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Thoreau's Social World

Confucius says truly, "Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan; it must of necessity have neighbors."

Walden, (V, 10)

One of the most popularly salient images of Thoreau taken from *Walden* is Thoreau as an asocial hermit, whether an honest one or a hypocrite. The Honest Hermit view sees his time in the woods as a praiseworthy retreat from other people in pursuit of higher values among nature. The Hypocrite Hermit view takes his forays into town – and the assumption that his mother did his laundry especially – as a sign that while he aimed to look holy out there in his hermitage, and would have been holy if he had achieved what he claimed, he did not live up to his own standard.¹ Both of these views respond to

¹ Rebecca Solnit has written about how strange it is that Thoreau's washing has become such a focus of attention. "There is one writer in all literature whose laundry arrangements have been excoriated again and again, and it is not Virginia Woolf, who almost certainly never did her own washing, or James Baldwin, or the rest of the global pantheon. The laundry of the poets remains a closed topic, from the tubercular John Keats (blood-spotted handkerchiefs) to Pablo Neruda (lots of rumpled sheets). Only Henry David Thoreau has been tried in the popular imagination and found wanting for his cleaning arrangements, though the true nature of those arrangements are not so clear." Rebecca Solnit, "Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved," *Orion*, June 2013, 18. Laura Dassow Walls points out that at the Thoreau boarding house, where Thoreau paid rent for the rest of his adult life after the Walden experiment, laundry was done by live-in servants. So presumably the charge against Henry was never quite accurate to begin with; everyone's laundry was done by servants. The charge reflected the accusers' own presumptions. Thoreau's mother did not do her own washing either. Walls's

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passages where Thoreau describes his avoidance of society and his appreciation of solitude. And they take him quite literally at his word when he writes, "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating" (V, 12). Those two views also leave open two other possibilities: first, that even if he was not a hypocrite, his aim was not praiseworthy – that is, being a hermit does not let you pursue higher values anyway; and second, the view I will defend, that the aim of living without society was never really his anyway, because the higher values he pursued were intimately related to society, or to relationships with others.²

Against an asocial reading of *Walden*, I argue that Thoreau's longing for solitude was tied to his deep interest and investment in (if also discomfort with) the dynamics of social life. There are a few main reasons to take this view.

comment: "No other male American writer has been so discredited for enjoying a meal with loved ones or for not doing his own laundry." Walls, *Henry David Thoreau*, 195.

² I am not, of course, the first interpreter of Thoreau to make this claim. A collection of essays on Thoreau, helpfully focused on his reception on both sides of the Atlantic, noted that almost all of the essays it contained emphasized "*relationality* as a central feature of Thoreau's writings." François Specq, Laura Dassow Walls, and Michel Granger, eds., *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 3. Even where they are inclined to emphasize Thoreau's solitude over his sociability, many of his finest readers have seen that the dynamics of sociability and solitude are deeply intertwined in his life and writing. For example, Jane Bennett insists that Thoreau rejected standard politics for practices of self-craft, thus focusing on the individual over against the social, but she acknowledges the centrality of friendship in Thoreau's practices of self-fashioning. Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature*, 20. Still, she emphasizes Thoreau's resistance to social life as a necessary condition for cultivating the nonconformist self. Thoreau's own writing has been partially responsible for the asocial reading of *Walden*. My interpretation in this chapter aims to acknowledge the evidence in *Walden* that might tempt readers to the asocial view of his project there, while joining those who see Thoreau relationally by opening a new view on the social world Thoreau joined in the woods.

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The first and most obvious is that Thoreau describes the social relationships he had in the woods in *Walden*, and the terms in which he describes them make clear that he also valued them. Even in his first few days at the pond, when – if he was bent on enforcing a rigorous solitude – we would expect him to avoid human contact, he records in his journal conversations with a man he met there, Alek Therien, who becomes his friend *while* he is living in the woods. Not only did Thoreau go to Walden Woods with friendships and familial relationships that he maintained; he also cultivated new relationships there, both intimate and remote.

Second, Thoreau was invested in a vision of social life that included more-than-human and more-than-living beings, or, as he usually called the social actors of the woods: “inhabitants.”³ It is easier to understand him as asocial (though still, I think, incorrect) when the only social actors you acknowledge are living human beings; but it is nearly impossible to maintain the asocial view when you take natural objects, animals, plants, and the human dead as involved in social life and relationships. Thoreau thought such beings were part of the social world and describes cultivating relationships with them, whether by keeping appointments with trees, weeding beans, or by “conjuring” the now-dead “former inhabitants” of Walden Woods.⁴ This interpretation of Thoreau’s sociality as including objects, plants, animals, and the human dead

³ The phrase “more-than-human” was coined (perhaps first by David Abram in 1996) to replace “non-human,” in the conviction that “non-human” placed moral priority on humans in a way that abetted human domination of other forms of life. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996). “More-than-living” is not common in current usage.

⁴ In his insistence on the social membership of a wide variety of creatures, Thoreau has what may be a surprising resonance with some forms of “ecological feminism” that developed in the 1990s. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

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relates to a growing field of scholarship being conducted across the humanities and social sciences – often under the rubric “multispecies” and indebted to the work of critical theory – which shows just how diverse social networks are and how much we miss of social life when we limit our understanding of “the social” to “the living human.”⁵

With all this in mind, this chapter argues against a view that sees the Thoreau of *Walden* having departed from society in general, that sees him as asocial. Rather, I show a dynamic within Thoreau's writing between his desire for solitude and his investment in community.⁶ I demonstrate Thoreau keeping company with a community of spirit that is peopled by exemplary individuals – both dead and alive, both flora and fauna. Among the individuals whom Thoreau took as neighbors in Walden Woods, some are easily legible as social actors. Alek Therien was a woodchopper who lived in the woods, and with whom Thoreau developed a relationship from his first days living by the pond. Others are less obvious, but no less important. Thoreau's writing describes an

⁵ Bruno Latour and actor-network theory are influential in this line of thinking. A key text for the field is Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing have been especially influential lately, in a purposefully feminist direction. For a helpful introduction (focused on plant sociality, but not on non-living social worlds), see Anna Tsing, “More-than-Human Sociality: A Call for Critical Description,” in *Anthropology and Nature*, ed. Kristen Hastrup (New York: Routledge, 2013). For examples of recent work in this line of scholarship, see the May 2016 issue of *Environmental Humanities*, especially Vinciane Despret and Michel Meuret, “Cosmoecological Sheep and the Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, 1 (May 1, 2016): 24–36; Hugo Reinert, “About a Stone: Some Notes on Geologic Conviviality,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, 1 (May 1, 2016): 95–117.

⁶ Bennett argues that Thoreau underplays “the role and force of collective ideals, such as community or justice.” Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature*, 132. She amends Thoreau (with Kafka) in an attempt to make his sensibility better equipped to engage public affairs. I find Thoreau (sans Kafka) already invested in community-building.

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experience of the woods that is full of personality, of alternative society. Beginning with his relationships with animals, plants, and non-living objects, and going on through his knowledge of the “Former Inhabitants” of the woods, whom readers often forget but who were one important example Thoreau had of what independence looked like, the woods as Thoreau described them *were* a society.⁷ When we ignore the beings who made up his social world, we get a distorted view of the aim of what he called his “experiment.” I use Thoreau’s writing about the woods and contemporary history of Concord slavery – which Thoreau’s writing has contributed to – to show that his vision of society was broader and deeper than readers often think.

