indices of what is harder to see—qualities such as character, intelligence, and creative capacities—claims destabilized, according to many US writers, by the natural history of coral as an animal that even the luminaries of Enlightenment science had repeatedly misidentified as a stone or a plant based on how it looks and feels. Within a culture that increasingly ranked and valued persons based on the color, shape, size, and texture of their physical features, reflections on coral's natural history were rarely about coral alone but also bore directly on current debates about slavery and some of its rationalizing logics and ways of seeing and evaluating.²⁰

Third, transatlantic slavery produced divergent knowledges and practices surrounding coral, while partly sponsoring Mediterranean coral fisheries that supplied most of the world's coral objects before 1900. Indigenous African value systems rendered red coral beads an important currency in the transatlantic slave trade between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. These systems made it possible for European traders to purchase humans with red coral, much of it retrieved by Mediterranean coral fishers hired by powerful European mercantile companies that facilitated the slave trade, including Great Britain's Royal African Company. These same Indigenous value systems also persisted beyond the exchange of coral for persons, however, shaping the styles of dress among Black women throughout the Black Atlantic diaspora who wore red coral well into the nineteenth century to preserve a link to the past and affirm their multiply informed racial, social, and cultural diasporic identities. Thus, in the nineteenth-century US, coral alternately signified the reduction of Black persons to commodities and the refusal of the logic of reduction, depending on whom one asked.

These are some of the major reasons that we must read nineteenth-century US reflections on coral in relation to histories of colonial violence. These relations help explain why so many different groups of people during this period considered coral strikingly relevant to questions of human labor. These people include white women, such as poet Lydia Huntley Sigourney, for whom coral sustained the idea that the most robust structures emerge by consuming and excluding countless "laborers" over many generations. They include Black women, such as poet and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who borrowed the reef analogy to point out the exclusionary social and political relations that subordinated Black persons long after the legal end of slavery.

They include the Coral Builders, a Black literary society in late nineteenth-century Cleveland that took up the metaphor of coral to imagine and enact a more just distribution of essential labor. And they include white abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe and Black political activist Charles W. Chesnutt, writers for whom red coral beads generated the fleeting but formative recognition that Black life is also lived beyond the reality and conceptual framework of slavery.²¹

Yet finding the complex reflections on human politics encoded in disparate reflections on coral requires more than close reading. It also requires key insights from Black studies, and from studies of material culture and race in North America and the broader Atlantic world.

A central goal of Black studies, as Alexander G. Weheliye reminds us, drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, is to track the conceptual frameworks, logics, and processes that produce human hierarchies by stratifying humanity into “full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans”—and by doing so in subtle ways.²² Those hierarchies can emerge, circulate, and gain credibility—and alternately be contested, refigured, and refused—through repetition across time, not only in overtly political texts but also in everyday reflections on topics that are apparently apolitical. Powerful modes of ranking and devaluation, of dividing and hierarchizing, Lindon Barrett suggests, often transpire in the most quotidian ways.²³ In the nineteenth-century US, racist presumptions about persons of African descent in particular were never confined only to texts that deal explicitly with the question of race.²⁴ A major premise of this book is that human differences are sometimes intensely produced and reinforced, challenged and refused, through texts that may not appear to be about race, or even about humans at all.²⁵

Black studies scholars also remind us, however, that the human hierarchies forged under slavery and scientific racism have never wholly defined the lives of Black persons. As Katherine McKittrick observes, both biological determinism *and* the scholarly critique of biological determinism risk violently diminishing Black persons by suggesting that the history and afterlives of slavery can fully explain and contain Blackness.²⁶ This book tries to heed McKittrick’s warning by reading representations of coral in relation not only to violent colonial practices and frameworks but also to Black self-representation and community formation within the US, to meanings of coral developed by Black women across the Black Atlantic diaspora, and to fleeting moments of white recognition that Black life far exceeds the US colonial logic of race as biology.

