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“Water, Water Everywhere”

Flows, Fate, and Transcendental Settlerism in
Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*

Abstract

*In this article I offer revisionist close readings of the first chapters of *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, where Margaret Fuller documents the beginning of a journey through the Great Lakes region during the era of ‘Indian removal’ and the US invasion and settling of lands further westward. I argue that while Fuller builds an understanding of the world that is directable and fluid, the ability to reform the world is in her writing, through a theory of fixed racial hierarchies, reserved only for the white settler. In close readings, I demonstrate how on the banks of the mighty flows of Niagara Falls, the Great Lakes, and the Rock River, the text documents and attempts to direct the fluid power flows of a continent—and, parallel to this, how it focuses on theorizing the divergent ‘settler’ and ‘Indian’ at the crossroads of what Fuller calls “inevitable, fatal” white progress. Along these lines, I contextualize the book’s aesthetics and politics as exemplary of what I call ‘Transcendental settlerism.’ Such colonial-critical readings, I suggest, are vital for more thoroughly understanding the legacy of Transcendentalism and the history of race, colony, and liberal imaginaries of progress in the United States.*

Keywords: *Margaret Fuller, fluidity, transcendentalism, settler colonialism, race*

In a new, newly industrialized, and rapidly expanding United States, Margaret Fuller left New England and spent a *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, the title of her corresponding first book, in which she documents her travels to the Great Lakes, the world’s largest group of land-locked bodies of water, constituting over one-fifth of extant fresh water, and at the time marking the western edge of the United States’s “frontier line.” Settler colonists from Europe and the United States’s East Coast streamed into the region over the land and waterways of the American continent, coordinately warring with and displacing Native American people, emboldened legally by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and seeking to make a new nation out of the land and resources they seized. It was these paths that Fuller tracked in 1843, to gauge the United States’ development and promise for the future—especially for the gender liberation

of settler women, following the publication of her first major work, “The Great Lawsuit,” just months before—with her book a report back to the East Coast elite on the status of a nascent, expanding United States.

Summer on the Lakes has generally been assessed positively as a text that “envision[s] an organic utopia, an alternative to the steady expansion of capitalism” (Newman 2005, 67), that “allows us to see the intricate links between instabilities in gender identity” (Grevin 2012, 51), and that “calls for the nation to listen to what Indians say about themselves and to grant them self-determination in their lives” (Coultrap-McQuin 1992, 88). The book, meanwhile, has mostly eluded thorough critique on settler-colonial or critical-racial lines: suspect for a text that juxtaposes an idealized ‘Indian’ absolutely to a European civilization that Fuller repeatedly states is, by the forces of nature and the cosmos, set by ‘fate’ to exercise control over the American continent. While Monika Elbert, for example, acknowledges that “there is a type of colonialist, imperialist swagger” as Fuller “positions herself as the privileged white observer” (2016, 59), her argument nonetheless simultaneously, and contradictorily, holds that *Summer on the Lakes* “negotiate[s] a terrain that would bring dignity to all those on the fringes of power” (2016, 71), with the article’s abstract even championing the book as an “EcoGothic tribute to Native Americans.” I am not as convinced, therefore, of the comprehensiveness of critical-racial scholarship on *Summer* as is Annette Kolodny, who writes that Fuller scholars “routinely” engage the book along such lines (Kolodny 2001, 1). While a number of scholars have suggested that Fuller perpetuated the ‘vanishing Indian myth,’ most such readings still emphasize positive feminist implications of her writing, forgoing sustained focus on the mechanics of *Summer*’s racial dimensions and its fundamental relations to Fuller’s progressive projects. In the present article, I build on this established scholarship to provide closer readings of the intersection of fluid aesthetics and settler-colonial politics of reform in *Summer on the Lakes*.

Specifically, I take the opportunity of this special issue on “Coastlines, Oceans, Rivers of North America” to focus on how the narrative of *Summer* moves across literal bodies of water—falls, lakes, and rivers—to survey the potential for liberal reform on the American “frontier,” and, parallel to this, how the text depends figuratively on fluid metaphor, fluid imagery, and fluid genre, and a general colonialist figuration toward the malleability of the world inherent to fluid states of being, what Fuller calls “the plastic power of water” (Fuller 1994, 99). I argue that, while *Summer on the Lakes*—which Christina Zwarg calls “a saturation of textuality” (Zwarg 1993, 620)—conceives of the world as basically fluid and thereby reformable, the text specifically understands this ability to reshape and reform as being linked absolutely to what Fuller posits as fixed, “fatal,” biological-essential, and basically *non-fluid* racial hierarchy. In *Summer*, the

