
Reading Tree in Nature's Nation: Toward a Field Guide to Sylvan Literacy in the Nineteenth-Century United States

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If the tree is addressed no longer as simply a tree but as evidence of something else, a location of *mana*, language expresses the contradiction that it is at the same time itself and something other than itself, identical and not identical.

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno¹

IN THE 1881 EDITION OF WALT WHITMAN'S *Leaves of Grass*, there appears a poem called "Song of the Redwood-Tree," in which an omniscient human narrator pauses in the California woods to hear

A California song,
A prophecy and indirection . . .
A murmuring, fateful, giant voice, out of the earth and sky,
Voice of a mighty dying tree in the redwood forest dense.

The "mighty dying tree" is a redwood in the midst of being cut down, and it sings:

*Farewell my brethren . . .
My time has ended, my term has come.*²

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¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif., 2002), 11.

² Walt Whitman, "Song of the Redwood-Tree," in *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia, 1881), 165–166. Whenever Whitman's tree speaks, it does so in italics.

Oddness abounds in Whitman's poem—a tree addresses the reader for sixty-six italicized lines, after all—but it is the world beyond the page that is strangest of all, for in the nineteenth-century United States, talking trees were nothing if not prosaic. We can still experience some of this if we listen in the right way when passing by an archive's shelves heavy with the leaves of nineteenth-century texts. The journey barely begins before the words come. "Don't drink," gravely intones *A Voice from the Forest*, an allegory from 1852 in which a convention of sober forest trees hold an outdoor revival for all the cultivated grain- and fruit-bearing plants to confess their sin of alcohol production. The forest trees do not tittle, and in a deep collective voice they urge all the others to guard their juices and saps from alcohol-thirsty humans. A bit further down history's path, we might be saluted with "Solidarity!" from an apple tree in Boston in 1848—a year of socialist revolution in Europe—a tree that urged upon the city's young a startlingly radical ethic of mutual aid: "All things and creatures are bound together, and live and flourish together . . . You cannot exist for an instant without help coming from abroad; you are joined to the creation, and to your fellow beings; you do not stand alone and cannot live alone."³

And yet, speech is only the most obvious attribute of a tree with a tale to tell. If we extend "speaking" to mean conveying information more generally, then a forest of meaning-laden trees reveals itself wherever we look in the cultural history of the nineteenth-century U.S. For example, it was popular at the time to collect souvenir envelopes, many of which depicted resonant patriotic scenes. On the back of the Civil War-era envelope in Figure 1, a pine tree—we know it is a pine because of its iconic form—decapitates an equally iconic palm. Beneath the scene is a bit of verse from Oliver Wendell Holmes's 1861 poem "A Voice from the Loyal North": "God help them if the tempest swings / The pine against the palm!" To nineteenth-century Americans, the bioregional cultural allusions would have been immediate: since at least the late seventeenth century, white pines had stood for New England (and American Indians, too, as the colonial seal of Massachusetts reveals), while palms stood for the South, especially the Palmetto State, South Carolina—the first state to secede from the Union.⁴ They also had connotations of foreignness: sometimes a pleasant Levantine Eden, at other times a Latin American out-of-place-ness, and at still others both unsteadily together.⁵ *Pine* and *palm*, then, were deeply resonant signifiers used in this case to tell a tale of a northern, natural triumph over a Confederate state that was seen as not quite American.

In the nineteenth-century U.S., a tree was rarely just a tree: it could be the forester's timber, the economist's lumber, or the contested object of social, political, and labor his-

³ Mary Hinckley, *A Voice from the Forest; or, An Appeal from Nature in Behalf of the Temperance Cause* (Lowell, Mass., 1852); *Lessons from an Apple Tree: A Gift from the Teachers and Children of the Warren Street Chapel, Boston, May 30th, 1848* (Boston, 1848), quote from 7.

⁴ Eric Rutkow has shown that early Massachusetts colonists cast a coin with a pine tree on it, and at the Battle of Bunker Hill a pine-tree flag flew over Massachusetts's Minutemen. Rutkow, *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2012), 25–33, 35. For southern sylvan allusions that privilege the palm, as well as another tree associated with the South, the magnolia, see "Trees," *Southern Literary Messenger* 14, no. 1 (January 1848): 12–16, here 12; and the southern landscape artist T. Addison Richards's "The Landscape of the South," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 6, no. 36 (May 1853): 721–733.

⁵ Katherine Manthorne, "The Quest for a Tropical Paradise: Palm Tree as Fact and Symbol in Latin American Landscape Imagery, 1850–1875," *Art Journal* 44, no. 4 (1984): 374–382; Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (New York, 2013), 337, 343–346.

tory, as historians of forestry, forest products, and forest conservation have ably shown.⁶ But though trees have of course always grown from the earth's humus, they have also long sprouted in the human mind, and for millennia imagined trees have assumed a prominent place in various world cultures, as a number of historians, ecocritics, and anthropologists have begun to argue.⁷ Indeed, one of the oldest surviving poems from the British Isles, "The Dream of the Rood," which dates to the eighth century (and perhaps even earlier), is a story within a story in which the tree cut for Jesus's cross delivers a history and prophecy of Christianity to its dreaming listener/narrator.⁸ And so trees live a double life: they are objective non-human beings out there in the world, and, at the very same time, always idealizations that have helped humans throughout the world to narrate their place in that world, even well into the modern era, when an enchanted nature was presumed to have perished in the glare of Enlightenment inquiry.⁹ Perhaps, then, "[t]he best definition of *tree* is simply a single-trunk plant filled with human meaning," as Jared Farmer argues in *Trees in Paradise: A California History*, a cultural symbol as well as a material fact. And since tree symbols are what Lori Vermaas has called "concentrated narratives," they are texts and can be read.¹⁰

⁶ Some of the hallmark approaches to forests and wood include Thomas R. Cox, Robert S. Maxwell, Phillip Drennon Thomas, and Joseph J. Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land: Americans and Their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1985); Michael Williams, *Americans and Their Forests: A Historical Geography* (Cambridge, 1989); Thomas R. Cox, *The Lumberman's Frontier: Three Centuries of Land Use, Society, and Change in America's Forests* (Corvallis, Ore., 2010); and Joachim Radkau, *Wood: A History*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Malden, Mass., 2012). To this body of work, one could add social forest histories influenced by Ramachandra Guha's pathbreaking *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989); books such as Richard H. Grove's *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600–1860* (Cambridge, 1995) and Karl Jacoby's *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001); Paolo Squatriti's essay "Trees, Nuts, and Woods at the End of the First Millennium: A Case from the Amalfi Coast," in Scott G. Bruce, ed., *Ecologies and Economies in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2010), 25–43; and Ellen Stroud's recent regional exploration, *Nature Next Door: Cities and Trees in the American Northeast* (Seattle, Wash., 2012).

⁷ See, for instance, Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago, 1992); John Brinkerhoff Jackson, "In Favor of Trees," in Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven, Conn., 1994), 93–102; Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995); Laura Rival, ed., *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism* (Oxford, 1998); Michael P. Cohen, *A Garden of Bristlecones: Tales of Change in the Great Basin* (Reno, Nev., 1998); Gayle Brandow Samuels, *Enduring Roots: Encounters with Trees, History, and the American Landscape* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1999); Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, *Tree Cultures: The Place of Trees and Trees in Their Place* (Oxford, 2002); Lori Vermaas, *Sequoia: The Heralded Tree in American Art and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 2003); Thomas J. Campanella, *Republic of Shade: New England and the American Elm* (New Haven, Conn., 2003); Lawrence S. Earley, *Looking for Longleaf: The Fall and Rise of an American Forest* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004); William Bryant Logan, *Oak: The Frame of Civilization* (New York, 2005); Megan Kate Nelson, *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (Athens, Ga., 2012), especially chap. 3; Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012); William Kerrigan, *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History* (Baltimore, 2012); Laura Auricchio, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, and Giulia Pacini, eds., *Invaluable Trees: Cultures of Nature, 1660–1830* (Oxford, 2012); Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*. The grandfather of this approach is Donald Culross Peattie's wonderful *A Natural History of North American Trees* (Boston, 2007).

⁸ "The Dream of the Rood," in Elaine Treharne, ed., *Old and Middle English, c. 890–c.1400: An Anthology*, 3rd ed. (Malden, Mass., 2010), 108–115.

⁹ The classic texts arguing that a vitalist, enchanted nature died in the stingy soil of Enlightenment science include Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, especially "The Concept of Enlightenment," 1–34; Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York, 1983); and Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), among many others.

¹⁰ Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*, 410; Vermaas, *Sequoia*, ix. For more on trees as symbols and narratives, see Cohen, *A Garden of Bristlecones*, especially the introduction.



FIGURE 1: Even trees were drafted into the Civil War. “Enough of speech; the trumpet rings! Be silent, patient, calm; God help them if the tempest swings The *Pine* against the *Palm*!” Illustrated envelope, ca. 1861–1865. The lines are from Oliver Wendell Holmes’s 1861 poem “A Voice from the Loyal North.” Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Of course, many non-human objects and beings have long burrowed deep into human culture. In the U.S., particular mountains, individual rivers, and specific landscapes have all carried a host of local, regional, and occasionally national associations, as have animals such as wolves, birds, and whales.¹¹ Plants and flowers, too, grew into metaphors, and the nineteenth century saw the publication of dozens of works dedicated to floral language—"the alphabet of angels," as Lucy Hooper put it in her introduction to *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry*, which included a "floral dictionary."¹²

But tree symbols were different. For one, the diversity of individual species dwarfed the more limited genres of geographical features—there are only so many different types of mountains or rivers. Yet D. J. Browne's *Sylva Americana* (1832) listed 145 trees in the U.S. "which exceed 30 feet in height," and by 1922 Charles Sargent's *Manual of the Trees of North America* noted 783 arboreal species.¹³ Such diversity allowed for great specificity, and many in the nineteenth-century U.S. understood the distinction between, say, redwood and cedar as not just physical, but cultural: the two trees simply meant different things, just as the pine and palm did. Some writers, such as Wilson Flagg, took it upon themselves to spell out explicitly the individual differences between trees. The birch reigned as the "Lady of the Woods," the oak as a (presumably male) "monarch," and the lithe ash revealed herself to be the "Venus of the forest."¹⁴ Such fine-grained cultural characteristics also clung to willows and mulberries and longleaf pines and sugar maples, as well as dozens of other species—a flexible, specific lexicon of sylvan symbols.