I introduce this chapter with a section on Thoreau’s insistence that the center of society could be anywhere. This view was part of Thoreau’s lively interest in spatial, scalar, and perspectival questions that I return to throughout the book.⁸ His belief that the center of society might be anywhere, depending on your point of view, also meant that whereas the residents of Concord might have seen him as leaving society, he took himself to be joining a society. This spatial play also entailed a commitment to viewing figures that might

⁷ In one sense, my reading of Thoreau’s time in the woods joins it even more closely to other utopian communities of the period, which interpreters have long compared it to, like those at Brook Farm and Fruitlands. In another sense, in my telling his community was far less utopian than theirs, to the extent it took his own weaknesses into account in the formation of its membership. On Fruitlands and Brook Farm see Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Sterling F. Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004); Richard Francis, *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and Their Search for Utopia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). On Walden as a “utopia of one” see Josh Kotin, *Utopias of One* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 17–32.

⁸ Similar matters arise throughout this book, especially in Chapter 4.

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be coded marginal in one way of thinking about society as in fact central. The first section of the chapter describes Thoreau's recentering of the woods, the second section discusses what to make of the evidence that might suggest Thoreau's retreat to the woods was asocial, and the later sections describe Thoreau's relationships with those who are recentered as "members" rather than "marginal."

The Village and the Woods

One reason that people have an image of Thoreau as avoiding society at Walden is that in *Walden* Thoreau plays with a conceptual pair that has been central to the long tradition of pastoral literature. This is the dynamic tension between the "country" and the "city," or in his case between "the village" and "the woods."⁹ When Thoreau describes his life in the woods and its distance from the village, he is not merely insisting on his remoteness. To do so would have been to take for granted that the village was the epicenter of society, which he refused to do. Instead, he was testing the categories themselves, which rely on one another. The woods are wild only *relative* to the village, and the village is civilized only in comparison to the woods. Thoreau thinks the way these concepts are tied together has significance, in that which location is thought primary can be switched. This switch is one of the things that *Walden* tries to do, to make the woods the center of a world and thus test the view that life in the village is somehow primary.¹⁰

⁹ Raymond Williams, a literary critic, is an important expositor of this conceptual pair in pastoral literature. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹⁰ This dynamic play between periphery and center functions in the title of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. That work treats the indispensability and inadequacy of social science to understanding political and historical life in India.

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Thoreau began *Walden* with a paragraph that suggested his home by Walden Pond was remote from society.

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

(I, 1)

With this first paragraph, Thoreau introduced the book that would eventually make him famous, and he did it in specifically spatial terms. In three sentences, he implied that the house at Walden Pond had been a retreat from society – he lived there “alone” – and that it had been a retreat to somewhere somewhat desolate – now he is in “civilized life again.” What then was his life “in the woods”? The implication is that life in the woods was the opposite of civilized in some way, “a mile from any neighbor.” At first, this distance from his closest neighbor reads like an insistence on the way his life in the woods was a retreat from society, the mile between him and the neighbor ensuring that he does not confront other people.

The first sentences of the introduction insist that Europe has already been provincialized – which is to say decentered. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). The decentering of European history and thought is a major theme in postcolonial literature broadly. I am trying to show that Thoreau's conceptual play between center and periphery, which is so central to the Walden project, is conceptually related to the kinds of questions raised by postcolonial efforts to decenter European ways of knowing. Thoreau shared with these more recent philosophical efforts a resistance to European Enlightenment reason's attempt to find a kind of objectivity that required a God's eye view. Every view is a view *from somewhere*. For an example of contemporary postcolonial work that aims to assess the legality of the colonial project from the perspective of Australian Aboriginal law (rather than from the perspective of European law traditions), see Irene Margaret Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

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But this measure, one mile, introduces a perspectival puzzle that Thoreau plays with for the rest of the book. As with the relative significance of “the village” and “the woods,” one mile can be very far, as this paragraph implies that it is, or very short, as one mile is when made relative to the “dozen miles” in which Thoreau describes looking for a place to live (II, 1).

The paragraph also has a playful tone, especially at its end. The sentence, “At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again,” initiates the reader to Thoreau’s sense of humor, which is very dry.¹¹ It also suggests, as the rest of the book continues to do, that there is a certain play between “the woods” and “civilization.” A sojourner is one who visits, and by calling himself a “sojourner in civilized life,” the last sentence suggests that Thoreau’s time in the woods has accomplished the switch that I have suggested the book aims to make, to take a view of the woods as primary, as the center, as home, and a view of so-called civilized life as a place to visit on the periphery.¹²

¹¹ I take Thoreau’s sense of humor as essential to interpreting *Walden*, and I exposit its centrality in the book further in Chapter 5, “Delight in True Goods.”

¹² The philosopher Michel Serres objected to the term “environment” in the early 1990s for a similar reason. In his now classic work on the need for a new peace pact between humans and the world, he wrote, “So forget the word *environment*, commonly used in this context. It assumes that we humans are at the center of a system of nature. This idea recalls a bygone era, when the Earth (how can one imagine that it used to represent us?), placed in the center of the world, reflected our narcissism, the humanism that makes of us the exact midpoint or excellent culmination of all things. No. The earth existed without our unimaginable ancestors, could well exist without us, will exist tomorrow or later still, without any of our possible descendants, whereas we cannot exist without it. Thus we must indeed place things in the center and us at the periphery, or better still, things all around and us within them like parasites.” Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 33. Some Indigenous thinkers object, however, to the view of humans as parasites, offering instead a vision of humans

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Thoreau demonstrates a similar sense of play between center and periphery at the beginning of the next chapter too. In “Where I Lived, and What I Lived for,” Thoreau describes a period in which he searched for a place to live. That chapter begins, “At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live” (II, 1). Thoreau was a surveyor; he was hired to measure and map land. He probably referred here both to his professional activities and to his walks around Concord. He describes how he thought about the places he visited.

Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it.

(II, 1)

Thoreau insists here, again and explicitly, on a perspectival shift from the one usually taken by those who live in the village, even those who enjoy outings to the woods. When he visited each place, he took *it* as the center, the place from which outings would occur; “the landscape radiated from me” suggests this. And some of the places he visited had much distance between them and the village, too much, even in Thoreau's view. But whereas “some might have thought [it] too far from the village,” to Thoreau “the village was too far from it.” Here, importantly, he does not suggest that how far away the village is does not matter. Even he thought the

as a “custodial species.” Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melborne, Victoria: Text Publishing, 2019).

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distance between them too far. Rather, he insists that any place, no matter how remote from the village, can be a center.

Thoreau's interest in the interplay between the village and the woods takes part in a long tradition of pastoral literature that describes life outside of cities. In that tradition, the dynamic between country and city is always being constructed. In the pastoral imagination, the country is often the seat of rural, agricultural life. The city is the cultural center, where intellectual life and the arts flourish. As Raymond Williams argued in *The Country and the City*, the history of rural and urban settlements is intensely varied – stereotypes will never capture the diversity of actual human settlements. And yet persistent images have grown up around the words “country” and “city.”

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.¹³

Those images have collected especially persistently in literature. And Williams analyzed this dynamic, between the images of the country and the city, especially but not only in British literature. What he found was that these words, and this dynamic in British literature, had collected images that have to do with the development of capitalism as an economic form. Nostalgia for the country often has to do with transformations of communities because of changed economies. Thoreau's writing is caught up in the tradition that Williams described. Going to the woods was, in part, Thoreau's resistance to the industrial economy he saw overtaking what he

¹³ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1.

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viewed as traditional economies of the region.¹⁴ He was seeking a way of, as Williams wrote, “enjoying people and things, rather than using and consuming them.” He wanted “to be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life.”¹⁵

A second significance of Thoreau's play with location and space has to do with the conceptual issue of center and periphery I have already begun to describe. Cities are often taken to be centers, with country as their surrounding periphery. But where the center is in any field is a completely perspectival question. What is described as center and what as periphery is dependent on what is taken by the describer to be important in the field. Like orthodoxy and heresy, center and periphery are shaped mightily by the position of the person doing the categorization and the purpose of their categories.¹⁶ In *Walden*, Thoreau insisted that where he chose to live, no matter its relation to the village, would be the seat, or center.

