

Introduction

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As we approach the bicentennial of Thoreau's birth, scientists warn that human behavior has triggered the sixth great extinction event, with species disappearing at unprecedented rates. In recent years, police violence against unarmed Black Americans has sparked nationwide protest, and white supremacist violence took the lives of nine members of an historic Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Worker productivity and household debt continue to climb while wages stagnate in our increasingly globalized economy. In the academy, scientists and humanists find it difficult to speak across the gap separating the "two cultures" once described by C. P. Snow.¹

Thoreau's thinking about the relationship between humans and other species, about just responses to state violence, about the threat posed to human freedom by industrial capitalism, and about the essential relation between scientific "facts" and poetic "truths" speaks to our historical moment as clearly, perhaps more clearly, than it did to the "restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century"² into which he was born. Writing before the environmental devastation of the twentieth century was a *fait accompli*, as industrial capitalism was still emerging, in a moment of urgent antislavery activism, and at a time when science was just beginning to cut its ties to the tradition of "empirical holism" to which he himself adhered, Thoreau speaks to us of other possibilities, other practices, other ways of being that might have taken hold but did not.³

Our commemoration of Thoreau's bicentennial thus invites reflection, perhaps even mourning, as well as celebration. One can't help but wonder, for example, what the world would look like had we listened to Thoreau's warnings in "Economy," about the mindless accumulation of wealth, or to his condemnations of state violence in "A Plea for Captain John Brown," or to his descriptions of members of other species as his neighbors, "so near to me and yet so different from myself"; or had we followed him in envisioning what we now call science and the humanities as parts of

the same holistic inquiry.⁴ We certainly have had the chance. *Walden* and “Resistance to Civil Government” are required reading in many schools and colleges, and thousands visit the pond each year. But even as the memorial cairn at the cabin-site grows,⁵ the practices of thinking, writing, and living Thoreau undertook seem more and more distant. Meaningful individual resistance to state violence and the pressures of global capitalism seems, if anything, less possible today than it was in the 1850s, and our collective indifference to the well-being of our nonhuman neighbors has become frighteningly clear.

And yet the fact that Thoreau remains not only a canonical but also a truly popular writer seems cause for hope, and also cause for renewed attention to the social impulse that the caricature of him as rugged individualist or lonely hermit elides. “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection,” Thoreau declares in *Walden*, “but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.”⁶ “Neighbor” is one of *Walden*’s keywords and appears frequently in the later Journal, often in reference to nonhuman residents of the Concord woods. But as the epigraph makes clear, Thoreau considers the reader his neighbor as well, and that his intimate and bracing address still reaches us speaks not only to his extraordinary power as a writer and thinker but also to the possibilities of neighborhood itself. Thoreau does not live with us; he isn’t a coinhabitant of our time and place, but he remains our neighbor: close enough to speak familiarly, far enough off to question the habits that we do not question ourselves. As he observes in the chapter on “Reading,” the power of books lies in their neighborly reassurance that despite the odds “The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered” in their pages.⁷

Motivating the assembly of this volume is the belief that in Thoreau’s writing we find many things uttered that our own moment struggles to articulate.⁸ To hear these utterances across nearly two centuries requires a diligent listening, and in particular, attunement to Thoreau’s central strategy of doubleness or paradox. Far more than the mere rhetorical trick Emerson famously dismissed it as,⁹ Thoreau’s attraction to paradox reflects a persistent habit of nonbinary thought, a continual recognition of the ways in which “the universe is wider than our views of it.”¹⁰ Any one-sided or absolute statement, he felt, betrays the wildness of actual experience: “Whoever seriously attempts a theory of it [the universe] is already behind his age. His yea has reserved no nay for the morrow. . . .”¹¹ Thoreau’s life-long response to a world of irreducible wildness and complexity was to push at the bounds of language, logic, and custom to

attain closer contact with the real, in all of its unexpected and untheorizable complexity.

Hearing Thoreau today also demands that we aspire to something like his extraordinary breadth of interest: in nonhuman species, in social and economic arrangements, in the etymologies of words, in the history of philosophy and religion, in native cultures, in forest ecology. And it is with these two guiding principles – doubleness and transdisciplinarity – in mind that we have structured this collection in four parts: “Thoreauvian Materialism(s),” “The Local Context,” “The Global Context,” and “Thoreauvian Cosmos” – each of which contains essays by scholars from multiple disciplines. We hope that the composite perspective offered in these sixteen chapters will enable readers to hear Thoreau anew on his two hundredth birthday.