At the same time, sylvan symbols attained a level of general legibility unavailable to more local phenomena because trees were nearly everywhere: a terrestrial wave of them swept in nearly unbroken greenery from the coasts of Maine to eastern Texas, from New England to the Deep South, finally breaking against the midcontinent's ocean of grass. Historical geographer Michael Williams has estimated that 45 percent of the contiguous U.S.—some 850 million acres—was forested at the moment of European contact, and of those 850 million acres, more than 680 million were located east of the Great Plains.¹⁵ Even when trees were absent, they were present: perhaps

¹¹ See, for instance, William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991); Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (New York, 1999); Jon T. Coleman, *Vicious: Wolves and Men in America* (New Haven, Conn., 2004); D. Graham Burnett, *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-Century New York Court Case That Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 2007); and Jared Farmer, *On Zion's Mount: Mormons, Indians, and the American Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

¹² One of the most explicit was Almira H. Lincoln's *Familiar Lectures on Botany*, first published in 1829. In a chapter titled "Language of Flowers," Phelps lists a one-to-one decoding of what different blossoms mean. See Almira H. Lincoln, *Familiar Lectures on Botany: Including Practical and Elementary Botany, with Generic and Specific Descriptions of the Most Common Native and Foreign Plants, and a Vocabulary of Botanical Terms*, 2nd ed. (Hartford, Conn., 1831), 421. Lucy Hooper, ed., *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry: To Which Are Added a Botanical Introduction, a Complete Floral Dictionary and a Chapter on Plants in Rooms* (New York, 1846), quote from 8. Many thanks to Sarah Dimick for pointing this out to me. For a study of how agricultural crops served as metaphors, see Kathryn Cornell Dolan, *Beyond the Fruited Plain: Food and Agriculture in U.S. Literature, 1850–1905* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2014).

¹³ D. J. Browne, *The Sylva Americana; or, A Description of the Forest Trees Indigenous to the United States, Practically and Botanically Considered* (Boston, 1832), v; Charles Sprague Sargent, *Manual of the Trees of North America (Exclusive of Mexico)*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1922), v.

¹⁴ Wilson Flagg, *A Year among the Trees; or, The Woods and By-ways of New England* (1881; repr., Boston, 1889), 43–44.

¹⁵ Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 3–4.



FIGURE 2: The Far West and one of its nearly impossible to imagine (for Euro-Americans) Joshua trees. C. R. Savage, *Needle Palm, (Yucca Brevifolia), growing on the desert, south of St. George, Southern Utah* (Salt Lake City, 1875). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

the most distinguishing feature of “the vast, barren, and treeless” Great Plains was the region’s arboreal baldness; and nothing symbolized the vexing weirdness of American deserts to Euro-Americans like the Joshua tree, which one of its first scientific observers, C. C. Parry, described using such words as “singular,” “remarkable,” “peculiar,” “gaunt,” “withered,” “disappointing,” “confused,” and “fetid”—for which reasons it was often associated with the Mormons.¹⁶

And so tree symbols, because of their great biological specificity and spatial diversity, were well suited for use as a widespread symbolic *lingua franca*. If the past is a foreign country, then they spoke a different, green-tinged language in that strange land of the nineteenth-century United States: they spoke Tree, and the ability to

¹⁶ The primary source base attesting to the strangeness of the treeless regions of the U.S. is enormous. Representative examples include the Plains and Great Basin chapters of such influential records of exploration as *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains: Performed in the Years 1819 and 1820, by Order of the Hon. J.C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, under the Command of Maj. S.H. Long, of the U.S. Top. Engineers*, 3 vols. (London, 1823), after the Lewis and Clark Expedition the earliest well-publicized exploration of the U.S. interior; John Charles Frémont, *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843–1844* (Washington, D.C., 1845); and hundreds of newspaper articles culled from every corner of the U.S., and from every decade after the publication of the Long Expedition’s findings. See, for instance, Morris Birkbeck, Esq., “Agricultural,” *Illinois Gazette*, January 5, 1822; George Catlin, “The Far West,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), November 4, 1836; “News for Oregon and Santa Fe,” *Cleveland Herald*, November 9, 1844; “Hygienic Influence of Trees,” *Charleston (S.C.) Mercury*, November 10, 1857; “Wisconsin Has a Large Stake in the Forthcoming Expedition to New Mexico,” *Lowell (Mass.) Daily Citizen and News*, April 24, 1862; “Planting Forest Trees,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* (San Francisco), March 24, 1871; “The Home,” *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago), November 13, 1880; “Tree Planting,” *Atchison (Kan.) Champion*, May 20, 1891. Quote from “The Great American Desert,” *Arkansas State Gazette*, February 28, 1837. For a description of the Joshua tree, and for its Mormon association, see C. C. Parry, “Botanical Observations in Southern Utah,” *American Naturalist* 9, no. 3 (1875): 139–146, here 141.

code and decode tree-as-cultural-text constituted what we might call a sylvan literacy. In an era in which shared language was used as the foundation for national imaginaries, trees stand out in the cultural history of the nineteenth-century U.S. because the story of America was often narrated using widely understood wooden signifiers.¹⁷ Thus, when Abraham Lincoln addressed the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, during his bid for a spot as a state legislator in 1838, he reverentially referred to the aged Revolutionary War soldiers as "a forest of giant oaks"—an allusion that would have instantly conveyed notions of Christian, royal stability.¹⁸

Yet, like all languages, American sylvan literacy was in a constant process of renegotiation; perhaps it would be better to pluralize the term: sylvan literacies. Harvard-educated transcendentalists spoke Tree, as did the woodcutters working in Walden Woods. African Americans, free and enslaved, relied on tree talk, and the Abenaki-speaking American Indians in the Northeast used trees as message-bearers.¹⁹ Women and men both anchored their thoughts in significant trees, which themselves took on shades of gender, and some trees, including the oak, grew thickly polyglottal with Old World allusion. Sylvan literacy was thus unavoidably ideological: trees both naturalized and contested gender norms, race and class relations, family genealogies, knowledges, power structures—all competing ways of distilling meaning from chaos.²⁰

And so a pair of warnings: no field guide can hope to exhaustively and completely catalogue its subject, and even the stoutest volume must necessarily remain unfinished.²¹ Nor are field guides only ever descriptive; they have always also prescribed particular visions of the world, its features and inhabitants, and their relationships. Just so with this proto-field guide. It is a general history and theory of an American sylvan literacy gone silent in the age of plastics and scientific authority; but it is also a self-recursive invocation of hybridity in which the fence line setting the idea of the

¹⁷ On language and national imaginaries, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991).

¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois: The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," in Andrew Delbanco, ed., *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 2009), 17–26, here 25.

¹⁹ Lisa Brooks writes that "hunters would commonly post pictographic 'message maps' on trees to inform each other of the location of game and the routes they would travel." Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis, 2008), 9, and more generally chap. 1.

²⁰ For trees as relationship-naturalizing objects, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1987), especially chap. 1; Stephen Daniels, "The Political Iconography of Woodland in Later Georgian England," in Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, eds., *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments* (New York, 1988), 43–82; Theodore W. Pietsch, *Trees of Life: A Visual History of Evolution* (Baltimore, 2012); J. David Archibald, *Aristotle's Ladder, Darwin's Tree: The Evolution of Visual Metaphors for Biological Order* (New York, 2014); and Manuel Lima, *The Book of Trees: Visualizing Branches of Knowledge* (New York, 2014).

²¹ One of this essay's biggest gaps is a dearth of American Indian voices. This is not to imply that American Indians could not or did not speak Tree—they did, and long before European contact; rather, recovering Native voices is simply beyond my training. Where I have managed to include such voices, it is thanks to the work of scholars who have an enviable facility with ethnography, archaeology, anthropology, material culture studies, and other modes of inquiry that can reach beyond the printed word. Furthermore, though the literacy recovered here is grounded in the mainstream popular culture of the nineteenth century—especially in its textual culture—that should not be understood as implying homogeneity. Rather, I hope that the essay's self-conscious open-endedness, its various gestures to alternative literacies, to transnational literacies, and to denotative ambiguity, will help open avenues of historical inquiry.

cultural off from the idea of the natural is overgrown and indistinct. It is a guide to an American past, meant for the Anthropocene, propelled by a faith that history is never just an afterthought, but perpetually green.

"THE GROVES WERE GOD'S FIRST TEMPLE," begins William Cullen Bryant's famous poem "A Forest Hymn," first published in 1825, and though one can find plenty of allusions to trees before the nineteenth century, it was not until that century's early decades that the cultural ground was capable of supporting a peculiarly American sylvan literacy.²² This new way of conveying meaning drew its sustenance from three main areas, two of which had deep historical roots: the long familiarity of wood-filled lives, and transnational traditions of tree symbolism. But it was only with a catalytic third, the rise of a nature-centered cultural nationalism in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, that a richly symbolic American sylvan literacy could sprout.

In the 1800s, a tree witnessed every part of people's lives, from the moment they arose from sleep in the morning to rekindle the fire, to their return in the evening to a wooden bed and leaf-stuffed mattress. Up until the ubiquitous spread of oil and oil-based plastic in the mid-twentieth century, trees were the plastic of their era (indeed, the first plastic, celluloid, was derived from wood), a component of everything—nuts and fruits for eating and fermenting; shingles for weatherproofing log cabins and gunpowder for destroying them; plank roads and wagon wheels and hemlock bark-tanned shoe leather for travel; false teeth (Henry David Thoreau had a set) and peg legs (for which willow was preferred).²³ By 1909, Americans had cut more than 306 million acres of forest, and so one source of sylvan literacy was simply the daily work of everyday life in a wooden era.²⁴

After early schooling in the back woodlot, one's sylvan literacy was enriched by transnational traditions that drew upon sylvan cultures from throughout the world: the symbolic importance of trees to many American Indian tribes; Druidic tree worship; the Norse Yggdrasil; the Tree of Life, which shows up not only in Judeo-Christian traditions but also in many of the world's other religions; the planting of guardian and memorial trees common to Europeans, West Africans, and Pacific Islanders. Anthropologists and others have mined this territory thoroughly and enumerated an enormous archive of world tree symbolism, most of which centers on the tree either as a material manifestation of (human) life or as a historical witness.²⁵ It is clear that some sort of sylvan literacy existed in many parts of the world; it is also clear that as-

²² William Cullen Bryant, *A Forest Hymn* (New York, 1860), 4.