Thoreau's play with the concepts of village and woods was shaped by and ought to contribute to philosophical discussion of one of the persistent epistemological problems of the modern period. The problem has only become more pressing,

¹⁴ I discuss Thoreau's worries about industrial economy further in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ Williams thought that, even given the historical diversity of human settlement in fact, the nostalgia of those who longed for the countries of their childhoods was part of something real and important. Writing in 1973, Williams insisted, “Yet what we finally have to say is that we live in a world in which the dominant mode of production and social relationships teaches, impresses, offers to make normal and even rigid, modes of detached, separated, external perception and action: modes of using and consuming rather than accepting and enjoying people and things. . . It is not so much the old village or the old backstreet that is significant. It is the perception and affirmation of a world in which one is not necessarily a stranger and an agent, but can be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life.” Williams, *The Country and the City*, 298.

¹⁶ For a recent overview of orthodoxy and heresy in the historiography of early Christianity, see David W. Jorgensen, “Approaches to Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Study of Early Christianity,” *Religion Compass* 11, 7–8 (July 1, 2017).

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and interesting, over the course of the last century. This problem has to do with the dependence of knowledge on the situation of the knower, and the independence of truth from any particular knower's view on it. I take it that all knowledge is, like judgments about center and periphery and orthodoxy and heresy, contextual. This is to say that what we can know depends on where we stand, because where we stand determines what we can see (or hear, or feel, or touch, or taste).

The issue is this: philosophy since Descartes has aimed to secure knowledge against skepticism, to assure us that our knowledge corresponds to an objective world, to achieve certainty. Philosophers with this concern often ask: How can we know that the things we *think* are true, *are actually true*? Descartes wrote that the purpose of the method of doubt he proposed was, "to reach certainty – to cast aside the loose earth and sand so as to come upon rock or clay."¹⁷

But philosophy that tries to do this, to secure our knowledge against the wonderings of skepticism, has often tried to do so at the expense of our actual relationship to that objective world. It has not generally been concerned with actual earth or sand or rock or clay. To take the most prominent example, Kant insisted that our knowing comes to us through *a priori* conditions, what he tried to enumerate as the categories. This theory suggested that we do, in fact, know, but that our knowing comes to us not from our actual relationships to our objects of knowledge, but via the categories with which knowing knows.

The Kantian doctrine sought, like much philosophy since Descartes, to avoid the problem of relativism. Some responses to skepticism do insist that knowledge comes through the

¹⁷ René Descartes, *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 34.

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relation of the knower to the object of knowledge. But if knowledge works in this relational way, Enlightenment philosophy worried, then it doesn't answer Descartes's challenge to find the rock on which knowledge might be built; it can't secure knowledge against skepticism. Since each person has a different set of relationships, they will therefore have a different view on the truth, and the concern was – the one Kant tried to address – that those views are so relative that knowledge is never secured.

But knowledge *is* relative, as the woods and the village are relative to one another. They only make sense at all in relation to one another. Knowledge is only achieved by knowers, and I can know only things that I can experience in some way, even if that way is – as it so often was for the philosophers of the European Enlightenment – through the fancy books I read. And what I experience, whether it is philosophy in books or raising children or being enslaved, has everything to do with where I am in space and time and in what relations I find myself. This explains what Stanley Cavell described as Thoreau's difference from Kant in *The Senses of Walden*. Like Kant, Thoreau thought that *a priori* conditions for knowledge were a necessity for humans, but, unlike Kant, that they could only be discovered historically. Cavell wrote,

I am convinced that Thoreau had the Kantian idea right, that the objects of our knowledge require a transcendental (or we may say, grammatical or phenomenological) preparation; that we know just what meets the *a priori* conditions of our knowing anything *überhaupt*. These *a priori* conditions are necessities of human nature; and the search for them is something I think Thoreau's obsession with necessity is meant to declare. His difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally; historically, Hegel had said.

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Walden is also, accordingly, a response to skepticism, and not just in matters of knowledge. Epistemologically, its motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German Idealists and the Romantic poets picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. Morally, its motive is to answer, by transforming, the problem of the freedom of the will in the midst of a universe of natural laws, by which our conduct, like the rest of nature, is determined. *Walden*, in effect, provides a transcendental deduction for the concepts of the thing-in-itself and for determination – something Kant ought, so to speak, to have done.¹⁸

Notice, Cavell makes the point in terms that are relevant to the main thesis of this chapter. He writes that Thoreau's project is a recovery of "the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object." This means that knowledge on Thoreau's picture *requires* relation. And relation defines social life. This means that Thoreau's construction of place in *Walden* has to do with one of the central epistemological puzzles of our time, and opens onto questions about his mistrust of social life and the social life he cultivated in the woods. If knowledge is only found in the relations I have, then what community I take myself to belong to is an epistemological question. It will determine how reliable my knowledge is.

Seeming Asociality/"Solitude"

Thoreau's interest in the self as the seat of knowledge sometimes makes him seem self-centered in a bad way. Like Wordsworth's before him, Thoreau's writing exhibits a focus on self-understanding that some read as selfishness, a fault of

¹⁸ Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 93.

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his character. Something like this was what Keats criticized in the famous phrase: “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime.”¹⁹ An interpretation in this vein would paint a picture of Thoreau as an asocial hermit and a cranky misanthrope. It would say that his loves were impersonal, mostly not for humans to boot. It would conjecture that sharing a room or a life with him would prove difficult, and that this is a bad sign if we are evaluating his character. This interpretation would emphasize Thoreau's insistence on being alone, on his love of solitude.

Many readers take the quintessential description of Thoreau's refusal of society to be in the “Conclusion” when Thoreau famously writes that, “If a man does not keep pace

¹⁹ William Wordsworth was born in 1770, in Cumberland, England. He is a central figure in English poetry of the Romantic period, which is sometimes associated with an understanding of the human person that is radically autonomous, deeply focused on individual emotions, and thus – in a word – selfish. This sense is sometimes applied directly to Wordsworth himself with a phrase, “egotistical sublime,” used by John Keats (under the influence of William Hazlitt's disappointment with Wordsworth) in an 1818 letter. Keats was Wordsworth's contemporary and fellow poet, who was, however, a generation younger and wanted to do something different with poetry than he thought Wordsworth had. Keats said, writing to a friend, that his own poetry had no self, no character, no identity. “As to the poetical character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime . . .) it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity.” John Keats, *Selected Letters*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147–48. Keats thought that poets could, if they were good at poetry, remove themselves from it entirely, that they are continually “filling some other body” about which they write. Wordsworth, in Keats's view, practiced a poetry that was overly focused on the poet's self and that saw the world only through his eyes. This is the flip side of the issue about the relativity of knowledge to the position of the knower, and there is a real question – perhaps the most pressing philosophical question of the last centuries – about whether a view that acknowledges the place of the individual in the pursuit of knowledge can avoid falling into the kind of solipsism that Keats worried Wordsworth had.

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with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (XVIII, 10). The image sometimes seems to suggest that the man who hears a different drummer should take leave from "his companions," which is to say from all other band members. But that reading of this passage misses the point Thoreau is making, as does the contemporary idiom that has sprung from this line: "marching to the beat of your own drum," which is importantly different from what Thoreau actually wrote. Someone who marches to the beat of "a different drummer" is still following "the music which he hears." He is not – as the asocial reading implies and the contemporary idiom makes explicit – drumming his own beat, off on his own.²⁰ He is following a different bandleader. The metaphor is ambivalent about society. It suggests there is more than one band you might join.