myth of the “vanishing Indian” (Deloria 1998, 64) who is “incapable of (or unwilling to) alter their environments” (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 66) propels Fuller’s trip to survey the American continent for its new, white inhabitants to reform and resettle: “The power of fate is with the white man, and the Indian feels it” (Fuller 1994, 139). For Fuller, English settlers are endowed with the ability to reform and progress their surroundings, while she posits that Native American people are contrarily controlled by their surroundings and unable to exploit the fluidity of things. To demonstrate this and show how it intersects with *Summer*’s fluid philosophical and aesthetic projects—even, or especially, its more liberatory dimensions—I first provide theoretical and historical context for my argument, introducing what I call “Transcendental settlerism.” I then move to close readings of the book’s self-reflective opening pages, followed by Fuller’s first surveys from the shores of Niagara Falls, the Great Lakes, and the Rock River. Finally, I conclude the article by reading the fluid poetics of *Summer* counter those of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, to further comparatively reflect on Fuller’s divergent but related reform theories of gender and race.

A number of scholarly precedents provide the theoretical basis for my readings from across fields, including two exceptional revisionist works in Transcendentalist studies. One such indispensable text for critical-racial revisionist readings is Anita Haya Patterson’s 1997 *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest*, which pulls at the uncomfortable paradoxes central to Emersonian concepts of democracy and progress, thereby setting precedent for the analysis of contradictions in Transcendentalist theories of the human. Patterson writes, for example, that Emerson’s “defense of rights and his racism are intimately and deliberately connected” (1997, 4) and of the “disturbing, contradictory logic” “that the fervent, critical recuperation of American democracy undertaken by Emerson was shaped and indeed made conceptually coherent only through his recourse to racialist language and ideology” (1997, 5). Patterson suggests these paradoxes, especially between racial theory and liberal-democratic ideals, should sit at the center of scholarly consideration of Transcendentalism. Further helpful here, and specifically focused on *Summer on the Lakes*, is Carolyn Sorisio’s chapter “The New Face of Empire: The Price of Margaret Fuller’s Progressive Feminist Project,” which, like Patterson’s work, does not dismiss but emphasizes the contradictions of physiology at the heart of Transcendentalist theorizing of the human. In an argument hardly picked up since, Sorisio critiques *Summer* for its being “predicated on the romantic assumption of historical progress” (2002, 149) and its related, basic situation in the action of manifest destiny and the genocide of

the indigenous nations of North America.¹ To better theorize the relations between discourse, power, and race, I read these revisionist studies alongside critical-racial and posthumanist insights from Black feminist scholarship. Especially important for the present article are Hortense Spillers’s concept of “the hieroglyphics of the flesh” and Alexander Weheliye’s critique of white constructions of the exclusive category of “Man,” which together provide a deeper critique of how *Summer* inscribes racial grammars and theorizes ontological hierarchies of being. Finally, I employ recent settler-colonial and decolonial scholarship that aims at destabilizing ideological scholarly frameworks that assume the inalienable right of the American continent to settlers: a phenomenon, I suggest, that haunts Transcendentalist studies.

Drawing on these theoretical traditions, I share my first critical readings of what I call ‘Transcendental settlerism.’ I consider this the poetical-political dynamics of Transcendentalist texts that operate out of an assumption of white right to sovereignty over the American continent, with particular focus on concepts of development, progress, and the human. The water-based exploration that makes up *Summer on the Lakes* is a helpful starting point for considering Transcendental settlerism. At the time of Fuller’s writing, what was claimed as the western part of the United States remained very much unofficial: “The institutions of the American state remained small, the numbers of soldiers were few, federal bureaucracies undermanned, and the lines of authority between the federal and state governments still evolving” (Frymer 2017, 74). It was only in the 1830s and 1840s, following the Indian Removal Act, that federal forces began to solidify their presence in all land east of the Mississippi River: “Indian removal at this time achieved what American leaders wanted all along—indigenous populations were almost entirely removed from the lands east of the Mississippi by 1840, and the final state—Michigan—was incorporated in 1837” (Frymer 2017, 77). While “the process is never complete” for settler colonialism (Estes 2019, 124), in its western-driven narrative over and alongside bodies of water, *Summer* self-consciously places itself in the very time and place of the genocidal policies of “Indian removal” and complex wars waged a young US Army and what Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz calls the young nation’s legally emboldened “solider-settlers,” “frontier-ranging militias,” and “footsoldiers of empire” (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 53-55). Amid this setting, there is sharp, striking juxtaposition between *Summer*’s descriptions of pleasure and obvious signs of genocide. Standing as its own paragraph, for instance: “This night we reached

¹ For settler colonialism as genocide in North America, see Jeffrey Ostler’s 2019 book, *Surviving Genocide*. For the exact time of Fuller’s travels, see “Part Three: Removal.” For defense of the term “genocide,” see the book’s first appendix.