²³ Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, 216.

²⁴ I have taken my statistics on forest-clearing from Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 119, 361. The classic essay on work as a mode of environmental meaning-making is Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?'" *Work and Nature*, in William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York, 1995), 171–185.

²⁵ Lowell John Bean and Katherine Siva Saubel, *Temalpakh: Cahuilla Indian Knowledge and Usage of Plants* (Banning, Calif., 1972); Harrison, *Forests*; Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, especially pt. 1, "Wood"; Rival, *The Social Life of Trees*, 3; Jones and Cloke, *Tree Cultures*. The classic *longue durée* work on the religious and mythical significance of various trees in Europe is James George Frazier's *The Golden Bough*, which eventually ran to twelve volumes. I have consulted his mercifully abridged version. See Frazier, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. (New York, 1951).

pects of this world culture worked their way into American imaginations. By the late 1830s, for instance, Ralph Waldo Emerson—himself a zealous planter of trees—was deeply immersed in Buddhist and Hindu traditions; at the end of his 1841 essay “Compensation,” he references a tree sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists as an allegorical human, one that has been strengthened through tragedy, and so is “made the banian of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men.”²⁶

Yet in order for a sylvan literacy to become “American,” trees needed to be tied to national identity, and in 1832 the horticulturalist D. J. Browne did just that:

The trees of our country recall the idea of it in the most forcible manner . . . and are often the first objects that attract the attention of those who have been long absent from their native land, and who, on their return, pour out their genuine effusions of joy on beholding them. We are aware that many an American has sighed under the shade of the banana for a sight at the village elm, the well-known oak, or the unchanged pine of New England.²⁷

The third catalytic root, which came alive in the 1830s, was the equation of nature with a peculiarly American culture, and 1836 is a watershed date: it was in that year that Emerson, in *Nature*, called for “our own works and laws and worship,” a unique American culture “proportioned to nature.”²⁸ At the same moment, the American painter Thomas Cole argued that “the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.” For Cole, “American scenery” and “wildness” explicitly meant one thing: “extensive forests,” and his most famous works give prominent place to woodlands—as does much of the work by the Hudson River School and the American Pre-Raphaelites that he helped inspire.²⁹ Nor was sylvan literacy a creation only of artists and essayists: American horticulturalists—the precursors to today’s biotechnologists—were in the midst of promoting an “Americanized” nature that combined the rationalism of science with what Philip J. Pauly has called “an old and rich linguistic compost redolent with sexuality, primitive religion, and primal group consciousness.”³⁰ Writers, painters, explorers, and tillers of the earth of all sorts took up Emerson, Cole, and the horticulturalists’ challenge, and by the mid-nineteenth century, America could be characterized as “Nature’s Nation,” a nation of “arboricultural nationalism”—though even cultural nationalists were influenced by the transnational currents of Romanticism and natural history flowing from England, France, and Germany.³¹

²⁶ Indeed, specific trees crop up frequently in Emerson’s prose. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Compensation,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 2000), 154–171, here 171. For Emerson and his reading, see Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (New York, 1968), especially chap. 5 and the appendix. For Emerson and his love of silviculture, see Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995), 433–435.

²⁷ Browne, *The Sylva Americana*, v.

²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, 2000), 1–39, here 3.

²⁹ Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” in Cole, *The Collected Essays and Prose Sketches*, ed. Marshall Tynn (St. Paul, Minn., 1980), 3–19, here 8.

³⁰ Philip J. Pauly, *Fruits and Plains: The Horticultural Transformation of America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 6.

³¹ Perry Miller, “Nature and the National Ego,” in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 204–216, here 209. For transnational currents affecting American culture, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875*, revised ed. (New York, 1995); Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993); David E. Nye, *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New*

With the rise of Nature's Nation, the stage was set for a new way of narrating the American drama. Yet if one looks tree-ward hoping for clear meaning, disappointment is sure to follow, for sylvan literacy rarely works in a denotative manner—there is often no exact one-to-one correspondence between symbol and meaning. Rather, it functions more like poetry: individual types of trees can have a range of possible meanings that often vibrate in tension with one another. This gives sylvan literacy a richly associational feel, as the apple, one of the most common sylvan signifiers in the nineteenth-century U.S., clearly shows.³²

Apples were nearly everywhere in the United States. Crab apples—with their “bow-arrow tang,” as one of Thoreau's neighbors put it—were New World natives, though European cultivars were growing in American soil by the first decade of the seventeenth century.³³ They were brought from France into Canada, and then down into the U.S. via the trade routes of voyageurs; from Portugal and Spain into South America, the Caribbean, and the American Southwest; from Protestant Europe to the Eastern Seaboard; and aboard seafaring British schooners that bobbed off the shores of present-day Washington State. By the nineteenth century, the U.S. was firmly in the apple's transnational grip.³⁴ Indeed, an 1854 nursery catalogue from Newburgh, New York, lists 356 varieties of apple trees for sale.³⁵ When A. J. Downing, one of the century's most influential horticulturalists, wrote his definitive *The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America* (1847), he focused on the material aspects of grafting, soil, and pest control, but his nearly 100-page discussion of apples begins with a cultural history: “The allegorical tree of knowledge bore apples,” he writes, “and the celebrated golden fruit of the orchards of Hesperus, guarded by the sleepless dragon which it was one of the triumphs of Hercules to slay, were also apples.”³⁶ D. J. Browne told the same tale in his *The Trees of North America*, adding that the Scandinavian goddess Iduna's apples were thought to confer immortality.³⁷ One might think that such allusions would leave a European taste on one's tongue, that apples, like

Beginnings (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York, 2006). The phrase “arbicultural nationalism” is from Pauly, *Fruits and Plains*, 84.

³² Jones and Cloke note that trees occupy multiple cultural places and meanings at the same time; *Tree Cultures*, 22.

³³ Henry David Thoreau, “Wild Apples,” in Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems* (New York, 2001), 444–467, here 458. Barrie E. Juniper and David J. Mabberley list *Malus fusca*, *M. angustifolia*, *M. bracteata*, *M. coronaria* (the crab apple Thoreau referred to), *M. glabrata*, *M. glaucescens*, *M. ioensis*, *M. lancifolia*, and *M. platycarpa* as indigenous to North America. See Juniper and Mabberley, *The Story of the Apple* (Portland, Ore., 2006), 185–186.

³⁴ Samuels, *Enduring Roots*, 52; Joan Morgan and Alison Richards, *The Book of Apples* (London, 1993), 28–31.

³⁵ A. Saul & Co., *Periodical Catalogue of Fruit and Ornamental Trees and Plants Cultivated at the Highland Nurseries, Newburgh, near New York* (Newburgh, N.Y., 1854).

³⁶ A. J. Downing, *The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America; or, The Culture, Propagation, and Management, in the Garden and Orchard, of Fruit Trees Generally; with Descriptions of All the Finest Varieties of Fruit, Native and Foreign, Cultivated in This Country* (New York, 1847), 56.

³⁷ Pauly, *Fruits and Plains*, 106–110; D. J. Browne, *The Trees of America, Native and Foreign, Pictorially and Botanically Delineated, and Scientifically and Popularly Described* (New York, 1846), 302–303. Farmer points out that, especially as the nineteenth century wore on, many trees became the Tree of Life, including the arborvitae and oak as well as oranges and the palm. Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*, 227, 241, 345.



FIGURE 3: Americans had been picturing strange fruit long before Billie Holiday gave the phrase its immortal cast. *The Last and Best Portrait of Jeff Davis, Drawn from Life*, by A. Sour Apple Tree. MS. n.d. [1865?]. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

pears, would signify Continental culture.³⁸ But Downing, an ardent arboricultural nationalist, argued instead that “the Apple tree is . . . most perfectly naturalized in America,” and “the Newtown Pippin,” America’s first must-have export after white-pine masts, “is now pretty generally admitted to be the finest apple in the world.”³⁹

And so the apple carried beneath its skin multiple identities. It signified wild nature and American Indians. It passed as European, and stood for an exceptional United States. Grafted apples, the best eating apples, suggested white cultural sophistication because they took time and money to cultivate, and so each tree was a precious semaphore broadcasting its owner’s conspicuous consumption. Apples took on regional identities: southern patricians, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, sought to signal their own cultivation through carefully selected and grown-from-graft fruit, while in the colonial and early republic North, apples were planted from seed on the most marginal land and used for hard cider. Money, of course, was in short supply on the western frontier, and since one way to stake a claim to a plot of land was to plant an orchard, cheap seed-grown trees were a symbol of the leading edge of “improved” progress, as William Kerrigan has shown in his nuanced *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard: A Cultural History*.⁴⁰

As the Garden of Eden’s Tree of Life, apple trees often symbolized the promise of utopia to be found in agriculture and stood for a moral, upright, Christian life—one guided by the firmly masculine hand of a horticulturalist.⁴¹ Yet, at the same time, apples were the forbidden fruit of knowledge dangling from Eden’s other named tree, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the one the serpent tempted Eve with, and Eve tempted Adam with, a gendered tree whose branches, “lust of the flesh” and “lust of the eye,” bore seductive fruit. When they were tattooed on an American sailor’s forearm, apple trees perhaps testified to Christian faith, or the life of a castaway, or the freedom to follow one’s own bearings.⁴² And when a Union cartoonist decided to picture the fruits of Confederate president Jefferson Davis’s secession, he showed the Confederate president lynched from a sour apple tree.⁴³ Sour apples, as many a northerner knew, made the best hard cider—the beloved drink of the Pine Tree People: New Englanders.⁴⁴

³⁸ It seems that pears had an especially French flavor about them, as many of their names—including Amiré Joannet, Early Beurré, Belle de Bruxelles, and Doyenné d’Été—testify. See also Pauly, *Fruits and Plains*, 68–69.

³⁹ Downing, *The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America*, 57; Samuels, *Enduring Roots*, 40.