But in some of the most famous portions of *Walden* Thoreau does seem to seek an escape from society. The most straightforward place to find textual evidence that seems to count against my thesis that Thoreau is social is "Solitude," the fifth chapter of *Walden*. Here, Thoreau describes what it is like to be in the woods alone, and he delights in the space he has to himself. "For the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself" (V, 3). Here, Thoreau revels in the distance he has from ordinary New England society. He has "a little world" all to himself, without intrusion except for

²⁰ Hodder suggests that the drummer passage acquires its full resonance when read in light of the appearance of the night drummer in *A Week*. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 91. Here, as in other places, Hodder's emphasis on ecstasy pushes his interpretation of this passage toward Thoreau's personal views about individual experience and away from the social and political implications of the passage.

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when, in the spring, some people come to fish for pouts in the pond. Even they were always gone by night. He counts this world "all to himself" a good thing. And his description of what he likes about it – being solitary, having his own world – might make him seem asocial. He is avoiding company after all.

Similarly, later in the section he responds to those who ask whether he doesn't get lonely out in the woods. "Men frequently say to me, 'I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially'" (V, 5). If Thoreau did want society, you might think, he would sometimes be lonely. But Thoreau dismisses this loneliness question. "Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not the most important question." Instead, Thoreau asks, "What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life." For him, apparently, the woods serve well as a life-source, despite being remote from "where most men congregate." Even more emphatically, he writes, "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (V, 12). This quotation supports a reading of Thoreau as departing from society. At Walden Pond, this text suggests, Thoreau found at last the solitude that he thought most satisfying.

These texts (and many others) push against my reading of Thoreau as seeking society at Walden Pond. In them he insists that lacking human society does him no harm. They argue, further, that being alone actually enables him to draw close to the source of his life. And they support Jane Bennett's view

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that some verison of asociality was required for Thoreau to do the kinds of self-formation he was attempting.

Dwelling on them, however, ignores texts in the same pages that describe another kind of society, the one I argue Thoreau found at Walden. Thoreau may sometimes say he is alone in the woods, but his writing elsewhere tells a different story. Just as Thoreau's spatial descriptions of Walden play with the conceptual pair of country and city, in "Solitude" Thoreau plays with the tension between solitude and society. The very first paragraph of "Solitude" shows a community of creatures and other phenomena in which Thoreau takes delight.

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen, – links which connect the days of animated life.

(V, 1)

Whereas readers might imagine the woods are empty, might imagine that solitude entails being alone, Thoreau demonstrates the society he finds on the shores of Walden Pond. The trumpets of the bullfrogs announce the coming night, and an announcement implies a community of hearers. Thoreau

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has "sympathy" with the leaves in the trees, a social feeling. The wind "blows" and "roars." Some creatures sing to lull others to sleep, and other creatures stay awake serving as "watchmen." Thoreau may have been the only human on the shore of the pond that evening, but he was not alone. The days at Walden are full of "animated life."

Even more strikingly, Thoreau himself describes the society he found, even when supposedly alone. After responding to the question about loneliness by describing his "little world all to myself," Thoreau describes the way in which he wasn't, after all, alone. "Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man" (V, 4).²¹ He was sometimes at a remove from other humans, but he found society in objects, and storms, and rain. He goes on to write about "the friendship of the seasons," and then, about the sympathy he received from pine needles. Usually he did not feel lonesome, but there was one time when he did. "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant." But in that one lonesome moment, he was comforted by

sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with

²¹ This may be an allusion to Wordsworth's poem, "On the Influence of Natural Objects."

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sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person or a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to be again.

(V, 4)

Thoreau found “society in Nature,” where he felt “something kindred.” He was sustained by an “unaccountable friendliness” in the “pattering of the drops.” This line, “unaccountable friendliness” acknowledges the strangeness of having society with Nature. It participates, too, in Thoreau’s play with the language of finance and accounting. The friendliness he experiences is unaccountable in many senses: the friends he finds do not offer an account of themselves and neither can he say what their friendship is or where it comes from. No one can count the value of such friendship in numbers. “The fancied advantages of human neighborhood” were replaced by the sympathy and friendship of the pine needles.

Thoreau sets this society in Nature – “like an atmosphere sustaining” him – against the patterns of other sorts of society. “Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are” (V, 13). Society is cheap when we make it cheap, by meeting too frequently without attention to whether those meetings are good for us or not. But society needn’t be that way. In the final pages of “Solitude” Thoreau describes visits from “an old settler” and “an elderly dame.” The settler “is thought to be dead” and the dame is “invisible to most persons,” but they provide Thoreau with the sort of society he values. Thoreau finds at Walden an alternative way of being in society.

Thoreau did delight in leaving the society that characterizes cities: close neighbors, bustle, and Beacon Hill. But he found

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another sort of society in the woods, one that nourished his human needs even as it tutored him in the bonds of community we can have with winds, and leaves, and frogs if we will spend time among them.

Thoreau's writing is complicated to be sure. What society, rightly understood, ought to be is a central puzzle in it, and there are certainly some social circumstances he clearly wanted to avoid. This does not make him asocial. My claim is that in going to Walden Thoreau did not retreat from society in general, but left one society and joined another: a spiritual community of exemplary creatures, places, and former inhabitants he thought formed the finest society he could imagine at the time. He sought out the social company of marginal figures who lived in the woods both in the present and the past.

Living People/"Visitors"

Thoreau's description of his retreat to Walden Woods was slightly tongue-in-cheek, in that he did not go very far but still lived and wrote as though he had. Similarly, Thoreau's insistence on his aloneness was also moderated, not only as I have described by his social feeling for beings we do not typically consider part of human community, but also by his relationships to human community. The chapter I have just been discussing, "Solitude," is followed by one called "Visitors." This juxtaposition in itself expresses the dynamic I am trying to describe. "Solitude" offers a description of Thoreau's being alone in the woods that transforms the seeming solitude into society, if admittedly of an atypical sort that includes animals, plants, objects, and weather. Then "Visitors" considers hospitality as a practice, and describes how hospitality is better when there is some distance between the people who come together. You cannot receive a visitor without their having

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been elsewhere to begin with. Together, these two chapters show Thoreau offering an alternative view of what society should be, how it should work, and what it should be for, but not a rejection wholesale of being with other people.

It is not hard to find evidence in *Walden* of Thoreau's obviously social habits. In "Visitors," Thoreau even wrote about a big party in his tiny house. "It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof" (VI, 2). And later, in "The Village," he writes about his near daily visits to the village.

Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper, and which, taken in homœopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs.

(VIII, 1)

Just as the woods offered opportunities for looking, and seeing, and being with, so too the village. Even gossip is good in homeopathic doses. He carries his powers of observation with him from the woods on his outings to town, "to see the men and boys," and "to observe their habits." He shows himself to be an astute ethnographer of his own country: "I observed that the vitals of the village were the grocery, the bar-room, the post-office, and the bank" (VIII, 1).

Thoreau himself was occupied with showing that his life was sociable. "Visitors" begins with Thoreau's own insistence that he is "no hermit."

I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither.

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I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.

