

Introduction: Why Thoreau Would Love Environmental Justice

The Book's Aims

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, published in 1854, is still so regularly taught in US high schools that US Americans usually know it by instinct. Whether or not they actually read *Walden*, they understand its basic plot: Thoreau went to the woods near Concord, Massachusetts “to live deliberately,” as he famously wrote. He built a tiny house by the shores of Walden Pond, in a friend's forest. He grew beans and read books and went on walks. He laid on his belly to peer through the ice of the pond when it was frozen over during the winter. And he recorded his experiences in journals that he developed over nearly ten years into *Walden*. This has made Thoreau into a saint of the environmental movement, sometimes.¹

¹ Lawrence Buell made the comparison to sainthood explicit and analyzed it in his important work on Thoreau and nature writing. There, he also analyzes Walden Pond as a site of pilgrimage. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 328–32. Rod Giblett has written on Thoreau as “the patron saint of swamps.” Rodney James Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). April Anson calls Thoreau the “patron saint of tiny houses.” April Anson, “The Patron Saint of Tiny Houses,” in *Henry David Thoreau in Context*, ed. James Finley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Contemporary interpreters regularly use the phrase “environmental saint” as though its meaning were obvious. See, for example, Kent Curtis, “The Virtue of Thoreau: Biography, Geography, and History in Walden Woods,” *Environmental History* 15, 1 (2010): 32. Of course, environmentalists are not agreed Thoreau should have this status, and there is a

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But, as I will describe, he is a complicated figure to hold up as a hero, perhaps especially for environmentalism. And his image as 'saint of the woods' has sometimes obscured his commitment to justice in human communities.

Bring to mind two different figures of Thoreau. On the one hand, there is the Thoreau we have from *Walden*, the one whose nature piety inspired him to live in the woods, to spend time among the birds and the trees and the woodchucks. This is the Thoreau whose writings grew more and more focused on the observation of nature as he aged, who came to believe that the observation of the world around him was his most important activity. This Thoreau was a great naturalist. Then, on the other hand, there is the figure of Thoreau we have from the essay that has come to be called "Civil Disobedience," the Thoreau whose night in jail for not paying tax inspired Gandhi – and then Martin Luther King, Jr. – to nonviolence in the pursuit of social justice. This Thoreau was an active abolitionist who admired John Brown and even made him into a Christ figure.

I want to tell a story that can unite these two figures of Thoreau – his nature piety and his political commitment to justice – into one man, one life.² We know Thoreau opposed

persuasive argument that Thoreau's influence on the environmental movement has in fact been negative. See William Chaloupka, "Thoreau's Apolitical Legacy for American Environmentalism," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Jack Turner (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

² The "two Thoreaus" observation is not new, and the tension we sometimes see between them is not simply (as I suggest below) a result of a segregated (and racist and misogynist) reception history. An early biographer wrote about his motivation for writing Thoreau's biography: "As Thoreau could do what he did, and never feel as though there was any inconsistency between Walden life and anti-slavery action, I was desirous to satisfy myself, by closer scrutiny, of his real aims and objects." Alexander H. Japp, *Thoreau: His Life and Aims* (Boston: Osgood, 1877), viii. In the twentieth century the theme remained in circulation: Leo Marx, "The Two Thoreaus," October 26, 1978, www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/the-two-thoreaus/ (accessed August 20, 2020). A late twentieth-century interpreter in

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slavery, but many readers of Thoreau read his opposition to slavery apart from his interest in nature. This book argues that these two sides of Thoreau should be read together. Thoreau didn't just happen to love nature and also be committed to economic and political justice, including the abolition of slavery, as though those were separate interests. Those two features of his work were part of one thing: a form of piety that entailed pursuing spiritual flourishing for all.³

Walden is the book in which these two figures come together most vividly, so I make this argument by way of an interpretation of *Walden*, one that draws out the justice concerns that were driving much of it and that are often, surprisingly, neglected. I reinterpret the nature piety in *Walden* as the ground for Thoreau's radical political commitments.