⁴⁰ Samuels, *Enduring Roots*, 40; Kerrigan, *Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard*, 4–6, 19, 58–59, 76–89, 142–143, 158–159, 169; Pauly, *Fruits and Plains*, especially chap. 1. The Newtown Pippin was introduced to the English by Benjamin Franklin in 1759. See Morgan and Richards, *The Book of Apples*, 74.

⁴¹ For the cultural and ideological aspects of horticulture, see Carolyn Merchant, “Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative,” in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 132–159; Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 2002), especially 8, 13–14, 22, 71; Pauly, *Fruits and Plains*; Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*; Aaron Sachs, *Arcadian America: The Death and Life of an Environmental Tradition* (New Haven, Conn., 2013), 28, and especially chap. 2 and the epilogue.

⁴² Simon P. Newman, “Reading the Bodies of Early American Seafarers,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 55, no. 1 (1998): 59–82.

⁴³ This was a widespread visual and literary trope, and included versions of “John Brown’s Body”; a Currier and Ives print called *Jeff. D. Hung on a “Sour Apple Tree”; or, Treason Made Odious* (New York, 1867); and J. W. Turner’s *The Sour Apple Tree; or, Jeff Davis’ Last Ditch* (Boston, 1865).

⁴⁴ Although the drink has been stereotypically associated with New England, its use descends from the English, who learned of it from the French. The origins of hard cider are unclear, though the drink is

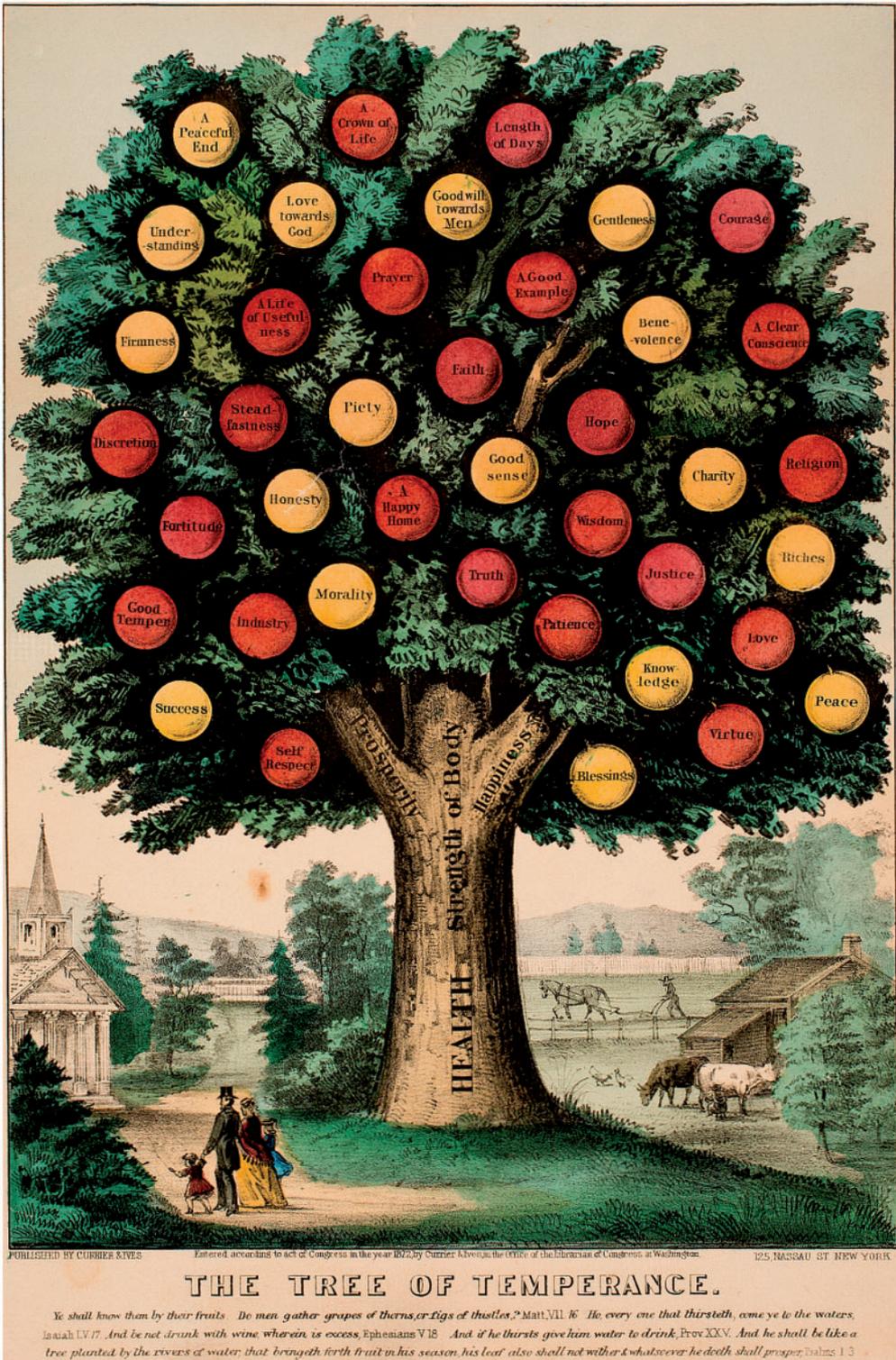


FIGURE 4: Sylvan sobriety could stand for an idealized society, family, and landscape. Currier & Ives, *The Tree of Temperance* (New York, 1872). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

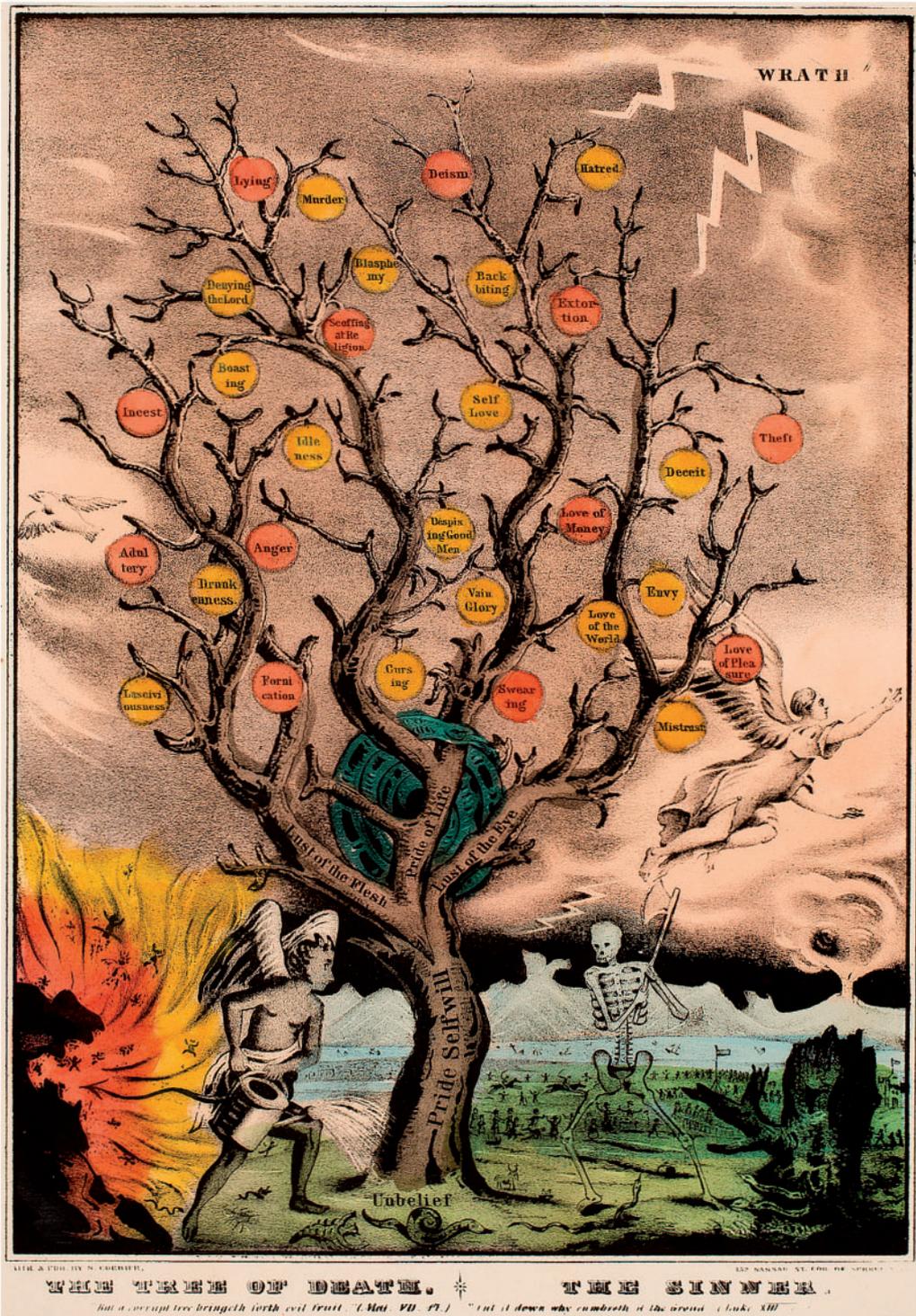


FIGURE 5: Lust, pride, disbelief, and Eve's tempting serpent all find their sylvan home in a place where angels and the dove of peace fear to tread. Nathaniel Currier, *The Tree of Death—The Sinner* (New York, 1850). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

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Alongside such poetic variability, an equally important characteristic of sylvan literacy is that a tree's connotation was rooted in the phenomenological attributes of the physical tree itself. Meanings were not random: each tree had "its own peculiar and distinctly marked character . . . producing an effect which needs not to be mistaken for that of any other," wrote George B. Emerson, whose 1846 *A Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts* was one of the first sylvan censuses in the U.S.⁴⁵ It was crucial for the apple's cultural identity that grafting and planting from seed yielded different offspring; that it bore fruit that could be used for both pies and alcohol; that it was native to both the New World and Eurasia; and that when pruned, the trees appeared orderly and symmetrical, like an upright husband, but when left to their own devices, they grew unpredictably twisted—like the Tree of Death. Like the sinner.