Tracking how coral, in particular, alternately abets and unsettles colonialist frameworks within the nineteenth-century US would also be impossible

without the methods of material cultural studies, which interprets materials and the metaphors they sponsor in relation to multiple human histories and practices. Of particular importance to this book is cultural historian Robin Bernstein's concept of "scriptive things," items of material culture that encourage or "script" certain ideas and behaviors because of their particular features in combination with their documented uses and meanings among human communities across time and contexts.²⁷ Put another way, things carry meanings because of how different groups of people have used them over time, and consequently, things may transmit those meanings beyond the intent or understanding of any given actor or author.²⁸ As a marine material with a global history spanning many centuries and cultures, coral carried many meanings—of nature and culture, individual and collective, labor and life—that took shape far beyond the US polity's cultural, political, temporal, and spatial boundaries. To track potential meanings of Blackness in particular that coral generated beyond those boundaries, I have relied on the methods of scholars of material culture in African and African Diaspora communities in the Atlantic world. Of special importance in that regard is Akinwumi Ogundiran's and Paula Saunders's concept of "Black Atlantic ritual." Ogundiran and Saunders argue that fragments of information about the memories, behaviors, values, and practices of persons forcibly entangled with commerce, commodification, Middle Passage, and slavery are encoded in the materials that mattered to them.²⁹

By recovering some varieties of political thinking once encoded in coral in the US, this book cannot by itself solve the problem to which it relentlessly returns, the country's persistent failure to create a truly just collective. After all, even the more optimistic varieties of political imagining with coral that I examine did not translate into wider practice or prevent the enslavement of millions of persons of African descent during a period that is rightly known for forging violent cultural logics of race and gender that persist into our present. Yet the goal of historically oriented humanities scholarship is not necessarily to provide us with ready-made solutions, but rather, as historian Dominic LaCapra reflects, to help us think through problems that "do not lend themselves to a definitive solution or first-time discovery," have been "repeated (and repeatedly thought about) with variations over time," and remain "alive and pressing."³⁰ This book aids our thinking about collective thriving in the US by using coral to illuminate, clarify, and historically contextualize that topic, to unearth overlooked solutions imagined by past generations, and to encourage us to understand ourselves in relation to, even as inextricable from, that past.³¹ For even as this book charts new origins and trajectories of exclusionary thinking and practice in the US, it also reveals that a refusal to categorize, know, and

rank life is also a vital part of the US polity's cultural past, and so that refusal must become a "condition of the present."³²

SOURCES AND ORGANIZATION

Of the hundreds of widely circulating written and visual reflections on coral and reefs consulted for this study across nearly ten years of research at scores of US (and some European) libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions, I have chosen to focus on those that most vividly convey the most interesting, surprising, and relevant lines of popular thinking about coral, labor, and politics in the US between roughly 1790 and 1900. These sources span multiple media and genres, including natural history, periodical essay, poem, song, short story, decorative object, specimen, painting, Sunday school pamphlet, newspaper article, novel, sermon, reference work, stereograph card, travel account, and trade dictionary. Nearly all circulated widely during the period in question, which means that fewer than I have wished were produced by persons marginalized by race, gender, and class. To be more particular about demography: about half of the sources included were created by white men; roughly a quarter by white women; roughly a quarter by anonymous creators; and a small percentage by Black men and women. Finally, while this study centers largely on US literature and culture between 1790 and 1900, its temporal and geographic span is much broader because so much nineteenth-century thinking on coral, labor, and politics derives from meanings of coral forged before 1790 and beyond the borders of the continent. Thus, I have tried as much as possible to take an oceanic approach to nineteenth-century US writers and artists by tracking multiple associations they made with coral; this approach has meant following their imaginations across the multiple centuries, continents, and cultures that brought coral itself, and ideas about coral, into everyday US life.

Immersing the reader in the global circulations of materials, bodies, and ideas that endowed coral with the power to evoke humans, along with three different forms of coercive and marginalized human labor at the silenced center of US life, is the goal of chapter 1, "The Global Biography of Early American Coral." This chapter focuses on three of the most common coral objects encountered by nineteenth-century Americans. It presents images and descriptions of these objects, histories of their uses and meanings in multiple cultures, and accounts of the labor required to procure and produce them. The chapter thus introduces readers to the most important raw materials, so to speak, that so many nineteenth-century US writers variously drew on and

transformed into the political or politically relevant insights that constitute the core of this study.