political science, Jane Bennett, focuses on one Thoreau (the naturalist Thoreau) so as to situate the other (the political Thoreau) within it. "The Thoreau most vocal in these debates is not the Thoreau of 'Resistance to Civil Government' or the antislavery lectures, but the Thoreau of *Walden*, the journals, *The Maine Woods*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and the natural history essays. I find these naturalist writings more engaging than the political writings because they map out a larger project within which, among other things, Thoreau's arts of civil disobedience and political dissent are set." Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), xx. At the time Bennet wrote, looking for the political Thoreau in the naturalist Thoreau was innovative. I join a new edge of Thoreau scholarship that tries to speak to current tensions between nature piety and social justice by arguing that the "two Thoreaus" are one. As Thoreau's most recent biographer wrote: "Today, two hundred years after his birth, we have invented two Thoreaus, both of them hermits, yet radically at odds with each other. One speaks for nature; the other for social justice. Yet the historical Thoreau was no hermit, and as Thoreau's own record shows, his social activism and his defense of nature sprang from the same roots." Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), xviii.

³ Jeffrey Myers has argued that Thoreau represented a new resistance to racial and ecological hegemony. Jeffrey Myers, *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

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This unified figure offers an image in which environmentalism and efforts for a just political community (including economic and racial justice) do not just happen to coincide but belong to one another, are integral, require one another.⁴ Thoreau's love of nature led him to love justice. Even if interpreters (especially white interpreters) have often evacuated *Walden* of its radical political significance and basic call for justice, the reading of *Walden* I offer in this book can reconfigure Thoreau's significance for contemporary environmental politics.

I think there are reasons readers have often leaned toward one or the other of the two Thoreaus in their interpretation of *Walden*. The main reason is that readers of Thoreau have generally been more invested in one of the two figures I described or the other – because they lived in a context in which one or the other of these radical visions was most pressing.⁵ For Gandhi, in colonial India, Thoreau's resistance to civil government offered an example of what resistance to political injustice could look like. But for Rachel Carson,

⁴ In this I hope to persuade those who share the growing agreement on this point among many with environmental concerns that Thoreau is an ally rather than a foe. The articulation of this point as “integral ecology” was one of the reasons Pope Francis's encyclical was welcomed warmly by environmentalists: Francis, *Laudato Si'* [Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home], http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed August 5, 2020). See also Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Purdy has argued that the challenges of this age call for an environmental politics that commits to a deepened democracy, since “taking responsibility for nature and taking responsibility for democracy come together” in a world determined by human powers (286).

⁵ This is just to say that Bob Pepperman Taylor's confession is a common (and often laudable) reading practice. “I had always read him with my own agenda as the overwhelming concern.” Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America's Bachelor Uncle: Henry Thoreau and the American Polity*, American Political Thought (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), x.

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facing the evidence of the harms of the widely used insecticide DDT in the United States, Thoreau's nature piety was most compelling. In both cases, readers of Thoreau faced real, pressing problems that shaped their reception of his writing. Of course, it is not the case that Carson ignored the claims of economic and racial justice, or that Gandhi was unconcerned with the health of the land. But different communal contexts (often shaped in the United States by ongoing effects of white supremacy, especially Jim Crow, intense segregation, and resegregation) led to one emphasis or another in the way readers have told the story of who Thoreau is. One premise of this book is that white supremacy perverted Thoreau's twentieth-century reception.

Since the environmental justice movements of the 1980s and 1990s, the presumed whiteness of US environmentalism is thankfully passing away, though of course its actual whiteness in the large national organizations, like whiteness of all kinds, persists.⁶ For too long, and still, white racial cultures of environmentalism have had tense relationships with communities of color, have failed to describe and fight environmental racism that harms such communities. The US history of land access (that it was stolen from Indigenous peoples) and labor

⁶ On environmental racism and environmental justice movements, the most prominent scholar may be Robert Bullard. His classic work, *Dumping in Dixie*, was among the first academic studies to document the fact of race- and class-based environmental inequality. Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990). Dorceta Taylor has been at the forefront of documenting the power of privilege in shaping American environmentalism. See especially Dorceta E. Taylor, "American Environmentalism: The Role of Race, Class and Gender in Shaping Activism, 1820–1995," *Race, Gender & Class* 5, 1 (1997): 16–62; Dorceta E. Taylor, "The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations & Government Agencies" Green 2.0. www.diversegreen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FullReport_Green2.0_FINAL.pdf (accessed August 5, 2020); Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015).