If trees could shade into humans—we share crowns, eyes, limbs, trunks, hearts, and crotches with our arboreal kin; the cypress even has knees—they were often used to signify larger ethnic, racial, or national groups.⁴⁶ One of the most common sylvan signifiers in the Anglo-American world was the oak, a traditional sign of English royal might.⁴⁷ The symbolic oak is a richly complicated example of how trees were used to narrate national identity in Nature's Nation, and therefore help to illustrate another branch of sylvan literacy: the double equation of Nature's Nation with trees and American Indians.⁴⁸ As with the apple, the oak's phenomenological form was important, and a key aspect was the tree's great strength, conspicuously on display in everything from the oaken trusswork supporting vaulted cathedral ceilings to the resilient oak-gall ink with which the Constitution was penned. Perhaps naturally, then, oak tended to signify national endurance, as the story of Connecticut's Charter Oak shows.⁴⁹

The Charter Oak's fame grew from its role as the hiding place for Connecticut's

thought to have been invented by northern Africans two thousand years ago. See Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World* (New York, 2002), 11; Browne, *The Trees of America*, 299–300.

⁴⁵ George B. Emerson, *A Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1846), 7.

⁴⁶ Sometimes trees nearly became human, especially during the devastation of the Civil War, which destroyed human and sylvan limbs alike. "Many Americans," writes Aaron Sachs, "noted the grim parallel, the linguistic echo, the bond of kinship between wounded veterans and devastated trees, the limbs and trunks cut down in their prime." Megan Kate Nelson further pursues the connections between ruined trees and ruined men, and even points out that willow was the preferred wood for prosthetic limbs. See Sachs, *Arcadian America*, especially chap. 4, quote from 138; and Nelson, *Ruin Nation*, especially chaps. 3 and 4.

⁴⁷ Indeed, as William Bryant Logan points out, there are many dozens of famous oaks in the British Isles, and oak was also the most common woodland symbol in British heraldry; *Oak*, 80.

⁴⁸ Euro-Americans had long seen trees and Indians as nearly interchangeable: in 1643, Roger Williams wrote that his Narragansett informants had told him that they had "*sprung and growne* up in that very place, like the very *trees* of the *Wildernesse*." And throughout the best-selling 1682 narrative of her captivity, Mary Rowlandson blurs the boundaries between tree and American Indian to highlight what she perceived to be the menace of each. Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, ed. John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz (Detroit, Mich., 1973), 85, emphasis in the original; Mary Rowlandson, *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, in Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, ed., *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives* (New York, 1998), 1–51.

⁴⁹ Logan, *Oak*, 80; Peattie, *A Natural History of North American Trees*, 198–199. On oaks and Christianity in the U.S., see, for instance, *The Old Oak Tree*, attributed to "the author of 'John Hardy, the footman' &c.," under the direction of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (New York, 1841).

colonial charter when the English governor-general sought to dissolve all of New England into Massachusetts in 1687. When the tree fell on August 21, 1856, its death was reported in newspapers as far away as London. It even had a funeral. Oaken iconography covered the Connecticut State House, and talismanic snuffboxes, canes, chairs, and pianos, replete with oaken imagery, were made from the downed tree's trunk. It was so famous that Thomas Cole's student Frederic Church painted the tree not once but twice, and it was parodied by Mark Twain. Indeed, its fame still resounds—the tree on the back of the U.S. Mint's state quarter for Connecticut is the Charter Oak.⁵⁰

Phenomenology and historical accident, however, were not enough to turn a particular tree into a national icon—it also needed to be long-lived. Because an oak's life can stretch into centuries, large ones often functioned as witnesses to a deep past, and in the U.S. such allusions came with their own distinctive accent: the almost unavoidable presence of American Indian-ness.

Even the Charter Oak, which seemed completely clothed in Revolutionary romanticism, could not overshadow an Indian presence. In 1843, the poet Lydia Sigourney's "Letter from the Charter Oak, at Hartford, to the Great Oak of Geneseo," another in the genre of speaking-tree poems, was published in *Graham's Magazine*.⁵¹ In it the Charter Oak addresses the Great Oak in western New York State. In the Charter Oak's telling, something has gone terribly wrong with the course of American progress:

Change steals o'er all; the bark canoe
No longer cleaves the streamlet blue,
Nor even the flying wheel retains
Its ancient prowess o'er the plains;
The horse, with nerves of iron frame,
Whose breath is smoke, whose food is flame,
Surmounts the earth with fearful sweep,
And strangely rules the cleaving deep.

The point of the poem is that industrialism, capitalism, the forest-devouring steam engine: such things were attacking an "authentic" America, symbolized by the oak, of course, but also by a metaphoric "bark canoe."⁵²

⁵⁰ Samuels, *Enduring Roots*, chap. 1; "The Charter Oak Is Prostrate!," *Connecticut Courant*, August 23, 1856; William Hosley, "The Romance of a Relic: Sam Colt's Charter Oak Relic Furniture," *Folk Art* 21, no. 3 (1996): 49–54.

⁵¹ Mrs. L. H. Sigourney, "Letter from the Charter Oak, at Hartford, to the Great Oak of Geneseo," *Graham's Magazine* 22, no. 6 (June 1843): 349–350. She wrote an earlier—and far less ambivalent—version of this poem, which was first published as "The Charter-Oak" in Sigourney, *The Boy's Reading-Book, in Prose and Poetry, for Schools* (New York, 1839), 292–293, and later appeared in various places, including as the lyrics to Henry Russell's ballad "Charter Oak! Charter Oak Ancient and Fair" (New York, 1839). The version that I am analyzing here would eventually be published as "The Charter Oak, at Hartford, to the Great Oak of Geneseo," in Sigourney, *Scenes in My Native Land* (Boston, 1845), 72–77, along with the Great Oak of Geneseo's response, "The Great Oak of Geneseo, to the Charter-Oak at Hartford," 82–85.

⁵² Sigourney, *Scenes in My Native Land*, 76. Alan Trachtenberg, leaning on Philip J. Deloria, has shown how the performance of Indian-ness was crucial to the ideology of an authentic America. Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880–1930* (New York, 2004), xii–xxiv, 23, 42, 52, 190–195; Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), especially chap. 1.

Because this was a time of poetry-writing trees, the Great Oak responded—twice. In the first reply, Sigourney's own "The Great Oak of Geneseo to the Charter Oak at Hartford," the Great Oak reassures its eastern sister that the "stern, lofty chiefs" who practiced "fierce torture" and "orgies dire" had been safely laid in "oblivion's grave" by a "pale-browed race" in whose fecund footsteps "new blossoms sprang."⁵³ This contrast between Native inhabitant and white pioneer takes up a majority of the poem, which is seemingly a standard defense of Manifest Destiny—albeit one that depends on some lingering trace of both Native Americans and native woodlands. Sigourney thus wrote herself a paradox: Nature's Nation—a nation of white settlers—depended on the image of the authentic, natural Indian, as well as the wild forest primeval; but if both were falling to a change stealing o'er all, then what of the nation?⁵⁴

Sigourney resolved her paradox with what Joseph Roach has called "surrogation." In Roach's exploration of how an Atlantic culture continually reproduces itself in the face of unceasing loss, he draws on the daily workings of the theater for an explanatory analogy. What happens, he asks, when the lead actor falls ill? Someone—a surrogate—fills in and takes her place, playing multiple roles. The show, as it must, goes on. "Into the cavities created through loss," Roach writes, "survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates," and in the drama enacted by Sigourney's oaks, trees fill in for Indians, here figured as "the unshorn forest," or in another substitution as "notched . . . waymarks" cut into the Great Oak's bark.⁵⁵ As long as there are a few ancient trees left standing to perform the role of American Indian, Sigourney seems to argue, there will also be a talismanic Native presence, and so an authentic America.⁵⁶

Yet in the Great Oak's second response to the Charter Oak, written by William H. C. Hosmer in 1843, an American Indian past is not so safely swept into history's dustbin, for as Roach points out, surrogation is never a close fit: an oak can only ever be a wooden Indian, no matter how good the costumer.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the act of replacement preserves the moment of loss. Through the gaps outlining the surrogate can come shining an uncanny ambivalence.⁵⁸ Indeed, Hosmer's Great Oak highlights an unsettling Indian presence that takes up half the poem, and for good reason: the Great Oak was the tree for which the 1797 Treaty of Big Tree, which extinguished

⁵³ Sigourney, "The Great Oak of Geneseo, to the Charter-Oak at Hartford," 83.

⁵⁴ Art historian Angela Miller makes a similar point, though she limits her critique to the equation of nationalism with wilderness. See Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art: The Dilemmas of 'Nature's Nation,'" in Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher, eds., *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2009), 85–109.

⁵⁵ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996), 2; Sigourney, "The Great Oak of Geneseo, to the Charter-Oak at Hartford," 83. Though Roach does not directly examine an environmental aspect of surrogation, Monique Allewaert does in her analysis of literary performance and identity in the Caribbean. See Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (Minneapolis, 2013), especially chap. 5.

⁵⁶ Sigourney, "The Great Oak of Geneseo, to the Charter-Oak at Hartford," 83. For a sensitive and slightly different reading of Sigourney's work, see Karen L. Kilcup, *Fallen Forests: Emotion, Embodiment, and Ethics in American Women's Environmental Writing, 1781–1924* (Athens, Ga., 2013), 75–99. The equation of forests with American Indians, and the way that the two could combine into a fairly critical response to American industrial progress, is the subject of Lee Clark Mitchell's *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton, N.J., 1981).

⁵⁷ William H. C. Hosmer, "Reply of the Great Oak at Geneseo to the Charter Oak at Hartford," *Graham's Magazine* 24, no. 6 (1843): 271–272. The lines quoted hereafter from this poem are taken from this version.