(VI, 1)

Despite his love of solitude, then, Thoreau was not asocial. He had friends who came to see him in the woods, and he welcomed them. The three chairs were a symbol of the fact of sociality in his Walden life, and the sociability of three comes into view in other parts of Thoreau's life in Walden Woods.²²

"Visitors" is also where we meet Alek Therien, a man whom Thoreau met in his first days living in the woods, in 1845, and with whom Thoreau had an interspecies experience of the sociality among three. In "Visitors," Therien has been translated out of the *Journal* and into *Walden* as a heroic figure, "a true Homeric or Paphlagonian man." I further discuss the significance of the portrait of the woodchopper in *Walden*, the model for whom was Alek Therien, in Chapters 4 and 5. The point at the moment is that if Thoreau had been hoping to enforce a rigorous apartness from other people, we would expect his interactions with Therien to be quite different than they were in those first weeks in the woods. Thoreau moved on July 4, and on July 14 wrote in his journal about meeting Therien as well as the five railroad men I described in the Preface. Then, on July 16, Therien comes to call. The *Journal* describes Therien in detail (which is largely copied into the portrait of the woodchopper in *Walden*). And then some time after December 23, 1845, and before March 26, 1846, less than a year after Thoreau's moving to the woods, Thoreau and Therien share a social experience that

²² It also recurs in my description of the sociability of writing in Chapter 4.

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includes a bird. It is useful to recall that Therien was Canadian and spoke French. The *Journal* describes it thus:

Therien the wood chopper was here yesterday – and while I was cutting wood some chickadees hopped near pecking the bark and chips and the potatoe skins I had thrown out – What do you call them he asked – I told him – what do *you* call them asked I – *Mezezence* I think he said. When I eat my dinner in the woods said he sitting very still having kindled a fire to warm my coffee – they come and light on my arm and peck at the potatoe in my fingers – I like to have the little fellers about me –

Just then one flew up from the snow and perched on the wood I was holding in my arms and pecked it and looked me familiarly in the face. Chica-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee, – while others were whistling phebe-phe-bee – in the woods behind the house.²³

This passage strikes me as a vivid example of the sort of society Thoreau cultivated in the woods. In the short interaction, Therien and Thoreau share caring mutual curiosity about one another's languages. Then Therien describes his own relationship to the chickadees he knows in the woods. And then a chickadee joins their circle, speaking its own language (one of the most complex among animals as it happens) and looking "familiarly." In this case, the social occasion included Therien and the bird.²⁴ It was an interspecies form of the social trinity Thoreau had described when he wrote that he kept three chairs in his house.

²³ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume 2: 1842–1848, 191.

²⁴ The French scholar of English literature and ecocriticism Thomas Pughe has written about Thoreau in the context of contemporary interspecies studies. Thomas Pughe, "Brute Neighbors: The Modernity of a Metaphor," in *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon*, ed. François Specq, Laura Dassow Walls, and Michel Granger (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 249–64.

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Edward Waldo Emerson wrote *Henry Thoreau: As Remembered by a Young Friend*, which was published in 1917. He wrote it in part as a defense, and for this reason it sometimes reads like hagiography more than history. Nonetheless, I think what Edward Emerson wrote about Thoreau's respect for animals suggests that his sociality with living humans and with other living creatures in the woods were related. They were part of the same reverence for created things as part of God.

He felt real respect for the personality and character of animals, and could never have been guilty of asking with Paul, "Doth God care for oxen?" The humble little neighbors in house or wood whose characters he thus respected, rewarded his regard by some measure of friendly confidence. He felt that until men showed higher behaviour, the less they said about the "lower animals" the better.

For all life he had reverence, and just where the limits of conscious life began and ended he was too wise, and too hopeful, to say.²⁵

Edward Emerson describes a man exceptionally attuned to life in the woods, a man who refused standard contrasts between humans and other animals. Further, according to Edward, Henry revered everything alive, and his reverence for created things made him wary of presuming to know which things had consciousness and which did not.²⁶

²⁵ Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry Thoreau: As Remembered by a Young Friend* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 82–83.

²⁶ The moral philosopher Mary Midgley would have approved. Her 1978 *Beast and Man* suggested that European philosophy had misconceived human nature by consistently setting it up in contrast to animals, when in fact we learn more about human nature by seeing ourselves as members of the class. She thought this problem in the European philosophical tradition had "distorted arguments in ethics" and might have obscured important human possibilities. She was particularly mad at Existentialism: "The really monstrous thing about Existentialism too is its proceeding as if the world contained only dead matter

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Edward seemed to think that Henry's habit of respect for other beings was rare. I can imagine a reader of this book suspicious of my using this moment to characterize Thoreau as sociable; they might think that Thoreau was inventing a society rather than joining one. But the passage about Thoreau, Therien, and the chickadee shows us that Thoreau was not some kind of raving loner who was odd because he thought he could talk to birds. Therien, too, likes "to have the little fellers about." And the chickadee himself, whose language we do not entirely know, gets a word into the account. "Chica-a-dee-dee-dee-dee."²⁷ All three make a contribution. The trinity of members exhibits mutual investment in the social moment. The important point is that Thoreau's sociability with other people is mutually constituted and not limited to human persons.

It may be, too, that the chickadee's language would have been more familiar to Therien and Thoreau, who spent so much time in the woods, than it is to most readers. Current research, conducted through close observation in controlled settings, has suggested that the "chick-a-dee" call is among the most complex animal communication science has uncovered.²⁸ Spending time among the chickadees could have

(things) on the one hand and fully rational, educated, adult, human beings on the other – as if there were no other life-forms. The impression of *desertion* or *abandonment* which Existentialists have is due, I am sure, not to the removal of God, but to this contemptuous dismissal of almost the whole biosphere – plants, animals, and children. Life shrinks to a few urban rooms; no wonder it becomes absurd." She did not consider what I take to have been Thoreau's view, that the dismissal of the biosphere was related to the removal of God. For him, the idea that God could be known by humans apart from God's created world was blasphemy. Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, Revised ed. (London: Routledge, 1995), xiii, 18–19.

²⁷ The bird's "chic-a-dee" is also quoted in Emerson's poem, "The Titmouse," written and published in 1862, the year Thoreau died.

²⁸ Christopher N. Templeton, Erick Greene, and Kate Davis, "Allometry of Alarm Calls: Black-Capped Chickadees Encode Information about Predator Size,"

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taught Thoreau something about what chickadees mean when they call – when they are far enough away from their fellows that they cannot see one another, but not so far away that they cannot call out, seeking a response. They call to alert their fellows to danger. They call to ask “are you here with me?” They call to encourage others to join them, to resist a threat. This variant of the “chick-a-dee” call is described by contemporary literature as “mobbing calls,” and the flock that joins in the harassment of a predator is described as exhibiting “mobbing behavior.” Chickadees publish their worries abroad, and they wait for a reply from their friends.²⁹ Thoreau may have considered the chickadee's call as a model for *Walden*, a call to alert his friends, and a hope they would join his mob.³⁰ Emerson was struck by the passage, and wrote a poem, “The Titmouse,” in response.

This image of Thoreau, Therien, and the chickadee has become, for me, an icon of what Thoreau learned in Walden Woods, what he thought *Walden* might be, and what *Walden* has in fact become. The chickadee of Walden Woods called out, Thoreau and Therien came around to join the bird, *Walden* relayed the call, aiming to alert its readers to the

Science 308, 5730 (2005): 1934–37. See also, Todd M. Freeberg, “Social Complexity Can Drive Vocal Complexity: Group Size Influences Vocal Information in Carolina Chickadees,” *Psychological Science* 17, 7 (2006): 557–61. And for a lay description of these studies of chickadee sociality (with reference also to Thoreau) see, Stephen Lyn Bales, *Natural Histories: Stories from the Tennessee Valley* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 6–8.

²⁹ Jeffrey Stout pointed out to me that there was more for me to learn about chickadees before I assumed that their language was indecipherable (which I had done in a previous draft). He also pointed out that their call (“Can you hear me? Will you join me?”) resonated closely with the message of *Walden*. It was characteristically respectful (of the chickadee) and creative on his part.