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(that it was so often stolen from kidnapped Africans enslaved in the United States and their enslaved, US-born children) has meant that white people have had particularly privileged relationships to the places we lived and recreated and sought to preserve. White supremacy has made it so that white citizens often have greater social, economic, and political powers to protect the places we love than communities of color; white environmentalism too often kept our places clean, and sent our environmental harms to be endured by communities of color.⁷ But the movements for environmental justice that began in the 1980s and 1990s and have only grown in the years since are teaching white environmentalists that our privileges were never *ours*. The care and connection we experience to the places that we live is real, but as Thoreau believed, ownership can fool us. When we think we own the land alone, we can forget the alternative view: that it was given to all in common.⁸ Thoreau complained of those landowners who put up fences – they interrupted his walking routes. But the insight was deeper: proprietary relationships can disfigure the ones who think of themselves as owners.

⁷ David Pellow's work on environmental injustice describes it as a form of social violence and associates it with police violence and hyperincarceration. David Naguib Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017).

⁸ I return briefly to Thoreau's worries about ownership in Chapter 4. Readers interested in the philosophical debate Thoreau was entering might take interest in a contemporary philosophical treatment of the topic in Jeremy Waldron, *The Right to Private Property* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). Waldron critically examines the idea that private property is a fundamental human right. In Thoreau's time and place, the suspicion of private property was common. Bronson Alcott's suspicion of private property contributed to the community he helped form at Fruitlands. Orestes Brownson admitted an individual right to property, but advocated the abolition of inherited property. "As we have abolished hereditary monarchy and hereditary nobility, we must complete the work by abolishing hereditary property." Orestes Augustus Brownson, *The Laboring Classes: An Article from the Boston Quarterly Review* (Boston, MA: B. H. Greene, 1840), 24.

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Much of the aim of telling the story the way I do is a desire to inspire those communities of white environmentalists I often find myself among to cease our own segregation of Thoreau. To let him be the whole person that he was. To see his radical commitment to justice as the outgrowth of the nature piety for which we have admired him. And to let him teach us to be the more wholesome people we might become, persons who can acknowledge our interdependence and work for the benefit of the goods we can only share in common if we want to avoid the moral and spiritual corruption that comes with deformed, unjust relationships with other people, other creatures, natural objects, ecosystems, and the land.

I see a problem with the way I have set this up, however. This story could be read as one that tries to make Thoreau into a predecessor of environmental justice movements, those twentieth-century political movements that showed the ways in which environmental harm is so unevenly distributed to communities of color and the poor. I like that about the story I am telling, in that it aims to make Thoreau an ally of frontline communities that are fighting for their wellbeing. But I am also attentive to the fact that Thoreau was no saint with respect to racial and class politics from the perspective of our times. And, more to the point, he was not the one who did the organizing – the work – required to bring environmental justice and movements against environmental racism into being and into the public view. The people who did that were citizens, patriots, who deserve our admiration and support.⁹ So part of me worries

⁹ One window into this activism through a particularly important case is Elizabeth D. Blum, *Love Canal Revisited: Race, Class, and Gender in Environmental Activism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008). Another important history that helped scholars see the ways in which mainstream white environmentalism failed to account for the difference race and class make to environmental problems is Laura Pulido, *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles*

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that this story will read as an aggrandizement of an imperfect man, at the expense of the vast coalitions of democrats who actually do the consistent, grinding work required to make environmental justice a reality.