⁵⁸ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2–6.

the Iroquois' claims to much of western New York, was named.⁵⁹ Hosmer's Great Oak registers this watershed moment, and preserves human specificity: "From flowery vale and mountain's brow / Gone are the Aganuschion now; / Pale Children of the Rising Sun / At length the mastery have won."⁶⁰ What seems like white triumph in the morning sours into Gothic horror at night, when the souls of the region's dispossessed congregate beneath oaken boughs, "a throng of shadows frail, / Chanting a low and mournful wail."⁶¹ Rather than celebration, the poem seems driven by a cascading sense of loss: before they were "blotted out" by the Anglo-European invaders, the Iroquois, "a robber horde," exterminated an earlier Arcadian people, whom "This vale with health and beauty blest . . . / With blood they reddened not the sod, / Nor shaded trail of battle trod, / And skilled were they in peaceful arts, / For love found harbor in their hearts." We could read this as an argument that the Iroquois received their just deserts when they, in turn, were forced from the land, and indeed, the poem does return to a tentatively hopeful celebration of a white "empire's proud foundation." But the final lines—"Last of the wood I lift my head, / My *Silvan Family* are dead, / And may the blast soon pipe my knell,—/ Yours, while a twig remains, Farewell!!"—leave us in an America devoid of both American Indians and venerable old trees, "the bright axe" having done its work.⁶²

The Charter Oak and the Great Oak at Geneseo, then, stood for a triumphal white America, but they also registered an Indian past—as do many of the dozens of American trees that were celebrated during the nineteenth century, from the Great Elm of Shackamaxon, under which William Penn reputedly bought his demesne from the Lenni Lenape in 1682 or 1683, to California's sequoias, named for the Cherokee who, as legend has it, developed an independent syllabary. Though we cannot claim that sylvan literacy always either soothed, contested, or accurately captured the displacement and genocide, it did mean that one could scarcely mention, picture, or even think the nation without acknowledging its Indian-ness. Because trees were understood to be truthful witnesses (the word "tree" is etymologically related to the word "truth"), and because the word "witness" is ambidextrous—both a verb and a noun, a word that gestures to both divine revelation and crime—one of the hallmarks of the sylvan-inflected language of nation and empire and people is ambivalence and paradox about what exactly constitutes nation and empire and people.⁶³

This is so because no one person could precisely determine a symbolic tree's referent, and perhaps never was this more self-evident than when Euro-Americans found themselves struggling with a Native sylvan literacy that long predated contact. Roger Williams noted in his 1643 *A Key into the Language of America* that the Narra-

⁵⁹ Kilcup, *Fallen Forests*, 91.

⁶⁰ "Aganuschion" is an archaic name sometimes used for the Iroquois.

⁶¹ Judith Richardson notes that haunting is a form of history-making, "in which things usually forgotten, discarded, or repressed become foregrounded, whether as items of fear, regret, explanation, or desire." Richardson's argument gestures to a practice Derrida calls "hauntology," or doing history with an awareness that the past is always un-dead. Richardson, *Possessions: The History and Uses of Haunting in the Hudson Valley* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 3, 5–6, 23–26; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, 1994), xviii, 3, 11, 48.

⁶² Emphasis in the original.

⁶³ For the etymological roots shared by both "tree" and "truth," see "tree" and "true" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

gansett viewed the English as wasteful followers of wood who sailed from place to place (in their wooden ships) leveling the forests wherever they went.⁶⁴ The Narragansett were not wrong: in 1691, King William III decreed that all of New England's white pines big enough for a ship's mast were to be reserved for exclusive use by the Royal Navy, and when the British government imagined New England, it seems they saw "great Numbers of White or other Sort of Pine-Trees."⁶⁵ The Narragansett thus clearly understood that certain trees, like the white pine, drove imperialism. Yet, though the white pine may have symbolized New England, the king, or even American Indians to many Euro-Americans, the Iroquois saw the tree as a covenant that tied two people together. Thus, when the Mohawk sought to make peace with the British and their Indian allies in 1684, their commitment was formalized with a sapling: "We now plant a Tree," the Mohawk speaker Cadienne was reported as saying, "whose Top will reach the Sun, and its Branches spread far abroad, so that it shall be seen far off; and we shall shelter ourselves under it, and live in Peace without Molestation."⁶⁶ After the speech, all sides buried their hatchets in the ground, lest the tree be cut down and provoke war; for as long as it stood, the tree would gesture not only to peace, but to a mutually agreed-upon Mohawk presence.⁶⁷ Though it was not recorded whether the tree that Cadienne planted was a white pine, the Tree of Peace—a symbol central to the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy, and the parent to which all descendant peace trees metonymically gestured—was. It was a symbol that continued to resonate throughout the nineteenth century, and in fact is still resonant today.⁶⁸ And so wherever a white pine flourishes its bushy top in Iroquoia, there grows a Native land claim.

Indeed, we might suggest, following James C. Scott, that symbolic instability allowed for sylvan literacy to be the rich ground of alternative views of the nation, nature, and people.⁶⁹ We can see this prominently in nineteenth-century African American culture. For instance, slavery could be narrated in terms of monstrous trees, abominations both to humans and to nature, by twisting a well-known dominant connotation into something darker. Peaches—the delicately sweet, prized fruit of the South—became a peculiar institution's strange fruit when they hung next to black bodies, as they do in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*.⁷⁰ And when Frederick

⁶⁴ Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 138.

⁶⁵ Great Britain, *An Act for the Preservation of White and Other Pine-Trees Growing in Her Majesties Colonies of New-Hamshire, the Massachusetts-Bay, and Province of Main, Rhode-Island, and Providence-Plantation, the Narraganset Country, or Kings-Province, and Connecticut in New-England, and New-York, and New-Jersey, in America, for the Masting Her Majesties Navy* (London, 1711), 2.

⁶⁶ Cadienne's speech is recorded in Cadwallader Colden, *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada: Which Are Dependent on the Province of New-York in America, and Are the Barrier between the English and French in That Part of the World* (London, 1747), 50. I have modernized the spelling.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Arthur C. Parker, "Certain Iroquois Tree Myths and Symbols," *American Anthropologist* 14, no. 4 (1912): 608–620. For a contemporary American account of the Tree of Peace, see Vincent Schilling, "Celebrate Ganondagan and the Great White Pine Tree of Peace," *Indian Country Today*, June 21, 2013, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/06/21/celebrate-ganondagan-and-great-white-pine-tree-peace-150023>.

⁶⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., 1990).

⁷⁰ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1854; repr., Mineola, N.Y., 1970), 114. There is thus a longer cultural history behind those lyrics—written by schoolteacher, poet, and radical Abel Meeropol in 1936—which Billie Holiday immortalized in 1939. For a cultural history of the peach, see William Thomas Okie,

Douglass pictured “an oak stick of wood” as a weapon that could be used to murder his wife’s cousin, or an oak tree as a living whipping post to which “old Nanny” was tied, as he did in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, he was slyly subverting the oak as the symbol of a Christian, democratic, just nation.⁷¹ Trees could also be providential: after James McCune Smith—perhaps the foremost black intellectual in the antebellum U.S.—visited the free black and escaped slave abolitionist community known as Timbuctoo in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State, he later signaled his hope for the rebirth of the nation when he wrote: “I felt myself a ‘lad indeed’ beneath the lofty spruce and maple and birches”—three trees endemic to the North.⁷²

Symbolic instability, then, made possible a great deal of ideological ambiguity when the tale of national progress was told with trees, and it is just such ambiguity that suffuses Whitman’s “Song of the Redwood-Tree.” Though it would be easy to read the poem as simplistic nationalism—the redwood gracefully leave the national stage to “a superber race”—by dissolving the categorical boundary between human and thing (“For know,” sings the redwood in an aside to the audience, “I bear the soul befitting me, I too have / consciousness, identity”), Whitman furthers the connection between tree and Indian.⁷³ In its time of dying, the sympathetic redwood branches out wildly in search of connection; indeed, by the poem’s end, Whitman channels the narrating “I” of the introduction into a triply hybrid, culturally resonant being. Part tree, part Indian, part (presumably white) narrator, it suffers the blows of the white axmen, who are incapable of hearing the forest-filling death chant: “The choppers heard not, the camp shanties echoed not, / The quick-ear’d teamsters and chain and jack-screw men heard not.” Though the poem ends by gazing toward “a grander future,” there is a profound nihilism at its heart, which performs the cost of progress in terms of deforestation, Indian extermination, and the death of poetry.⁷⁴

Of course, poetry never died, though Whitman was prescient: a widespread poetic American sylvan literacy has largely ceased to resonate. There are exceptions. Those who work with wood often maintain a rich sylvan vocabulary. And we could say that the generalized tree-as-synecdoche-for-nature is thriving: look at the imagery from many conservation organizations or for most things branded “green”—the things that “tree huggers” like. Indeed, what Rob Nixon calls “the theatre of the tree” has become one of the most potent symbols of a worldwide resistance to the hegemony of global capitalism, as India’s Chipko and Kenya’s Green Belt move-

“Everything Is Peaches Down in Georgia’: Culture and Agriculture in the American South” (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 2012); for “Strange Fruit,” see David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (New York, 2001).

⁷¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, in William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., *Slave Narratives* (New York, 2002), 267–368, here 297, 368.

⁷² James McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith, February 6, 1850, Gerrit Smith Papers, Incoming Correspondence, Box 34, Smith, James McCune, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y. For more on James McCune Smith, see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). And for a detailed history of Timbuctoo, see Daegan Miller, “At Home in the Great Northern Wilderness: African Americans and Freedom’s Ecology in the Adirondacks, 1846–1859,” *Environmental Humanities* 2, no. 1 (2013): 117–146.

⁷³ Whitman, “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” 166. For an alternate take on Whitman, see Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 309–326, 432–433, 449–458, 499.