Chapter 2, “‘Labors of the Coral,’” explores nineteenth-century US fascination with “coral insects” and explains how and why people came to imagine these animals as “workers,” and specifically as workers who labored under conditions that strikingly evoke human chattel slavery. Returning to Sigourney’s “The Coral Insect,” I place the poem within a much longer tradition of seemingly ephemeral reflections on reef-making between the 1820s and 1860s. During this period, visions of apparently collective coral “labor” repeatedly normalized coercive labor relations as the necessary foundation of the strongest structures—while simultaneously eliding the fact that Black enslaved persons were the human workers performing that type of labor in the US. That elision is precisely what later writers, speakers, and activists would come to challenge through coral. The chapter thus establishes the centrality of coral to the imagination of human labor, but it also lays the groundwork for the alternative and more hopeful modes of political thinking with coral that also emerged during the period.

Chapter 3, “Fathomless Forms of Life,” turns to a different understanding of coral insects and coral reefs, one that originated in science and suggested that coral refuses easy classification or prediction. Americans were fascinated by older taxonomic debates about whether coral was animal, vegetable, or mineral, and by more recent studies of coral reefs by Darwin and others who sought to explain how, why, and where reefs grow from a profusion of interacting forces. US writers variously transformed that fascination into new and politically relevant claims, all of which emerged from coral’s popular status as a fathomless form of life. Imagined in this way, coral especially appealed to writers seeking to challenge and propose alternatives to the period’s obsession with measuring and ranking different groups of humans and then predicting their political value and social role on the basis of visible form and features.

Chapter 4, “Coral Collectives,” examines nineteenth-century US writers and activists who drew on the unique properties of coral polyps and reefs to imagine, and sometimes enact, more just alternatives to a society that extracted the labor of marginalized groups while appearing to sustain the collective. These writers and activists include white US women as various as Stowe, Sigourney, feminist philosopher and university lecturer Ellen M. Mitchell, Boston adoption reformers Anstrice and Eunice C. Fellows, and historian and translator Elizabeth Wormeley Latimer. And they include Black men and women, from James McCune Smith to Frances Ellen Watkins

Harper, who drew on coral to point out the limits of white collectives and call for transformation of the political arrangements that subjugated Black persons long after the end of slavery. The power of coral both to illuminate coercion and model a more genuinely just collective is nowhere more apparent than in actual nineteenth-century charitable societies that named themselves after coral, such as Cleveland's Coral Builders Society, a Black literary society that supported Saint John's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church during the 1890s.

Chapter 5, "Red Coral, Black Atlantic," traces a long history of red coral ornaments across the Atlantic world—from Senegal, Guinea, and Nigeria through Jamaica and New Orleans—and then uses that history to reinterpret US novels and stories of slavery and race as unlikely sites of knowledge about the Black Atlantic diaspora. Black women within African and African diaspora communities across the Atlantic world wore red coral as a "Black Atlantic ritual." That ritual shaped US fictions of race and slavery as various as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Chesnut's "Her Virginia Mammy" (1899). By reading these works in light of that ritual, we can perceive that they point us toward sources of Black identity that exceed the frameworks of slavery and other forms of colonialism. Read through red coral, these works might also encourage a form of epistemic humility that must be the foundation of more just racial relations.

Collectively these chapters affirm that nineteenth-century Americans were quite capable of complexity when thinking about labor and the ideologies that rationalized labor. They delighted in acknowledging the perils, contingencies, and irresolvable quandaries attending any effort to categorize, fix, and determine. They imagined better political models than a country built on coercive labor. And yet their intellectual capaciousness and awareness too rarely translated into more just practices toward marginalized subjects. What, then, is the value of recovering that past awareness now? This is the question taken up more fully in the coda, "Coral Temporalities," which reflects on the value of a historically oriented environmental humanities.



Coral reefs are disappearing. Imperiled by human industry—and by some of the same forms of industrial violence that produced slavery and other colonial exploitations—reef ecosystems are collapsing. We already know that coral's death will endanger human lives and will have other profound ecological consequences. But the loss of coral also means the loss of vital ways to *imagine*

human life and society. As we lose coral, then, we are losing a material that is not only biologically crucial but also conceptually indispensable to us. To grasp the extent and stakes of that loss, we must return to a time when coral was everywhere; when everyday encounters with coral were encounters with worldwide, oceanic circulations of knowledge, bodies, and labor; and when, consequently, seeing coral could be a matter of seeing oneself and one's polity anew.

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