When you're a person who likes Thoreau, as I do, writing about him carries with it one great danger: that the infatuation will blind you, that your admiration will lead you to make larger claims than the evidence demonstrates, and especially that you will take him to be exemplary, a moral model on a grand scale, when he also of course represents his time and its foibles. I feel the danger pressing in.¹⁰ I am inspired by the life Thoreau lived, especially by the ways in which he articulated the concerns that we share. He resisted the emaciated vision of the human promoted by industrial economy, and I find this feature of his writing deeply heartening. He was funny, and he struggled to find his way, and he loved and was loved deeply. In this way, I am drawn to how he articulated his humanity, and, by doing that, sometimes enables the rest of us to be a little more human.

in the Southwest (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996). See also Shannon Elizabeth Bell, *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed: Appalachian Women and the Fight for Environmental Justice* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013). Broader histories of the US environmental movement can be found in Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2005); Chad Montrie, *A People's History of Environmentalism in the United States* (London: Continuum, 2011). There is a particularly helpful bibliographical essay on the historiography of environmentalism in Montrie, *A People's History of Environmentalism*.

¹⁰ I have even written myself on how Thoreau might serve as an example for contemporary environmental ethics, though I claim he ought to be an example of something rather different than simply "living lighter on the earth." Alda Balthrop-Lewis, "Exemplarist Environmental Ethics: Thoreau's Political Asceticism against Solution Thinking," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, 3 (September 2019): 525–50.

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But I also know that my attachment to him sometimes leans in the direction of adulation. And I know that a lot of the Thoreau literature leans this way. Such a tendency can be distasteful. He was not a perfect man.

In this context, my attempt to cast Thoreau as a proto-environmental justice figure could be read as undermining the importance of the citizens who created environmental justice movements in the first place. I do not attribute the development of those movements to Thoreau. What I mean to do is offer an interpretation of *Walden* that will unify the two strands I described before, the nature piety and the social justice, to show those who have been inspired by his nature piety that their piety entails a social justice politics, and those who have been inspired by Thoreau's vision of individualist politics that such a politics rests on a relation to nature that ought to be characterized by piety, which is to say reverent acknowledgment of dependence.

Thoreau's Religion is thus a new reading of *Walden*. My sense is that people do not usually read *Walden* this way because of white supremacy. It is telling that Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. – leaders of movements against forces of white supremacy – are the most famous figures to put Thoreau to use for social justice causes. They read him with the struggles of their own communities in mind. For such communities, in contrast to many white communities with access to wealth and land, nature was not always a place of peace, and a naïve view of Thoreau's romanticism was perhaps less tempting. And it is telling that the predominantly white, wealthy environmentalist movement of the twentieth century focused so closely on the nature piety of *Walden*.¹¹

¹¹ Here, I may accept too quickly the standard narrative of the environmental justice movement that Jedidiah Purdy complicates. Jedidiah Purdy, "The Long Environmental Justice Movement," *Ecology Law Quarterly* 44, 4 (2017): 809–64.

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Those readers came from communities in which forced land labor was past, coerced labor largely hidden, and the wildness of the woods indicated peace.¹²

For Thoreau, the woods were not only a place of peace. They were also where people of color and poor people we now consider white (largely Irish) lived and worked. In going to the woods, he opened himself to encounter with people outside his social, racial, and class position. During his time in Walden Woods, Thoreau made his world a little less segregated. He went to live in a neighborhood that had, in the generation before, been the home of formerly enslaved people and others outside of more elite Concord society. It was then the working place of Irish laborers. He traveled

¹² There is an important strand of literary interpretation that has argued that the view of wilderness and nature as a homeland and place of peace (over and against other images of nature, for instance, as a place of exile and fear) is inflected by white experience and fails to account for experiences of other groups, especially Black and African American communities. For examples see Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Outka is refreshingly unmotivated to redeem Transcendentalist authors from the racism of their milieu, and has argued that environmental practices contributed historically to the construction of whiteness and blackness in America. Outka is much less attentive to the historical location of his studies in nineteenth-century European, British, and American humanism, which sometimes makes him inattentive to the settler colonial narrative in which the story of race he tells plays out. He is also, perhaps therefore, inattentive to the ways in which relationships to land among the First Nations of the Americas might complicate his story. Other work on the role of literature in shaping American views of nature and race includes Myers, *Converging Stories*. Recent important scholarship collects and analyzes Black writing about nature and agriculture. Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Sonya Posmeniter, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2020).