Even without the occasion of Thoreau’s bicentennial, the time would be ripe for a volume of this kind. The past three decades have witnessed radical changes in Thoreau scholarship. Aspects of Thoreau’s work that scholars have revealed in this period include his profound and conflicted relationship to the science of his day, his significant contributions to American philosophy, the depth of his transatlantic engagements, his shifting thinking about and relationship to his Native American contemporaries, and the nature and extent of his political commitments. These developments in our understanding of Thoreau have emerged from the impact of a variety of new directions in both cultural and literary studies, including (to name only a few) new historicism, science studies, transnational literary studies, ecocriticism, and new materialism.

Thoreau’s critical reputation has been a famously unstable one. In the decades immediately following his death, critical responses and anthology selections largely fell in line with Emerson’s famously ambivalent eulogy, suggesting that “Thoreau was chiefly to be regarded as a noble if eccentric soul whose life was a failure, whose work in natural history was a ‘broken task,’ and whose writings might chiefly be appreciated insofar as they could be mined for small gems of vivid description.”¹² This period gave way in the 1930s to an emphasis on Thoreau’s social and economic thought, a shift that mirrored widespread public interest in economic questions during the Great Depression.¹³

Thoreau’s reputation as a literary artist wasn’t cemented until the 1940s, when F. O. Matthiessen placed him at the heart of what he famously dubbed the *American Renaissance*.¹⁴ Thus, as Robert Sattelmeyer observes, the rise of Thoreau’s reputation (and specifically his reputation as the

author of *Walden*, canonized in the 1940s as one of a handful of genuine American classics) “is coeval with the rise of American literature itself as an academic discipline in the twentieth century.”¹⁵ Formalist approaches enshrining *Walden* for its verbal artistry and rhetorical complexity (e.g., Sherman Paul’s *The Shores of America: Thoreau’s Inward Exploration*¹⁶) held sway until the 1960s, when the spread of the civil rights and antiwar movements shifted popular and subsequently scholarly attention to “Resistance to Civil Government” and Thoreau’s other political writings.

The rise of environmentalism in the 1970s led to renewed appreciation of Thoreau’s naturalism and his eventual canonization as, in Leo Marx’s phrase, “the patron saint” of environmental thought.¹⁷ However, it wasn’t until Laura Dassow Walls’s 1995 study *Seeing New Worlds* and Bradley Dean’s 1996 publication of the collection *Faith in a Seed* (followed by his 2001 publication of the late work *Wild Fruits*) that Thoreau’s late essays and natural history projects received thorough scholarly treatment, a development that coincided with the rise of ecocriticism in the 1990s.¹⁸ Lawrence Buell consolidated Thoreau’s place at the center of ecocritical discourse in his field-defining 1996 study *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*.¹⁹

A parallel strain in Thoreau criticism began with Stanley Cavell’s *Senses of Walden* (1972) and extends through H. Daniel Peck’s *Thoreau’s Morning Work* (1990), Alan D. Hodder’s *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness* (2001), Alfred I. Tauber’s *Henry Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (2003), and the 2012 anthology *Thoreau’s Importance for Philosophy*.²⁰ This tradition highlights Thoreau’s participation in and contribution to religious and philosophical thought. Thoreau was an avid student of classical and contemporary philosophy as well as of a variety of religious traditions including Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. His writings, these critics demonstrate, traverse ethics, epistemology, ontology, and aesthetics; meditate on various religious traditions; and anticipate such later philosophical developments as pragmatism, phenomenology, and process philosophy.

As this brief sketch suggests, critical response to Thoreau, driven by twentieth- and twenty-first-century disciplinary divisions, has tended to isolate individual facets of Thoreau’s complex, transdisciplinary thought and ignore others, leaving us with a series of fragmented portraits: Thoreau the Concord hermit and rugged individualist, Thoreau the poet, Thoreau the political radical, Thoreau the environmentalist, Thoreau the scientist, Thoreau the philosopher. Though a few books have taken up this problem explicitly (e.g., Walls’s *Seeing New Worlds* and David Robinson’s *Natural Life*), the picture remains a patchy one; each chapter in the story of

Thoreau's critical reputation reveals as much about the state of American literary scholarship at the time as it does about Thoreau's work.²¹ The chapters in the present volume contribute to, but also implicitly critique this critical legacy, sometimes by striking out in wholly new directions (the transnational turn reflected in our "Global Context" section represents one such departure), other times by applying multiple disciplinary lenses to his writing (e.g., the essays by Newman, Finley, Walls, Lemire, and Dimock).