Belvidere, a flourishing town in Boon county, where was the tomb, now despoiled, of Big Thunder. In this later day we felt happy to find a really good hotel” (Fuller 1994, 109). Indeed, *Summer on the Lakes* documents the first major movements of European people and institutions into the Great Lakes region. Both Chicago’s and Milwaukee’s populations at the time of Fuller’s arrival, for instance, were but five thousand people. Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa were not yet states. The content of *Summer on the Lakes*—the land on which Fuller walked and over which she was wagoned, the water over which she was boated, which the text inscribes as being already, or imminently, material part of the United States—was still being negotiated, still legally between, actively undergoing transformation into US empire by the ships, guns, feet, texts, paintbrushes, and laws of squatting settler-colonists. Fuller calls this take-over “this transition state” (1994, 143), and refers to the western movement of European people, employing first-person plural pronouns, as “our mighty stream” (1994, 145). The willed-to-be-virgin American continent acts as a “site to construct her new American garden,” in part by Fuller’s “eagerly surveying the Great Lakes and Wisconsin territory as a possible site for a reformed America” (Soriso 2002, 156). For Fuller, the spiritual re-form of society is, or is at least bound absolutely to, the re-form of a continent. And it is on this being-colonized land—and, figuratively, *through* it—that she creates her American romanticism. This is Transcendental settlerism.

Essential for this article’s readings of Transcendental settlerism is, more specifically, how Fuller aesthetically presents frontier water and transportation thereon as vital, flowing forces, and links this, furthermore, to actual colonial circumstances and theories of white supremacy. It is literally on top of and beside water that the genre-narrative takes place, while figuratively and philosophically working through motifs of fluidity and settler-reformability. In Chicago, for instance, Fuller writes of the infinite of Lake Michigan’s “faintly rippling waters which then seemed boundless” (1994, 111), and earlier of her impatience for superficial settler-talk while being boated “on these free waters” (1994, 80). Indeed, Fuller repeatedly blends, and ultimately makes indistinguishable, water’s physical and figurative abilities to make move. Water signifies change and is a way west, a way into a future transformed by the cultural, legal, military, and economic apparatuses of the settler-colony. Along these lines, in the readings below I understand Fuller as positioning the white settler in the exclusive ontological category of “Man,” which Weheliye calls “a surplus version of the human” and “the western configuration of the human as synonymous with the heteromasculine, white, propertied, and liberal subject that renders all those who do not conform to these characteristics as exploitable nonhumans, literal legal no-bodies” (Weheliye 2014, 135). Fuller, then, expands “Man” to include “Woman” but

maintains its basis in imagined racial hierarchy. It is this gap between her fluid theory of gender and fixed-essentialist theory of race that brings Fuller to claim that, while the dynamic power flows of the world might be basically liquid-like, the realization and reformability of this fluid state of being nonetheless belong—by natural law—to the white settler alone. As mentioned above, in *Summer* the Native American is rendered incapable of reforming their environment and thereby made the opposite of Fuller’s “English” or “Anglo-Saxon” settlers who forge progress. To analyze this racial-colonial ideological work in *Summer on the Lakes*, I move now to close readings of the intersections of its liquid poetics and politics, beginning with the book’s very first words.

Before it moves to survey the actual flows of the Great Lakes, *Summer on the Lakes* opens by self-consciously positioning itself as part of the flows of an expanding settler nation. Critical to the book’s “romantic aesthetics” (Adams 1987) is that it repeatedly acknowledges both its own being constructed and its having an actual audience that is part of the colonial phenomena it describes: effecting a dynamic relation between reader, text, and world. The book opens with a preface of two self-reflexive poems: one adopting the title of the book and addressed in second person to “summer days,” and the other, also in second person, titled “To a Friend” (Fuller 1994, 70). As the book concludes with a poem called “The Book to the Reader” (1994, 226-227), it is thus bookended by second-person declarations that engage the reader in the material drama of its own grammars, cadences, pages, all rendered part of settler expanse. Such textual-political dynamic is deepened by the book’s first prose, as chapter one begins, too, by clearly directing the reader as it self-reflexively acknowledges itself as both a literary and colonial operation:

Since you are to share with me such foot-notes as may be made on the pages of my life during this summer’s wanderings, I should not be quite silent as to this magnificent prologue to the, as yet, unknown drama. (Fuller 1994, 71)