⁷⁴ Whitman, “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” 166, 169.

ments, Chico Mendes's labor and environmental organizing in Brazil, and the "Redwood Summer" spearheaded by Earth First! in 1990 have shown.⁷⁵

Yet we no longer live in a world where an apple's taste evokes Eden and damnation, sober male husbandry and titillating female temptation, patrician gentility and rural stalwartness. Although there are a number of reasons for the decline of an American sylvan literacy, a few broad brushstrokes will make the hazy outlines of the historical trajectory clear: sylvan literacy fell largely silent in the late nineteenth century owing to a combination of the end of the Wood Age and the ascension of scientific professionalization.⁷⁶

As iron and coal and oil came to replace wood, as fewer people looked to their woodlots for life's basic materials, and as Americans fled the country for the city, a close, lived-with familiarity with the sylvan world became increasingly distant. At the same time, the symbols of the nation shifted from the forests of home to both the newly familiar, technologically wondrous urban environment and the grand but far-away nature of the national parks: the Brooklyn Bridge and railroads, Yellowstone and Yosemite slowly came to replace individual trees as markers of a peculiarly American culture in the late nineteenth century, while Horatio Alger, Andrew Carnegie, and Henry Ford supplanted Emerson, Cole, and the horticulturalists as America's visionaries touting images of the Good Life.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, the more important story resides in the culture of scientific professionalization. By the dawn of the Progressive Era, the question "Who gets to speak for nature?" was increasingly answered with "Professional scientists do." Indeed, beginning with John Evelyn's 1664 *Sylva; or, A Discourse of Forest Trees, and the Propagation of Timber in His Royal Majesties Dominions*, a new and purely material interest in tree-as-wealth was narrated in a language that prized exactitude and empirical facticity over a culture of sylvan allusion. Evelyn was responding to British fears of a timber famine, and as Joachim Radkau has persuasively argued, forestry professionals have often used scarcity as an opportunity to claim the sole authority to speak for trees.⁷⁸ In 1785, the American botanist Humphry Marshall made the stakes explicit. "The Science of Botany," he wrote, "teaches the right knowledge of the Vegetables," and his *Arbustrum Americanum* is a long treatise on exactly what he considered "right knowledge": the physical characteristics of trees along with their purely material uses.⁷⁹ The claim that a tree was most properly an object of science gained a tremendous boost with the internationally influential work of the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century father-and-son French botanists André and François

⁷⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 132–137.

⁷⁶ Joachim Radkau has recently argued that the Wood Age lasted from roughly 400,000 years ago—when humans first learned to work the material—to the late nineteenth century; *Wood*, 14–15, 228–233.

⁷⁷ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964; repr., London, 1976); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1981); Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982).

⁷⁸ Radkau, *Wood*, 25, 31–34, 47–50, 137, 156–204. For a similar argument that traces the effects of bureaucracy on the stories Americans told about wolves, see Coleman, *Vicious*, especially pt. 4.

⁷⁹ Humphry Marshall, *Arbustrum Americanum: The American Grove; or, An Alphabetical Catalogue of Forest Trees and Shrubs, Natives of the American United States, Arranged According to the Linnaean System* (Philadelphia, 1785), v.

Michaux, in which there is not a hint of poetic association.⁸⁰ And so the nineteenth century was a time of struggle in which a stereotypically modern understanding of disenchanting nature collided with the Romantic reaction of intellectuals like Emerson and Cole who sought to imbue the natural world with spirit.⁸¹ Mediating between the mechanistic denotation of science and the vitalist connotation of poetry were horticulturalists such as George Emerson, A. J. Downing, and J. D. Browne. But by the closing years of the nineteenth century, accelerating material crises privileged remedies spoken in a rigorously material language, and neither the poets nor the horticulturalists were ultimately able to compete with the professional scientists.

When George Perkins Marsh penned *Man and Nature* in 1864, his fear of deforestation's effects dovetailed with a scare in the U.S. over a timber famine of its own, a scare in the offing in the 1860s and full-blown by 1870 as the forests of first the East, then the Midwest, and then the South and the Far West were converted to fields of slash.⁸² The decade 1870–1880 was a particularly bad one from a tree's standpoint, as nearly 50 million acres of woods were cleared; indeed, the last thirty years of the century represented the lumber industry's "period of greatest growth, greatest production, and greatest destructiveness," write the historians of forestry Thomas R. Cox, Robert S. Maxwell, Phillip Drennon Thomas, and Joseph J. Malone.⁸³ Among the many people alarmed by the rate at which trees were being felled was the conservationist Franklin B. Hough, who stumped the nation throughout the 1870s to raise awareness of the risks of deforestation. Hough was aided by multiple births: of professional forestry associations in the mid-1870s; of forest preserves in the 1880s; of the federal Division of Forestry, the institution that in 1905 would become the U.S. Forest Service. Then, in 1880, Harvard's Arnold Professor of Arboriculture, Charles S. Sargent, was appointed by the federal government to conduct a survey of the nation's forest populations. In 1884 his weighty *Report on the Forests of North America (Exclusive of Mexico)* was finally ready.⁸⁴ Its more than six hundred pages are filled with geographic descriptions, Latinate names, and acres of tables detailing everything from each type of

⁸⁰ See, for instance, André Michaux, *Quercus; or, Oaks: From the French of Michaux*, *Histoire des chênes de l'Amérique Septentrionale*, trans. Walter Wade (Dublin, 1809); and F. Andrew Michaux, *The North American Sylva; or, A Description of the Forest Trees of the United States, Canada, and Nova Scotia*, ed. J. Jay Smith, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1859).

⁸¹ Though they are writing of Europe in the eighteenth century, Auricchio, Cook, and Pacini point out that even as professional, materially minded silviculturalists became increasingly obsessed with counting board-feet of lumber, a popular sentimental attachment to trees was also on the rise; *Invaluable Trees*, 4.

⁸² George P. Marsh, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York, 1864); Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 393–394; Cox, *The Lumberman's Frontier*, especially chap. 8; Cox, Maxwell, Thomas, and Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land*, especially pt. 3.

⁸³ Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 361; Cox, Maxwell, Thomas, and Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land*, 154.

⁸⁴ Franklin B. Hough, "On the Duty of Governments in the Preservation of Forests," in *Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Twenty-Second Meeting, Held at Portland, Maine, August, 1873*, pt. 2, sec. B: *Natural History* (Salem, Mass., 1873), 1–10; Hough, "Public Health Interests Concerned in the Preservation of Certain Primeval Forests and in the Cultivation of Groves and Trees" (paper read at the Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association in Baltimore, November 11, 1875), in *Public Health Reports and Papers*, vol. 3: *Presented at the Meetings of the American Public Health Association in the Years 1875 and 1876* (New York, 1877), 176–184; Cox, Maxwell, Thomas, and Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land*, 180–186; Williams, *Americans and Their Forests*, 376, 395–411. Hough would be appointed the first agent of the Division of Forestry in 1876.

wood's elasticity to its tannin value. The *Report*, and Sargent's more popular manuals and catalogues that followed, is a triumph of nineteenth-century systematic knowledge, and its language marks the ascendance of an imperial, fact-driven sylvan prose. In what might be read as both scientific anxiety over the role of human interpretation and the desire to make his authority appear natural, Sargent's hunt to weed out subjectivity extends to his syntax itself: many of his sentences lack subjects. Here he is on the formerly iconic white pine: "Vancouver's island, Coast and Gold ranges of southern British Columbia, through the Cœur d'Alêne and Bitter Root mountains of Idaho to the valley of the Flathead river, northern Montana . . . south along the Cascade mountains of Washington territory and Oregon and the California Sierras to Calaveras county."⁸⁵

Of course, Sargent is not to blame for singlehandedly killing sylvan literacy. His *Report* was simply a stand-in for the ascension of a mentalité animating American scientific discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸⁶ Nor does the senescence of sylvan literacy mean that Americans lost all sylvan sensibilities. Indeed, even the technocrat James Berthold Berry described trees in 1924 as "man's greatest friends. They supply him with food and shelter; they conserve water power and preserve the soil; they soften the climate for God's creatures; they inspire holy and beautiful thoughts."⁸⁷ The language is certainly impressionistic, and Berry cared deeply about trees. Nevertheless, what is most important about them for Sargent, Berry, and the emerging discourse to which they belonged is that trees were no longer things good to think *with*, but resources to be thought *about*.

This flattening of poetics continued throughout the twentieth century, and if we look at three influential environmental texts that span its second half, it becomes clear how desiccated sylvan symbols had become, even among those who most exemplify the entwining of tree and culture. In a chapter titled "Good Oak" in his 1949 *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold tells about cutting and splitting an oak tree that he found to be more than eighty years old. He then reads the tree's rings back to 1865, discovering in them a straightforward history of America's resource use. Though Leopold understands the oak as a long-lived witness to the past, much of the rest of the typically oaken connotation—of national might, of Christianity, of American Indians, as well as the tension of multiple possible interpretations—is missing. In the portrait of a fictional town with which Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring* opens, an idealized relationship with nature is signified by the oak, maple, and birch trees limning the town's streets and yards. When spring comes, however, the blooming ap-

⁸⁵ Charles S. Sargent, *Report on the Forests of North America (Exclusive of Mexico)* (Washington, D.C., 1884), 187. For the biopolitics of forestry in the nineteenth century, the classic study is James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), especially chap. 1.

⁸⁶ Shen Hou has recently shown how important Sargent was to American conservation, though in so doing, she chronicles the disciplinary boundary work that Sargent was also involved in. Hou, *The City Natural: Garden and Forest Magazine and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Pittsburgh, 2013), especially chap. 3. Jared Farmer and Philip Pauly have argued persuasively that in the same period in which Sargent and his peers were so strenuously arguing for scientific professionalization and specialization, a widespread, more democratic horticulture was losing its cultural importance. Farmer, *Trees in Paradise*, 120, 249; Pauly, *Fruits and Plains*, 1, 230. The classic work detailing the antidemocratic, technocratic aspect of American conservation during the Progressive Era is Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Pittsburgh, 1999).

⁸⁷ James Berthold Berry, *Northern Woodlot Trees: A Guide to the Identification of Trees and Woods to Accompany Farm Woodlands* (Yonkers-on-Hudson, N.Y., 1924), v.

ple trees have no pollinating bees to visit them—all the insects have been poisoned by DDT. And so Carson's trees, shorn of individual meaning, are reduced to generic symbols of a pastoral small-town nature, a foil for the unnaturalness of the synthetic-chemical-producing industry. Perhaps poetry should be the last redoubt of sylvan poetics. Yet in Mary Oliver's "White Pine," published in a collection by that name in 1994, the eponymous tree functions as a delicate ecology—"From its crown springs a fragrance . . . Everything is in it. But no single part can be separated from another." It is a haunting cautionary poem that ends "in the darkness," but arboreal specificity has ceased to matter, and the rich range of sylvan symbolism has been reduced to two thin signs: a white pine is a witness, and it is nature.⁸⁸

Yet, this history should not be taken as a simple story of decline. For one thing, the scientific language of professional forestry *has* had a positive material impact on the forests of the U.S., which really *were* in danger at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, one could argue that Cole's paintings, Downing's treatises on horticulture, and Hosmer's poetry did little to stay the lumberman's axe. We have the rise of professional scientific forestry and conservation to thank, in part, for the 154 national forests, representing more than 188 million acres of land dappling the U.S.⁸⁹ For another, even though we have largely lost the sylvan lexicon of the nineteenth century, a sylvan culture is clearly thriving. There are an abundance of coffee-table books, photographic portfolios, essays, poems, CDs, novels, and stories from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that are dedicated to the celebration of trees.⁹⁰ Indeed, the very existence of a professional organization such as the Forest History Society attests that trees matter; perhaps we could theorize some sort of silviphilia that maintains a firm hold on American culture.⁹¹ And it is important to point out that while tree symbols may have lost much of their evocative aura, traces of a leafy poetics remain: palm trees continue to shade South Carolinians' license plates, and Maine is still the Pine Tree State; maples continue to evoke the North (and Canada), and sequoias still stand for California; and in 2004 the oak was designated the national tree of the United States. Perhaps we could add region to the dwarfed sylvan literacy that has survived into our century; it is a sense of region that beckons in the

⁸⁸ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York, 1949), 6–18; Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, 1962), 1–3; Mary Oliver, "White Pine," in Oliver, *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems* (San Diego, Calif., 1994), 55.