Indeed, hearing Thoreau clearly requires us to imagine, across the intervening decades of increasing academic specialization, the kind of inter- or transdisciplinary knowing to which he aspired and that his writing bears out:

I have a common place book for facts and another for poetry – but I find it difficult always to preserve the vague distinction which I had in my mind – for the most interesting & beautiful facts are so much the more poetry and that is their success. They are *translated* from earth to heaven – I see that if my facts were sufficiently vital & significant – perhaps transmuted more into the substance of the human mind – I should need but one book of poetry to contain them all.²²

If Thoreau's ambition to unite "facts" and "poetry" illustrates one kind of disciplinary crossing or "translation," his movement between engagement with the political issues of his day, most notably slavery, and contemplation of the natural world requires another. Thoreau sometimes shifts abruptly, even jarringly, between the social and the natural, for example, in "Resistance to Civil Government" when he describes joining "a huckleberry party" after his release from the Concord jail and soon finding himself "on one of our highest hills, two miles off" with "the State . . . nowhere to be seen."²³ Here, too, however, inter- or transdisciplinary approaches can help us recover the complex ways in which these concerns were, for him, part of a holistic inquiry that understood slavery as an environmental as well as a social problem because it rethought these categories entirely, positioning the "human" and the "natural" within the same sphere.

The four sections of this volume suggest some of the central currents and crosscurrents of contemporary scholarship on Thoreau. The question of the relative extent of Thoreau's materialist and Romantic (or scientific and literary) tendencies – and to what degree these tendencies are at odds – has been among the most persistent themes of Thoreau criticism, beginning with William Ellery Channing's description of him as a "poet-naturalist" in 1873. The opening and closing sections of the book, "Thoreauvian Materialism(s)" and "Thoreauvian Cosmos,"

reflect this ongoing critical question in a way that suggests not simple opposition but critical complementarity, with a nod to the Thoreauvian strategy of doubleness. Similarly, we see the chapters in the second section, “The Local Context,” which seek to ground Thoreau’s writing more concretely in his own place and time, as a necessary complement to the important new critical impulse toward a more global Thoreau represented by the third section. Taken together, these two sections encourage us to engage the local and the global simultaneously, to become “expert in home-cosmography.”²⁴

Part I: Thoreauvian Materialism(s)

Our first section highlights the materialist current in Thoreau’s writings, and situates this current in relation to a variety of both nineteenth- and twenty-first-century materialisms. Lance Newman argues for the coherence of Thoreau’s environmental and economic critiques within the theoretical framework of new materialism and ecocriticism, noting that Thoreau “increasingly applied a natural historian’s habits of mind – empirical observation and materialist analysis – to the social and political life of Concord, and by extension, to the antebellum United States as a whole.” Against the backdrop of the longstanding debate about the extent of Thoreau’s indebtedness to Emersonian transcendentalism, Newman’s chapter locates a coherent materialism underlying both Thoreau’s naturalist and his political writings. Similarly, James Finley’s reassessment of Thoreau’s antislavery essays in the context of the Free Soil movement addresses the separation of his political from his environmental thought by articulating a coherent “ecological vision of antislavery” extending from *Walden* to “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” These two chapters thus attempt to repair a disciplinary breach that has long imposed an artificial division onto Thoreau’s thought and writings.

Finally, political scientist Susan Gallagher adds to the tradition of social and political readings of Thoreau, highlighting his “consistent critique of industrial capitalism.” Gallagher illuminates the parallels between Thoreau’s “Economy” and Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, demonstrating the degree of Thoreau’s absorption of Smith’s thought and illustrating the ways in which his writing may be read as an extended critique of Smith’s mechanism. For Gallagher, the question animating Thoreau’s whole career is whether the “unreality” of life within a capitalist economic system “could be avoided, at least on an individual level, by introducing or, perhaps, repeatedly reintroducing a moment of conscious choice.”