The “drama” and various materials of the text (“foot-notes,” “prologue,” “pages”) are, in this first sentence, positioned as fundamental parts of a dramatic universe shared by the narrator, reader, and world. The text thereby inserts itself as part of colonial processes of reform: the “drama” of the text is related to the “drama” of the expanding nation, as foreshadowed in the opening poems and elaborated in the book to come. The pun on “foot-notes” makes this yet clearer: the text is a path into the uncharted, the “unknown” to European people, trodden for the first time by white feet and thereafter compiled into both footnotes and metrical feet.² The

² Christina Zwarg notes two other self-referential dimensions to this provocative first sentence. First, that the book in fact contains no footnotes, as Fuller “has moved them all to the center of

first words of *Summer* and the movement of the white settler westward both constitute a “magnificent prologue to the, as yet, unknown drama”: one just beginning, and, as Fuller describes later, “inevitable” and “fatal” (1994, 96). The text and settler colonialism are cast as dramas, intimate parts of the other’s quotidian functions: the text positions itself as actualizing reform by shaping discourse in the settler-colony, and the settler-colony in turn constitutes the contents of the text. In proper Transcendentalist and Fullerite fashion, this self-situation into the stuff of colony is further set into a rhetorical-mystical dimension:

Yet I, like others, have little to say where the spectacle is, for once, great enough to fill the whole life, and supersede thought, giving us only its own presence. “It is good to be here,” is the best as the simplest expression that comes to mind. (Fuller 1994, 71)

What could be called the colonist’s dream—it finally being “good to be here”—is for Fuller “the best as the simplest” way to describe existence in the zone of the geographical and rhetorical-literary frontier, lying ultimately in the sublime realm beyond the limits of linguistic understanding (“supersed[ing] thought”). The expanse of the literary report from the frontier, the expanse of the settler-subject, and the expanse of the settler-nation are paralleled—and critically, not only metaphorically, but going beyond metaphor, these related expanses are situated actually into the role that discourse plays in the infrastructure of settler colonialism: a report back to the East on the state of the West. Furthermore, Fuller pens the West not only as a potential place for the spiritual advance of white settlers, but also as a potential place of leisure, echoed in the book’s title: *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. The book can in this way also be read as an American vacation to their Great Lakes in the process of being claimed: a time away from the bustle of the already-fixed East Coast, a new Eden, and marked by its self-conscious situation (“*in 1843*”) in the time of the 1840s expanse of a settler-empire that enslaved over two million people and was at the moment amplifying its long-standing project of genocide. Fuller later explicitly sets herself into a thrilling rush of her moment’s *Zeitgeist*, rendered through rapid metaphor: “Let me stand in my age with all its waters flowing round me” (1994, 150).

Fuller’s first reports from the Great Lakes region to her East Coast contemporaries begin on the shores of Niagara Falls, the most powerful rush of water in North America. In the presence of these famous rapids, it becomes clearer how *Summer* is based in imaginaries of the fluid, re-

her narrative, and everything she tells is invariably a reference to some previously read text.” Second, as a woman writing her debut book, Fuller was stepping out of the social position of “footnote” in East Coast elite society by publishing a genre-bending piece of original literature (1993, 621).

formable states of the settler colony. Here people, their ideas, and their goods are described as moving through frontier towns: both literally along water and water-like. For instance, paralleling Edward Everett’s industrial-hydraulic metaphor of the West as “a safety valve to the great social steam engine” (qtd. in Slotkin 1998, 117), it is at Niagara that Fuller looks west to describe Buffalo and Chicago as “the two correspondent valves that open and shut all the time, as the life-blood rushes from east to west, and back again from west to east” (Fuller 1994, 87). Fuller furthermore recalls the Falls through fluid linguistic traits, noting, for example, their “whisper[ing] mysteries” and “thundering voice” (1994, 73), bringing together ecology and discourse, and describing them through romantic-literary figuration as “a sketch within a sketch; a dream within a dream,” “fragment,” and “fluent,” etymologically uniting water-like movement and smooth speech (1994, 73). Nature, narrative, and nation are paralleled on these contested lands. They are brought intimately together at the site of metaphor and through a suggestiveness that trickles beyond metaphor, as the text positions itself and the narrative it builds as shaped by and shaping the movement of a vigorous, liberal, western-moving settler-colonial nation. Fuller makes these civilizational dimensions explicit, for example calling Niagara Falls an “imperial presence” (1994, 74)—particularly loaded and literal, as the Falls were then border between the United Kingdom and the United States.