³⁰ In Australian Aboriginal English, the term mob often refers to family, linguistic, cultural, or national groups, as in the question, “who's your mob?” It's a lovely way to describe who your people are.

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dangers of injustice, and the mob has been gathering ever since. I discuss the significance of this image further in Chapter 4.

Dead People

The respect Thoreau had for living creatures meant that the form of society he lived in was atypical. It included inhabitants of the woods whom other people might exclude from society, like oxen or chickadees. But I think even “living beings” does not properly describe Thoreau’s society; he included the now-dead as well. One of the key texts that supports this view is a chapter in the last part of the book, where readers rarely focus attention, entitled “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors.” Here, I think Thoreau’s attention to the former inhabitants of Walden Woods should suggest to us that they too, though now dead, were among the society Thoreau joined in the woods. Their presence in the woods and in *Walden* also suggests, as I discuss at length in the next chapter, that Thoreau’s form of life in the woods was more political than we usually notice.

The first notable thing about this chapter is its doubled title. Only the second chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” has a title that includes more than a singular topic. Other chapter titles include “Economy,” “Sounds,” “Visitors,” “Higher Laws,” and “Spring.” “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors” thus represents the coordination of two seemingly separate topics into one subject. It could be that Thoreau made the choice to include the two topics together because neither had the material for the length of the chapter he planned. But given the variation among chapter lengths in the rest of the book, I do not think this is likely.

It is more plausible to think that Thoreau coordinated these two topics for thematic reasons; the former inhabitants are *among* the winter visitors. *Walden* is organized around the

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seasons of one year. Thoreau arrives in the woods in July, and the chapters trace seasonal changes. While he lived in the woods for two years, the book collates both years into one seasonal story, so that the major principle of organization in the book is the changing of the weather, and the woods, and the behavior of animals, as well as the work required for Thoreau to live in each of the different periods of the year. The book ends in spring, in part as an emphatic insistence on the promise of morning and associated aim of spiritual awakening that Thoreau weaves through the whole book. The winter months thus appear in the chapters leading up to the end of the book. And in this particular chapter, Thoreau introduces his reflections on the former inhabitants by the fact of his aloneness, especially in that winter period. He wrote, "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods" (XIV, 1). In the winter, when he spent more time inside and alone than usual, he conjured the former occupants of the woods in order to enjoy human society that was lacking in that season.

But read the sentence again. "For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods" (XIV, 1). "For human society" may refer not only to the human society Thoreau found for himself in the woods. It may also signify something like "for the sake of human society," and refer to the society beyond Walden Woods that Thoreau hoped to reach by writing *Walden*. He conjured the former occupants of the woods not only so that he could enjoy their company, but also on behalf of broader human society, a society that did not generally share Thoreau's interest in their lives.

It may be surprising to some readers that Walden Woods, as Thoreau describes his neighborhood, ever had occupants before Thoreau. The popular image of Thoreau's retreat to the woods has him aiming to live outside of society in intense

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solitude. This was an image Thoreau knew people had, and which he in some sense cultivated, even within the pages where he describes the people who lived there before him.

But against the caricature of Thoreau as living in untouched wilderness, his writing shows that he had historical consciousness and curiosity about the place that he lived, and that he was interested in what had come before.³¹ The nineteen-paragraph discussion of the neighborhood *as a neighborhood*, as what had been – as Thoreau wrote – a “small village,” shows that the location had a history. It had been a place where people made their homes. Thoreau wrote, “Within the memory of many of my townsmen the road near which my house stands resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants, and the woods which boarder it were notched and dotted here and there with their little gardens and dwellings” (XIV, 1). His knowledge of these former inhabitants suggests that Thoreau had conducted something like what we now call oral history about “the memory” of his “townsmen,” as a way to learn what had been before him in the woods he came to occupy. I find it easy to imagine that this may have been one of the things Thoreau liked to gossip about in Concord. In whatever way he came to know what

³¹ Treatments of the history of Walden Woods include: Thomas Blanding, “Historic Walden Woods,” *The Concord Saunterer* 20, 1/2 (1988): 2–74; W. Barksdale Maynard, *Walden Pond: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Maynard’s book focuses on the history of the Pond from Thoreau’s early life up through the present but briefly mentions the earlier inhabitants of the woods. Lemire concentrates on the history of slavery in Concord, and especially on the free Black people whom Thoreau writes about in “Former Inhabitants.” Her book is the most in-depth history of slavery in Concord, and I rely on it not because it is an exemplary history of Northern slavery (there are many fine examples of important new work on Northern slavery), but because it deals in specifics with respect to Concord that are important to my interpretation of *Walden*.

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he did, he is one of the key sources for history about the people who had occupied Walden Woods, situated between Concord and Lincoln, in the generation before him.

As it happens, many but not all of these people had been formerly enslaved free Black people, members of the last generation of Concord slavery. This may be one of the reasons so many readers forget that Walden was not a wilderness. US historiography, dominated in the academy by white people, has for too long failed to consider Black society as historically significant society. But this exclusion of the Black people who were always part of Northern history was not a habit of Thoreau's. He describes four free Black people whose homes had been close to where he built his own along the northern shore of Walden Pond. Thoreau's descriptions of the Black people who lived in Walden Woods before him exhibit features of racist thinking deployed among some white people of his period. Stories about the former inhabitants circulating in white Concord gossip must have conveyed these images to Thoreau, and that fact should make us cautious about his representations of them. But all the same, Thoreau never takes the strange tone later white historians did, when they took Concord as the center of society and described these figures as "pariahs or lawless characters," "outcasts and cast-offs."³²

³² Thomas Blanding's section on "Walden Woods before Thoreau" offers a glimpse of the strange tone some historians have taken – up through the 1980s – to the people who lived in the woods before Thoreau: "For more than half a century before Thoreau moved to the woods, Walden had harbored the outcasts and cast-offs of the village – freed slaves, drunkards, and, a little later, the shanty Irish. Concord historian F. B. Sanborn records, 'It is curious that the neighborhood of Walden . . . was anciently a place of dark repute, home of pariahs and lawless characters, such as fringed the garment of many a New England village in Puritanic times.'" Blanding, "Historic Walden Woods," 7–10. The Sanborn quote comes from the early Thoreau biography, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, *Henry D. Thoreau* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, 1882), 202.

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The first of the people whose ruined homes Thoreau describes is Cato.

East of my bean-field, across the road, lived Cato Ingraham, slave of Duncan Ingraham, Esquire, gentleman of Concord village; who built his slave a house, and gave him permission to live in Walden Woods; – Cato, not Uticensis, but Concordiensis. Some say that he was a Guinea Negro. There are a few who remember his little patch among the walnuts, which he let grow up till he should be old and need them; but a younger and whiter speculator got them at last. He too, however, occupies an equally narrow house at present. Cato's half-obliterated cellar hole still remains, though known to few, being concealed from the traveller by a fringe of pines. It is now filled with the smooth sumach, (*Rhus glabra*,) and one of the earliest species of goldenrod (*Solidago stricta*) grows there luxuriantly.

(XIV, 2)

Three things about this passage are important to note. First, one of the key features of the description has to do with what Cato did in order to live independently. He prepared for his old age (and presumably his current nutritional needs) by growing walnut trees. The text does not make clear whether the walnuts were for food and barter or for lumber, but it was likely both. Walnuts provided important protein and the wood is precious as lumber; it would have made sense for Cato to plan to harvest the trees in his old age.³³ Second, though Cato planned to live independently in Concord through his old age, he never enjoyed the financial proceeds of his labors. “A younger and whiter speculator got them at last.” Though the phrase “narrow house” had been used by Thoreau in “Economy” to describe a grave, and therefore might suggest that Thoreau was referring to an unidentified though now dead person, I suspect that the “younger and

³³ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 148.