While this strategy allows Thoreau to voice a significant critique of Smith's deterministic account of the "invisible hand," the hope implicit in this critique was ultimately defeated, Gallagher argues, by the seemingly irresistible rise of slavery in the 1850s.

Part II: The Local Context

This section adds depth and nuance to our understanding of Thoreau in his time and place, challenging formalist treatments of Thoreau's texts, and of *Walden* in particular, as discrete literary masterpieces. Drawing on the historicizing impulse that animates much of contemporary cultural studies, these chapters return Thoreau to Concord and to the particular social and historical forces at work there in his lifetime.

Elise Lemire's essay both vividly demonstrates the ways in which Thoreau's writings can be used to reconstruct the lives of his African American neighbors and investigates his own somewhat different purposes in invoking those neighbors and their histories. She begins with an archival investigation into the lives of former slaves and descendants of slaves named in Thoreau's writings. Thoreau, in this reading, is valuable principally as a witness to and source of evidence about lives that might otherwise have vanished from the historical record. This historical reconstruction is balanced by the second half of the chapter, which considers Thoreau's "memory studies" in the "Former Inhabitants" chapter of *Walden*. Here Lemire evokes the complexities of Thoreau's thinking about the relationship between space and time; in particular, the ways in which the text evokes the Walden woods as a landscape containing "traces of a disappearing built environment that, when read in conjunction with oral histories, open the past onto the present." The result is a fascinating recovery of the life stories and struggles of Thoreau's African American neighbors, as well as a clear exposition of how their situation as "former inhabitants" provoked Thoreau to double back to reexamine how memory affects experience.

Joshua Bellin's similarly historicizing account pushes beyond Thoreau's own writings on Native Americans "to situate him within historically specific intercultural contexts." Bellin argues that the long tradition of reading Thoreau's view of "the Indian" might be usefully complemented, or indeed replaced, by Native American readings of Thoreau. Noting the emphasis in Thoreau's writings on the "vanished Indian," Bellin asks us to read *against* this trope "to perceive an antebellum New England populated by Native peoples who – due to affiliation with intertribal bodies,

mixed racial ancestry, and/or Christian conversion – were invisible to Thoreau himself.” Bellin’s chapter thereby demonstrates both the limits of Thoreau’s historical vision, and – following the principle of doubleness – the necessity of treating its claims to finality with suspicion.

Sandra Harbert Petrulionis’s chapter makes a significant contribution to Thoreau’s complex reception history by examining the beginnings of that history in his relationship to another important nineteenth-century figure, Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Petrulionis argues that both as author and critic, Higginson “constructed a de-politicized, reductive portrait of Thoreau as an original American author-explorer whose stoic resilience and nobility served as a model of the ideal of authorship and moral manhood to which Higginson himself aspired.” Higginson’s repackaging of Thoreau, and in particular, his submerging of Thoreau’s (and his own) more radical leanings, serves as a case study in the construction of a literary reputation – and warns us to regard its claims with suspicion, even if they are made by a friend and sometime neighbor, such as Higginson.

The history of Thoreau’s immediate human neighborhood, the town of Concord, is the focus of historian Robert Gross’s chapter, which reveals a rich and complex cosmopolitanism that the pastoral image of the birthplace of Transcendentalism has long obscured. Gross demonstrates that this fictional image of Concord during Thoreau’s youth and early adulthood as a safe haven from reality, a bucolic, communitarian place where farmers and poets met on equal terms, and where one could easily commune with nature has in turn distorted our understanding of Thoreau. In correcting the record, Gross contributes to our evolving view of Thoreau as neighbor and citizen, a view that challenges the popular image of the hermit of Walden Pond, pointing to the way that, like his natural history work, Thoreau’s social criticism envisions “an *interdependent* community in which humans were truly neighbors and not masters of all other living things.”

Part III: The Global Context

In the third section, four chapters contribute to recent efforts to reposition the field of American literature within a global context. Reminding us that “The other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent,” the contributors to this section illuminate the complex network of relations through which Thoreau is bound not only to his Concord neighbors but also to his global ones, particularly those across the Atlantic.