These “old” and “new” worlds face off, then, at Niagara, over a rushing spectacle that gushes water and excites blood flows. For Fuller, however, “as picture, the Falls can only be seen from the British side” (1994, 72). From only the British side, the vantage of the old world and its monarchical order, can one look out over America. Similarly to the book’s beginning by paralleling the production of text with the expanse of the colony, here the “imperial presence” is consumed “as picture,” as aestheticized object. In view of this picture, the rush of the manifold flows of what Europeans called the New World becomes most palpable. Described in the romantic language of the transcendent experience of the European sublime, from Victoria’s side the Falls “are seen in their veils, and at sufficient distance to appreciate the magical effects [...]. There all power of observing details, all separate consciousness, was quite lost” (Fuller 1994, 72). The racial-colonial dimensions of this are critical for the current consideration. Britain was not only a competing world power and recently excised sovereign, but was also assumed to be the origin of an obsessively imagined ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race: a racial category that held profound meaning for Transcendentalist writers, as for much of the period’s English-language romantics (Horsman 1981, 158-186). These ‘old’ and ‘new’ empires, racialized as ‘Anglo-Saxon,’ are here literally split over the axis of the sublime ‘picture’ of this legendary rush of water, transcribed by Fuller’s own genre-fluid text. The text itself thereby becomes a dramatic, fluid literary

rendering of the Transcendentalist struggle over poetic, political, and racial relation to a Britain imagined as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ kin.

After surveying both British and American sides of the Falls, and the day before she is to “set off for Buffalo,” Fuller watches over her preferred rapids at Goat Island, where she claims she can encounter yet a deeper sublime, described as flowing through body and mind:

When I stood upon this frail support, and saw a quarter of a mile of tumbling, rushing rapids, and heard their everlasting roar, my emotions overpowered me, a choaking sensation rose to my throat, a thrill rushed through my veins, “my blood ran rippling to my finger’s ends.” This was the climax of the effect which the falls produced upon me—neither the American nor the British fall moved me as did these rapids. For the magnificence, the sublimity of the latter I was prepared by descriptions and by paintings. (Fuller 1994, 76)

Once separate from the established flows of discourse about American land and how to feel (Zwarg 1993, 619-620), she is “most moved in the wrong place” as she reveals the actual relation between the rush of blood in her body and the rush of the water in the river. Coming later at night to again see the rapids, the shine of the “moonlight” upon the shifting water is figured as linguistic and sublime, as it “gave a poetical indefiniteness to the distant parts of the waters” (Fuller 1994, 76). This lesser-known place was free of “gaping tourists” and their socially pressured assumptions, and therefore “all tended to harmonize with the natural grandeur of the scene” (1994, 76). Fuller herself is excluded, interestingly, from the “gaping tourists,” and her reflection is assumed as both part and sanctioned judge of the “natural grandeur.” In what Mary Louise Pratt would call a “monarch-of-all-I-survey scene” (Pratt 1992, 201), Fuller declares: “I gazed long. I saw how here mutability and unchangeableness were united. I surveyed the conspiring waters rushing against the rocky ledge to overthrow it at one mad plunge” (Fuller 1994, 76). That “mutability and unchangeability were united” in a “survey” of and “gaze” upon frontier water flows is particularly important. Set in mystical language of paradox, this is evocative of the Transcendental settlerist anxiety over the ability of something or someone to be re-formed, and to re-form: the borders between the corporeal and the ideal, the biological and the social, and, for Fuller’s project in particular, of who qualifies as “Man” precisely. This mystical “gaze” and “survey” yet further unite the frontier and hierarchies of “Man,” as the section is set into expeditionary and missionary traditions and precipitates religious experience: summoning in the settler-speaker a “humble adoration for the Being who was the architect of this and of all” and joy for the “happy” “first discoverers of Niagara,” “whose feelings were entirely their own”—not Native American people, but “Father Hennepin,” a 17th

century European missionary, as he visited and recorded the sublime flows of American-continent water of which “all the universe does not afford its parallel” (Fuller 1994, 77). Such racialized, cosmic-literary conception is continued a few pages later, when Fuller again compares her experience at a lesser-known place—this time, the Rock River—more favorably than that at the famous Niagara Falls, for which she had already been “prepared by descriptions and by paintings,” and at which she “thought only of comparing the effect on my mind with what I had read and heard” (Fuller 1994, 76). By the banks of the Rock River, however, Fuller encounters a rawer “frontier” experience, describing finally experiencing “unalloyed, spotless happiness” and a “peculiar charm in coming here” (1994, 96). Furthermore, the land and the people who inhabit it are rendered, again, mere aesthetic—“the scene of some of the latest romance of Indian warfare”—as she claims:

This beautiful stream flows full and wide over a bed of rocks, traversing a distance of near two hundred miles, to reach the Mississippi. Great part of the country along its banks is the finest region of Illinois, and the scene of some of the latest romance of Indian warfare. To these beautiful regions Black Hawk returned with his band “to pass the summer,” when he drew upon himself the warfare in which he was finally vanquished. No wonder he could not resist the longing, unwise though its indulgence may be, to return in summer to this home of beauty. (1994, 94)

After reducing Native Americans’ defending their homes to an aesthetic picture, and blaming Black Hawk—who died but five years before the writing of *Summer*—for his being invaded by US colonists (“he drew upon himself the warfare”),³ it is here on the Rock River, further both from the East Coast and from Europe, in frontier experience rendered glorious, that Fuller employs the grammatical past-tense to attempt to banish Native Americans to pre-history by declaring them incapable of touching the fluid dimension of things but instead being determined by it. She worries, thus, that the “Gothic, not Roman” “progress” of most settlers will “obliterate the natural expression of the country” that “the Indians, who chose the most beautiful sites for their dwellings, and whose habits do not break in on that aspect of nature under which they were born” somehow, again in past-tense, “forbore to deform” (1994, 96). While Fuller claims the land “bears the character of country which has been inhabited by a nation skilled like the English in all the ornamental arts of life, especially in landscape gardening” (Fuller 1994, 94), she leaves entirely out of question that this was the doing of those who long inhabited the land

³ I suggest reading this in comparison to Fuller’s entirely different tone when heroically describing the defence of Rome in the 1849 revolution of the Roman Republic.

she surveys.⁴ Dina Gilio-Whitaker describes this “virgin wilderness construct” exactly, which “presupposes a landscape unadulterated by human intervention, which imagined the Indigenous inhabitants incapable of (or unwilling to) alter their environments” (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 66). While Fuller writes that the catalogue of well-maintained landscape details that make this “picture” “all suggest more of the masterly mind of man,” she insinuates it is rather, to her puzzlement, “the prodigal, but careless, motherly love of nature” that somehow has shaped the land (Fuller 1994, 94). Fuller, who herself offers a “polygenic” theory of human “races” having evolved separately on respective continents from unrelated ancestors (Soriso 2002, 164), thereby here establishes her belief that it is an imagined European, and especially “English,” race who is uniquely capable of touching the fluid nature of things to reform the world.

In addition to rejecting Native American people’s abilities to reform their environments, and thereby removing them from her history of “Man,” Fuller moves to write of “the force of the symbol” she greets on the frontier, in a section that is highly revealing of the meeting points of aesthetics and ideology in *Summer on the Lakes*. Here, the frontier itself is made text, legible by way of reading the *symbol* imprinted upon the exploitable form of American land, when she writes of the “progress” of settlers:

This is inevitable, fatal; we must not complain but look forward to a good result. Still, in travelling through this country, I could not but be struck with the force of a symbol. Wherever the hog comes, the rattlesnake disappears; the omnivorous traveller, safe in its stupidity, willingly and easily makes a meal of the most dangerous of reptiles, and one whom the Indian looks on with a mystic awe. Even so the white settler pursues the Indian, and is victor in the chase. (Fuller 1994, 96)

Progressive flows of white settlers—paralleled by the fluid genre of the narrative at hand, and the frontier rapids that it describes—are situated as being basically natural: signified through inter-species hierarchies of North American ecology. Most important for my consideration is that Fuller refuses absolutely to interject in this process. In fact, Fuller claims such an interjection is impossible: the rush of white progress has been chosen by the basic organization of nature. The double meaning of “fatal” here is especially ominous. The text at hand, and any potential reader, can only direct this fate as kindly as possible and “look forward to a good result” (Fuller 1994, 96)—of genocide and settler-colonialism. We might situate this prophecy of Fuller’s

⁴ For a concise summary of agriculture and landscape on the American continent, see “Follow the Corn,” the first chapter of Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*.

alongside Philip Deloria’s analysis of the “ideology of the vanishing Indian,” where he writes that it was “in conjunction with Indian removal” in the 1830s that “popular American imagery began to play on earlier symbolic linkages between Indians and the past” and “proclaimed it foreordained that less advanced societies should disappear in the presence of those more advanced” (Deloria 1998, 64). Indeed, Fuller’s text works in “conjunction” with settler-colonial war efforts: the interlinked “symbols” above position the literary, natural, and national-political as fundamentally inseparable, and both read through and determined by related signs and systems of the American continent that promises that “the white settler pursues the Indian, and is victor in the chase.” Even while Fuller suggests here that “the Indian” knows the land and its poisons, she writes the “white settler” nevertheless could never be overcome: “inevitable, fatal.” Reader, text, and racialized settler-colonial apparatus are rendered part of a singular, fateful drama, at once literary and historical. American land, therefore, is made both literary symbol and literal determiner of those who can access the fluid state of the world, of those who are able to reform the world.