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whiter speculator” was Thoreau, who quite proudly occupied a narrow house himself during his time at Walden, and often used ironic financial puns, like “speculator,” to describe his own activities. If the walnuts were for lumber in Cato's old age, and Thoreau was the younger, whiter speculator, then Cato's walnuts – tended in his lifetime both for food and as a financial investment – wound up serving the society of Walden in Thoreau's period.³⁴ The third thing to note is that the end of the paragraph describes the remains of Cato's house as a ruin being overtaken by plants. There is the “half-obliterated cellar hole” obscured from view by the pines and filled with sumach and goldenrod. These three features – first what Cato did to live independently, second the sense in which the plan did not work out, and third the description of his former home as a ruin – unite Thoreau's descriptions of the first two former inhabitants, first Cato and next Zilpha.

Here, by the corner of my field, still nearer to town, Zilpha, a colored woman, had her little house, where she spun linen for the townsfolk, making the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing, for she had a loud and notable voice. At length, in the war of 1812, her dwelling was set on fire by English soldiers, prisoners on parole, when she was away, and her cat and dogs and hens were all burned up together. She led a hard life, and somewhat inhumane. One old frequenter of these woods remembers, that as he passed her house one noon he heard her muttering to herself over her gurgling pot, – “Ye are all bones, bones!” I have seen bricks amid the oak copse there.

(XIV, 3)

³⁴ I thank one of the anonymous reviewers from the Press for pointing out that Cato may have cultivated the walnuts as lumber and thus that their being handed down to Thoreau – the younger, whiter speculator – makes them members of the society of Walden Woods I am describing.

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Like Cato, Zilpha worked to provide for herself, spinning “linen for the townsfolk,” and keeping chickens. Nonetheless, her soup was made mostly of bones, and her life was hard, “inhumane” even. Her house and livelihood were destroyed by presumably white arsonists.³⁵ And now, in Thoreau's time, all that is left is some bricks amid the oak copse, a ruin among the plants that grow around it.³⁶ Zilpha of Walden Woods also shared a name with Zilpha Elaw, one of a number of early nineteenth-century Black women who defied race and gender hierarchies to preach the Christian gospel.³⁷ Thoreau could have been alluding to this other Zilpha, as he might have known Zilpha Elaw from her preaching or her autobiography, *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, and Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour*, which was published in 1846.

Next, Thoreau describes Zilpha's brother Brister and his wife Fenda.

³⁵ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 167.

³⁶ The figure of the ruin was central to the poetics of the Renaissance, as a figure for the absorption of the past in the making of the future. Andrew Hui, *The Poetics of Ruins in Renaissance Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016). Describing the ruins of the former village, I think Thoreau is playing with those representations as he so often does, offering a particularly American form of a European classic.

³⁷ According to Eddie Glaude, preachers like Elaw “challenged directly the idea that the Gospel was the possession of men. Their witness inspired others as they openly rejected – as they preached the word of God – assumptions about the inferiority of black women.” Eddie S. Glaude, *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 46. Womanist theology appeals to their examples. According to Mitzi Smith, Zilpha Elaw and other Black women preachers “named, defined, and legitimized [their experience] as Black women called to preach.” Mitzi Smith, “‘Unbossed and Unbought’: Zilpha Elaw and Old Elizabeth and a Political Discourse of Origins,” *Black Theology* 9, no. 3 (June 22, 2011): 287–311.

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Down the road, on the right hand, on Brister's Hill, lived Brister Freeman, "a handy Negro," slave of Squire Cummings once, – there where grow still the apple-trees which Brister planted and tended; large old trees now, but their fruit still wild and ciderish to my taste. Not long since I read his epitaph in the old Lincoln burying-ground, a little on one side, near the unmarked graves of some British grenadiers who fell in the retreat from Concord, – where he is styled "Sippio Brister," – Scipio Africanus he had some title to be called, – "a man of color," as if he were discolored. It also told me, with staring emphasis, when he died; which was but an indirect way of informing me that he ever lived. With him dwelt Fenda, his hospitable wife, who told fortunes, yet pleasantly, – large, round, and black, blacker than any of the children of night, such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord before or since.

(XIV, 4)

Thoreau's description elided two different Bristers: Brister Freeman of Concord, who had lived at Walden, and Brister Sippio of Lincoln whose grave Thoreau had seen.³⁸ One thing the two Bristers had in common was the burden of their blackness. Racial violence was commonplace in Concord.³⁹

³⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffery S. Cramer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 249 n20.

³⁹ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 160–71. The story of one attack is told with chilling nonchalance in the memoir of Peter Wheeler in Edward Waldo Emerson, *The Centennial of the Social Circle in Concord: March 21, 1882* (Riverside Press, 1882), 140–41.

"Mr. Wheeler once had a most ferocious bull to kill. He and his men succeeded with some difficulty in getting the animal into his slaughter-house. They were afraid, however, to go in and encounter his fury, and, while outside conferring upon the safest mode of proceeding, Brister Freeman, the celebrated negro, happened along. Wheeler, giving his men the wink, inquired very affectionately after Brister's health, and told him if he would go into the slaughter-house and get an axe, he should have a little job to do. Brister never suspected mischief, at once opened the door and walked in, when it was quietly shut upon him, and the appalled negro found himself face to face with the enraged bull. It was already a 'case of fight or die,' and after sundry minuets about the house, the celerity of which would have established even a French dancing-master, Brister fortunately spied the axe he had been sent in for, and, seizing it, commenced belaboring his

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Another thing the two Bristers had in common was their name. Cato and Brister's names both carried deep significance. Enslaved people were often given names from ancient Greek and Roman history (as Cato had been) or named after places. Brister's name was a common name given to enslaved men in the north, one that carried with it a bitter history. Bristol was England's largest slave port, and "Brister" was a variant of the name of that city.⁴⁰ Brister had likely been named after the port in which he had been traded as property.

The former inhabitants, the remains of whose households Thoreau describes, had been part of a small community that had mostly disappeared before Thoreau ever went to the woods. Brister Freeman's grandson, John Freeman, was the last descendent of a person formerly enslaved in Concord and settled in the small village in Walden Woods to die there, which he did soon after his grandfather in 1822.⁴¹ "An Irishman, Hugh Quoil" was the last human inhabitant of Walden Woods before Thoreau, and he died soon after Thoreau moved to the woods (XIV, 11).

adversary, giving him a blow here and there as he had opportunity. All this while stood Peter and his men watching through the dry knot-holes the valiant exploits of Brister, and cheering him on with the most encouraging roars of laughter. Fortune at length decided in favor of the negro; he laid the bull dead upon the floor, and casting down his weapon of fight, came forth unharmed. But imagine the amazement of his tormentors when at length he emerged, no longer the dim, sombre negro he was when he entered, but literally white with terror, and what was once his wool, standing up straight like so many pokers, they could hardly persuade themselves to believe it was Brister; but without waiting for them to identify him, or receive their congratulations for the notable manner in which he had sustained himself, the affrighted and indignant negro turned his back upon them and departed."

Sanborn's biography, published the same year, describes the same occasion. Sanborn, *Henry D. Thoreau*, 206–7.

⁴⁰ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 17.

⁴¹ Other formerly enslaved people and their descendants lived in other parts of Concord until the late nineteenth century. Lemire, 171–73.