⁸⁹ This number is accurate as of the latest Land Areas Report from the National Forest Service. "National Forest Lands Annual Acreage (1891 to Present)," in *Land Areas of the National Forest System as of September 30, 2012* (Washington, D.C., 2013), 164, http://www.fs.fed.us/land/staff/lar/LAR2012/LAR_Book_FY2012_A4.pdf.

⁹⁰ For a smattering of recent examples, see Stephanie Kaza, *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees* (New York, 1993); Julia Butterfly Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, a Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods* (San Francisco, 2000); Diana Beresford-Kroeger's linked books *Arboretum America: A Philosophy of the Forest* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2003) and *Arboretum Borealis: A Lifeline of the Planet* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2010); Neil Young and Crazy Horse, *Greendale* (music CD, Reprise, 2004); Barbara Bosworth, *Trees: National Champions* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Richard Preston, *The Wild Trees: A Story of Passion and Daring* (New York, 2007); Robert Adams, *Tree Line* (Göttingen, 2009); Gretchen C. Daily and Charles J. Katz Jr., *The Power of Trees* (San Antonio, Tex., 2012); Rachel Sussman, *The Oldest Living Things in the World* (Chicago, 2014); and Katie Holten's remarkable book of trees *About Trees* (Berlin, 2015), written in a special font that she developed called Walbaum and Trees. See also the ongoing collaboration between the Rhode Island School of Design and the National Park Service, "Witness Tree Project," <http://www.witnesstreeproject.org/>.

⁹¹ I am playing on Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York, 1990), which theorizes topophilia as the affective bond between people and physical place.

magnolia trees that lend an ironic southern feel to Johnny Cash's "Starkville City Jail," a sense given a dark sylvan shape in Natasha Trethewey's 2006 poem "South":

I returned to a stand of pines,
bone-thin phalanx
flanking the roadside, tangle
of understory—a dialectic of dark
and light—and magnolias blossoming
like afterthought.⁹²

AFTERTHOUGHT: NO ONE KNOWS how many species of trees there are: biologists think somewhere in the realm of 60,000 worldwide, which is a tremendous base from which those in the past built sylvan lexicons.⁹³ It is important that we learn this language, for if, as Raymond Williams argued in his influential essay "Ideas of Nature," the language with which we speak of nature tells us as much about ourselves as it does about the environment, then recovering some sense of sylvan literacy can help us understand how those in the past placed themselves in the world.⁹⁴ And that placing might be surprising. For Williams, what was most important about the idea of "nature" was that in the modern period it inexorably became a dualistic foil for the idea of the "human," and that celebration of the abstract "natural" erased politics, labor, inequality—in short, "nature" deleted history.⁹⁵ One of Williams's great tasks was to historicize the gaping divisions characterizing modernity—humans from nature, culture from society, the country from the city, the material from the literary—as a preliminary step toward repairing the catastrophe of capitalism. One way in which many environmental historians have followed Williams's lead is by tracing the interconnecting material flows that have built the modern world: all human things are somewhat natural, all natural things somewhat human; everything is materially hybrid—a posi-

⁹² Johnny Cash, "Starkville City Jail," recorded live February 24, 1969, from *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* (1969; reissue, music CD, Sony, 2000); Natasha Trethewey, "South," in Trethewey, *Native Guard: Poems* (Boston, 2006), 45–46, here 45.

⁹³ Colin Tudge, *The Tree: A Natural History of What Trees Are, How They Live, and Why They Matter* (New York, 2005), 17–20.

⁹⁴ Williams's "Ideas of Nature" is one of the foundational texts undergirding what Paul Sutter has called the "second generation" of environmental history in his recent lead essay on the state of the field in the *Journal of American History*. It is a generation that Linda Nash has argued, in her response to Sutter, largely follows a path blazed by William Cronon. Perhaps the most important collection of essays from the second generation of Cronon-inspired environmental historians is *Uncommon Ground*, which is studded with references to Williams, and in whose conclusion Cronon writes that Williams's aphorism "Ideas of nature, but these are the projected ideas of men" (a line from "Ideas of Nature") is the common ground sustaining the book's collective effort. Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in Williams, *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London, 2005), 67–85, here 82; Paul S. Sutter, "The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (2013): 94–119, here 94; Linda Nash, "Furthering the Environmental Turn," *ibid.*, 131–135, here 132; Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 457–458. The entire state-of-the-field exchange can be found in the eight essays by Paul S. Sutter, David Iglar, Christof Mauch, Gregg Mitman, Linda Nash, Helen M. Rozwadowski, and Bron Taylor in "State of the Field: American Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (2013): 94–148. For an articulation of the wages of hybridity that predates, and provides a thoughtful alternative to, Sutter's, see Richard White, "From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History," *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (2004): 557–564.

⁹⁵ Williams, "Ideas of Nature."

tion that Paul Sutter has recently critiqued for its inability to offer “analytical and normative clarity” in the Anthropocene Era of global climate change.⁹⁶

There is, however, another way, and it involves following Williams in a turn toward the intellectual and cultural (though never away from the material).⁹⁷ When we do so, we might well find, as has Conevery Bolton Valenčius, a “surprising holism in the worldview of the bustling, rapidly industrializing nineteenth century” growing alongside Williams’s disconnection.⁹⁸ Of course, there is nothing necessarily ethically good about holism, and that is Sutter’s point: not all connections are positive ones. But this is precisely where sylvan literacy comes in, for it was never a mode of knowing only nature, or only humans, but of knowing each through the other. Sylvan literacy allows a way into a different sort of hybridity from the material one Sutter critiques, a way into the many confluences in the ideas of nature and humanity, and it does so without valorizing connection because confluences are by their nature turbid.⁹⁹ Just as holism sometimes sounds in a minor key, there was nothing inherently socially or environmentally virtuous about sylvan literacy. But in such turbidity lies possibility, which was as true for those in the past as it is for today’s historians. While Sutter laments that recognizing everything as materially hybrid renders it difficult to make historical judgments (it is hard to draw moral conclusions if “natural” things are no longer coded as good and “human” things as fallen), sylvan literacy was always prescriptive, always an explicit language of relationship. A metaphor, after all, is nothing more than a blending of dissimilars—a hybrid. And so a focus on sylvan literacy allows us to judge the quality of hybrid connections by highlighting what sorts of relationships—economic, gendered, ethnic and racial, national, environmental—were being naturalized.

All field guides are prescriptive in their description, and I have focused this one on a dominant sylvan narrative of nation to show the slippages, faults, and fissures of ambiguity warping the main story’s facade, all of them gaps through which alternative literacies could find voice. I continue to be inspired by Paul Sutter’s commitment to

⁹⁶ It is the value of a nature/human material hybridity that is the subject of Sutter’s recent state-of-the-field essay in the *Journal of American History*. Sutter’s initial provocation reads, in part: “American environmental historians must look up from their tight focus on complexity and hybridity and return some of their attention to arguably the most radical historical point that environmental history allows them to make: over a relatively short period of time humans have spread across the planet and transformed it to serve their ends to an extent that is difficult to fathom.” Sutter’s critique has received a great deal of pushback, and indeed, he somewhat moderated his position to acknowledge the value of hybridity. But in his response to his critics, he sought to clarify his argument by writing, “environmental historians have not done a great job of reengaging metanarratives of environmental decline after the hybrid turn.” Sutter, “The World with Us,” 96, 119; Paul S. Sutter, “Nature Is History,” *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 (2013): 145–148, here 147.

⁹⁷ This is a point to which Williams consistently turned: it is there, for instance, both in the conclusion to *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958; repr., New York, 1983) and in the concluding chapter of *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973); and it is one of the principles animating *Marxism and Literature* (New York, 1977), as well as the collection in which “Ideas of Nature” appears, *Culture and Materialism*.

⁹⁸ Conevery Bolton Valenčius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York, 2002), 3.

⁹⁹ We could likewise see the recent interest in posthumanism/object-oriented ontology/thing theory/new materialism as a broad avenue of inquiry that is similarly interested in the ethics of a three-way intellectual, cultural, and material hybridity. For paradigmatic examples, see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003); Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., 2004); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C., 2010); Allewaert, *Ariel’s Ecology*; Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, 2013).

an activist environmental scholarship—though I am not sure that a narrative of decline is “the most radical historical point” available to environmental historians. After all, the word “radical” is related to the word “root,” and what is a root if not the tenacious possibility of continuing life?¹⁰⁰ Learning to speak Tree will not solve the riddle of the Anthropocene; yet I find myself returning, once more, to Williams and his faith in alternatives: “We need different ideas because we need different relationships.”¹⁰¹ But what of those different ideas, those different relationships, rooted in the forgotten past? In the end, sylvan literacy helps us to recover a messy intellectual hybridity that characterized the nineteenth century, and in so doing it aids the historical and critical project of uncovering multiple modernities, multiple Enlightenments, multiple notions of nature and culture, alternative competing ideas of who and what is worth talking about. Such multiplicity matters, for if we have inherited the past’s legacy of exploitation and disconnection, we have also inherited its genius for tactical improvisation, resilience, and metaphor.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ See “radical” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁰¹ Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” 85.

¹⁰² I am finally, and perhaps always, indebted to Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Calif., 1984), from whom I borrow the idea of tactics as well as the commitment to improvisation and resilience.

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