The section opens with Len Gougeon's positioning of Thoreau's late essays within the context of tense Anglo-American political relations at the outset of the Civil War. Gougeon frames both the writing and reception of Thoreau's late essays, "Walking," "Autumnal Tints," "Wild Apples," and "Life Without Principle," in relation to Great Britain's policy of neutrality and the subsequent cultural animosity between northern US and British cultural figures. Highlighting the nationalist and anti-British sentiment in Thoreau's writing, this chapter contrasts with that of Paul Giles, which attends to the way Thoreau's writing works to undermine the nationalist project. Giles's chapter, "Transnational Thoreau: Time, Space, and Relativity," argues that Thoreau's landscapes evoke complex "transnational and crosstemporal perspectives" that challenge the emerging hegemonies of nationalist temporal and geographical schemes.

In a jointly authored chapter, Rochelle Johnson and Samantha Harvey adopt a transatlantic perspective to argue for the centrality of Coleridge's "dynamic philosophy" to Thoreau's thinking about nature. This framework, outlined in Coleridge's "Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life," enabled Thoreau to chart the "fluid continuities between the categories of self, nature, and spirit" and served as a "model of self-culture aimed at bridging philosophy, theology, science, and literature." Culminating this section, Wai Chee Dimock's meditation on Thoreau's shift from the resources of ancient Sanskrit fables to those of lamentations from the Hebrew scriptures in his narrativizing of animal sounds shows him to be "increasingly aware of the natural world as one 'maimed' and 'mutilated' by modernity."

Part IV: Thoreauvian Cosmos

The final section balances the opening articulations of "Thoreauvian Materialism(s)" and evokes the myriad ways in which the spiritual and the material are always interrelated in Thoreau's writing. We take this title from one of the chapters in the section, Laura Dassow Walls's "The Value of Mutual Intelligence: Science, Poetry, and Thoreau's Cosmos," which asserts the unity of Thoreau's poetic and scientific endeavors. In an effort to resurrect the holistic vision shared by Thoreau and Alexander von Humboldt, Walls enlists the Greek word κόσμος (*cosmos*) to express "the twinned meanings joined by the ancients, for whom 'Cosmos' signified both the physical universe in its materiality, and the human comprehension of its order and beauty." To perceive *Cosmos* as Thoreau did, Walls argues, is to recognize the essential holism of all of

his endeavors – scientific, political, social, and aesthetic. This perspective is shared by Lawrence Buell, who argues for a “consistency within and among the literary, political, and proto-ecological sides of Thoreau during his adult lifetime, a unity underlying his seeming course-corrections and appearances of self-contradiction.” In contrast to the emphasis on Thoreau’s sociality in Gross’s and Walls’s essays, however, Buell’s contribution highlights the “ethics of disaffiliation” that, Buell argues, unites the diverse strains of his writing.

Two chapters in this section, those by Lawrence Rhu and Alan Hodder, contribute to our understanding of Thoreau’s legacy for the fields of philosophy and religion. In “Thoreau and Cavell: Unauthorized Versions” Lawrence Rhu traces Stanley Cavell’s engagement with Thoreau and in so doing articulates some elements of an “American philosophy.” As Rhu notes, *The Senses of Walden* “marks the beginning of a serious philosophical engagement with American Transcendentalism by a first-rate American philosopher.” Rhu’s chapter maps the way “the self-generated, experiential integrity of Thoreau’s vision” became a model for Cavell’s own work as a philosopher, and how this work in turn inaugurated philosophical treatment of Thoreau’s work.

Alan Hodder’s chapter, which emphasizes Thoreau’s place in the history of American religious thought, builds on his important 2001 study of Thoreau’s religious thought, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness*. In his chapter for this volume, Hodder observes that Thoreau “was among the first Americans to articulate and embody in a publicly performative way an approach to being religious or ‘spiritual’ that has become increasingly recognizable and even appealing to a large swath of Americans, particularly since the 1960s.” Hodder calls this approach, which he maps in the latter half of his chapter, “the new American spirituality.” Finally, in the book’s epilogue, biographer Robert D. Richardson takes up Thoreau’s description in “Walking” of a “Gospel according to this moment” and uses the characteristics laid out by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to ask of what such a gospel might consist. Richardson concludes his chapter and our volume by arguing for a twenty-first-century environmental strategy grounded in this materialist religious impulse.

Perhaps no single scholar, nor any single twenty-first-century discipline, could offer us what Leo Marx has called “The Full Thoreau.”²⁵ In place of a single, comprehensive view, the field of Thoreau studies at the bicentennial of his birth consists of a wide range of competing, overlapping, and complementary perspectives. *Thoreau at Two Hundred* gathers the central