Such enmeshment of fluid poetics and settler-colonial ideology is exemplary of Transcendental settlerism. The “romantic aesthetics” (Adams 1987) of the text are revealed to be entrenched in an assumption of white people’s destiny to reform the malleable American continent, the stage of the “drama” of the spiritual development of “Man.” These racial-colonial theories are fundamental to Transcendentalists’ and Fuller’s philosophy of America’s reformability. As Horsman writes, “the transcendentalists found that the idea of a Teutonic race imbued with the great idea of freedom melded well into their search for a guiding spirit in American democracy and the American nation, and New Englanders in general attacked war and aggression while prophesying the ultimate triumph of an American Anglo-Saxon Christian civilization” (1981, 177). In Transcendentalist writing such contradictions of racial dynamics are implicit often, but also often explicit, as shown in *Summer*’s obsessively mentioning “the Indian” over two hundred times, mostly signifying an animal relation to American land and a destiny to remain in the past that she employs to justify theories of civilizational advance. For Fuller, people native to the Americas are a different type of human, fitting into the ontological categories that Weheliye refers to as “not-quite-human” or “nonhuman” (2014, 3), and she thereby produces a frontier report that spends much of its focus attempting to “prove” that Native American people are prophesized by the American land itself to remain on the wrong side of settler progress, and thus outside of “Man.” As shown, too, in Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” scene (Outka 2008, 43), through positioning their settler-subjects as negotiating the cusp of “wild” and “untamed” American landscape, Transcendentalists claimed special ability—endowed to them by being

“English” or “Anglo-Saxon”—to bring “Man” forward into higher realms of being. As part of the expanding empire for which they prophesized limitless potential, Transcendentalists fabricated theories of inflexible racial essence that they thought justified living in and “reforming” “New England” and the “New World.”

Accordingly, when Fuller once mentions race in liquid metaphor in her report from the frontier, it is crucially different than her description of the liquid-like redirectability of landscape or of gender. This occurs when, borrowing the expression from “a late French author”—George Sand, in her 1837 *Lettres d'un voyageur*—Fuller describes an English woman “bathed in the Britannic fluid” (1994, 93), who supposedly thereby turns her surroundings on the frontier British.⁵ While this might at first glance seem to be a fluid understanding of shifting racial inscriptions, I suggest it is its opposite. Fuller borrows Sand’s suggestion that British essence is to be impervious to natural environment: the original text describing an English woman who seems not even to be made wet by rain (Sand 2014, 98). The metaphor therefore proposes a fluid that is purely “Britannic,” and thereby determines the British settler’s body into a racial essence that fundamentally endows her life with the ability to reform the fluid world around her. This must be compared to Fuller’s antithetical description of Native American people as incapable of affecting their landscapes and being rather shaped entirely by them. In *Summer*, to be “British” is therefore to be diametrically opposite of being “Indian”: the British are unaffected by circumstance and able to change the course of the rapids of the world. But, again, while a fluid is involved in the metaphor borrowed from Sand’s travelogue, the dynamic of becoming racialized is for Fuller definitively not fluid: not moving, contingent, relational. We can better understand Fuller’s non-fluid theory of determined-by-essence racial fates through comparison with Hortense Spillers’s contrary description of the “hieroglyphics of the flesh.” For Spillers, racialization is a socio-corporeal process in which “the flesh” is inscribed upon by complex pressures of social-historical circumstance. Fuller’s Britannic fluid, rather, is a one-time baptism in essence. As regards race, Fuller does not want to fathom how “this body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside” (Spillers 2003, 207). Rather than social circumstance inscribing itself upon racialized flesh, for Fuller it is circumstance that is inscribed upon by racial essence. It is because of this that, instead of critically reading the semiotic zones

⁵ I thank Charlene Avallone, who has pointed out to me that this “Britannic fluid” (orig. “fluide britannique”) comes from Sand’s *Lettres d'un voyageur*. For reflection on fluidity in Sand’s writing, see James Vest’s “Fluid Nomenclature, Imagery, and Themes in George Sand’s *Indiana*.” Elsewhere, I hope to compare Sand’s and Fuller’s genre- and gender-fluid works along liquid lines.

where flesh and culture meet, Fuller comes to write of the white take-over and “development” of the American continent as cosmic-racially determined: “this is inevitable, fatal” (Fuller 1994, 96). “The widespread doctrine of racial inequality associated with this biological concept,” writes Anita Patterson, “asserted the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race above all others” (1997, 4). The centrality of “the Indian” in *Summer*’s aesthetic and political project thereby promises settlers “bathed in the Britannic fluid” that they possess a unique ability to see, touch, and redirect the fluid nature of the American continent, and reassures them of what they believed to be their rightful—or at the very least inevitable—ownership of its land and water.

While Fuller’s granting or denying access to reform is rooted in a mythology of fixed racial hierarchy, her theory of gender is in flux, and famously fluid. Unlike for race in *Summer*, regarding gender in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* Fuller demonstrates incredible political sensitivity to the fluid relation between structural power and personal circumstance: a major part of Fuller’s “inventing a feminist discourse” (Kolodny 1994). It is in *Woman*, therefore, that Fuller builds a systematic theory of liquid and gaseous states of the human, but which remain within discourse of gender alone. Here Fuller writes, for instance, of femininity’s “electric fluid” and “mysterious fluid” (1994, 286), and declares that the soul in *Woman* “flows, it breathes, it sings,” and “that which is especially feminine flushes, in blossom, the face of earth, and pervades, like air and water, all this seeming solid globe, daily renewing and purifying its life. Such may be the especially feminine element, spoken of as Femality” (1994, 293). Critically, for Fuller these “female” energies do not stay only in the bodies of anatomically female people: diverging fundamentally, therefore, from her use of Sand’s “Britannic fluid” that is cleaved purely to the body. Fuller writes, for instance, that Percy Shelley constituted a great thinker and reformer because he existed in liquid gender harmony: he “shared the feminine development” and “knew it,” and therefore—again employing metaphor of liquid movement of blood through the body, as at Niagara Falls—he constituted “one of the first pulse-beats in the present reform growth” (1994, 292). These flows of fluid gender are made yet more explicit on the following page, in one of the *Woman*’s best remembered passages, standing as its own paragraph, and perhaps the most succinct summation of Fuller’s fluid philosophy of gender:

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman. (1994, 293)

Unlike race, for Fuller gender is a shifting platonic form that intercepts with the body, but does not entirely determine it and is not entirely determined by it. Such stark dissonance between

the “fluidity” of theories of gender and race is a basic foundation of Fuller’s philosophical project’s existence: self-cast as eclipsing an imagined-to-be-static “Indian race,” and replacing it with liberal reform by way of “this transition state” (Fuller 1994, 143). As this process is “inevitable, fatal,” and stamped by racial essences, there is nothing for Fuller to do but walk, write, and “look forward to a good result” (1994, 96).

As shown in these readings of “Transcendental settlerism,” it is in *Summer on the Lakes* that Fuller’s under-criticized theory of “fatal” races and its implications on settler-reform plays out most literally, as the book situates itself as documenter, artefact, and organizer of westward streams of settlers. As theories of colonial advance, rooted to mythologized racial hierarchies, are at the center of Transcendentalist visions of the cosmos, I suggest it is reckless to attempt separating the aesthetic from the political, or the liberal-progressive from the settler-colonial, when reading and theorizing their writing. Their progress is settler progress. To ignore this is not to read Transcendentalists, or Fuller, kindly, but to read them badly. Building more robust theories of the intersections of progressive aesthetics and settler politics not only permits better understanding of how Transcendentalism operates, but also how discourse of nature, nation, and whiteness relate more generally in American mythology. Fuller’s progressive vision, as white Americans’ moreover, rests actually on mostly-silenced battlegrounds and the extractive properties of the settler-colony. Her work, like Transcendentalist thought at large, depends on the exportation of suffering and the deportation and death of people inscribed as “not-quite” or “non-human,” and the related theorized endowment with or denial of the ability to reform the rapids of the world. And, furthermore, following Spillers, the fluid grammars of Fuller’s work are part of the historical processes of the social creation of race in the United States. It is not enough, therefore, to focus only on the liberatory dimensions of Fuller’s fluid theory of gender reform: they are fundamentally inseparable from her work’s endorsement of racial hierarchies determining one’s ability to change the world. It is up to Transcendentalist studies, I believe, to come to grips with these complex relations of race, settler-nation, and progress in the most famous US literature of reform, and begin to collectively redirect such discourse toward ends that might be truly radical and truly liberatory.

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