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It is not a coincidence that many, though not all, of the inhabitants of Walden Woods in the generation before Thoreau had been free Black people. People were enslaved in Concord from its founding in 1635 until after the Revolution. One contemporary scholar, herself a child of Concord, was motivated to tell the history of Concord slavery by the fact that even after a surge in studies of Northern slavery, most books about Concord continued to be “more or less about the town’s role as the cradle of liberty and literature,” almost never acknowledging that “enslaved men and women helped to build what would become New England’s most storied town.”⁴² Thoreau’s oral histories of Cato, Zilpha, Brister, and Fenda recorded a Concord that included Black people who had been enslaved in Concord, and in which their continued presence was usually unwelcome by whites except in continued service to white residents in exchange for subsistence.

In the awkward transition from slavery to freedom around the time of the American Revolution, many newly free people understandably chose lives very similar to the ones they lived under slavery. But a few courageous new citizens – some of whom had fought in the Revolution in place of their enslavers – chose to leave lives of domestic service and make their way on their own, to live independently. Because newly free people were usually unable to purchase land, “the abandoned slaves were permitted by their former owners to squat locally, but only on the most out-of-the-way, infertile places.”⁴³ Thus, one of the things we know about the

⁴² Lemire, 9. A contemporary museum, The Robbins House, works to raise awareness of the African, African American, and anti-slavery history of Concord from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. See <https://robbinshouse.org/about/> (accessed August 20, 2020).

⁴³ Lemire, 10.

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formerly enslaved people who settled at Walden Pond – among them Cato, Zilpha, Brister, and Fenda – was that they refused the new wage economy, in which they would have exchanged labor for wages (or, more likely, subsistence).

Rather than continuing to live by service to others, these courageous people made the difficult decision to eke out an unsteady and harassed, but independent, living on the shores of Walden Pond. There they established a community that endured for four decades (between approximately 1782 and 1822) and at its height seems to have included around fifteen formerly enslaved Black people and some poor white people. Thoreau called it a small village. Brister owned his own land for a time, until he sold it to Rachel Le Grosse, a white widow with whom he commenced a relationship after Fenda died. Because his marriage to Rachel would have been illegal under Massachusetts law, he likely sold Rachel the land as an assurance for her future should he die.⁴⁴ Indeed, she sold the land the year after his death.⁴⁵ That place, Brister's Hill just north of Walden Pond, still bears his name. Brister's sister, Zilpha, lived independently for forty years, "a feat matched by no other Concord woman of her day."⁴⁶

Walden Woods was not the only such place. Other sites on the outskirts of Concord had also been home to communities of formerly enslaved people and others who were unwelcome in the village. Many such places, where newly free people formed their own communities, often with others who were unwelcome in town, have become – like Walden Woods and the site of Negro Fort near Apalachicola that I discussed in the Preface – icons of wilderness. As Lemire writes, "The history of slavery and its aftermath reveals that at least some of our

⁴⁴ Lemire, 163 ⁴⁵ Lemire, 170–71. ⁴⁶ Lemire, 137.

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nation's cherished green spaces began as black spaces, with Walden Woods a particularly striking case in point."⁴⁷ Lemire doesn't elaborate the point, but two other examples begin to fill out this pattern.⁴⁸ Contemporary archeological work in Central Park has investigated a community there, Seneca Village, that was razed to build the park.⁴⁹ Central Park is now, of course, one of the most famous green spaces in the United States. The Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina, part of which is now a National Wildlife Refuge, was famous as a refuge for people who escaped enslavement and formed new lives for themselves.⁵⁰ And of

⁴⁷ Lemire, 12.

⁴⁸ There are so many individual examples, it seems like there ought to be a book about the pattern. I have not found one. I hope someone else is working on this.

⁴⁹ Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, and Cynthia Copeland, "Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City," *Historical Archaeology* 42, 1 (2008): 97–107. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 356–57.

⁵⁰ Thoreau probably alluded to this when he wrote in "Walking": "When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place,—a *sanctum santorum*." It would have also been an allusion to Longfellow's 1842 poem "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp." Harriet Beecher Stowe went on to set her second novel, published in 1856, in the Great Dismal Swamp: *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. On the history of formerly enslaved people in the Great Dismal Swamp see Ted Maris-Wolf, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Maroon Life and Labor in Virginia's Dismal Swamp," *Slavery & Abolition* 34, 3 (September 1, 2013): 446–64; Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (Gainesville, FL: Society for Historical Archaeology, 2014). Shannon Mariotti writes about Thoreau's attraction to swamps, but misses his likely interest in swamp habitation. Shannon L. Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity*, Studies in American Thought and Culture (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 141–42. See also Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands*. For a general treatment of the place of swamps in the nineteenth-century imaginary, see David Miller, *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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course all of these places had been first dispossessed from the First Nations who occupied them before European settlement.⁵¹

Thoreau moved to the Pond twenty-five years after Zilpha's death in 1820. He was inspired by the heroism of these 'former inhabitants.' He was drawn for this reason to the neighborhood they had occupied, and they were among the community of spirit he joined while in the woods. Describing the former inhabitants' importance to Thoreau, Lemire writes, "Their experiences after emancipation were one reason Thoreau was drawn to live in Walden Woods himself. He regarded the former slaves' persistence in the face of isolation and harassment as heroic, and like them he sought to live independently."⁵² This is one of the main reasons to think that Thoreau was drawn to Walden Woods for social reasons; he sought a community from which he could learn to live well, a community of exemplars.⁵³

To the extent that Thoreau was drawn to Walden Woods by exemplars, my interpretation also complicates Alfred Tauber's claim that Thoreau created the following individualist myth: "We each potentially possess the heroic ability to elevate our respective lives by conscious effort, by deliberate

⁵¹ Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵² Lemire, *Black Walden*, 1.

⁵³ I thank Andre Willis for drawing my attention to Neil Roberts's work on the import of such communities to contemporary political philosophy. Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Roberts argues that "Revolutionary slaves possessed their own political imaginary, an imaginary with its own notions of reason and freedom that developed during the process of struggle against a form of slavery" (21). These notions constitute "theories of freedom from modernity's underside" (21). Roberts elaborates them with more insight and depth than I am capable of. My point is just to say that Thoreau may have been appealing to such theories of freedom in his moving to the woods.

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moral choice.”⁵⁴ Thoreau did make a choice to join the society he found at Walden Woods. It was a heroic effort to surround himself with the spiritual community that would help him improve, and to try to keep something of that community's spirit alive in his period. But he didn't think that he could do it alone. He relied on the community at Walden Woods to elevate his life.

My interpretation of Thoreau's going to Walden to seek society is also supported by the frame Thoreau gives the passage on former inhabitants. The passage comes directly after one of the most moving images of Thoreau's two years in the woods. He writes that when he got a woodstove in his second winter to replace the fireplace he used in his first, “I felt as if I had lost a companion. You can always see a face in the fire” (XIII, 19). The stove is a better technology, it burns less fuel, but it's also less companionable. Having the fire shut up in the stove, where you cannot see it, doesn't provide the same kind of company as watching the flames would. This passage about the fire is followed immediately by the chapter “Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors.” Instead of the fire, Thoreau says, “For human society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods” (XIV, 1). I take it that he is not being coy when he calls this conjuring a provision of society. The face in the fire was a real loss; just so, the former inhabitants – like the elderly dame and old settler of “Solitude” – are real company. This impression is deepened in the tenderness with which Thoreau describes the former habitations of the people he has for company on winter nights.

What a sorrowful act must that be, – the covering up of wells!
coincident with the opening of wells of tears. These cellar dents,

⁵⁴ Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 9.

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like deserted fox burrows, old holes, are all that is left where once were the stir and bustle of human life and “fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute,” in some form and dialect or other were by turns discussed. But all I can learn of their conclusions amounts to just this, that “Cato and Brister pulled wool”; which is about as edifying as the history of more famous schools of philosophy.

(XIV, 12)

Here, Thoreau expresses sympathy with the loss of the community that had existed before him. He expresses respect for its inhabitants, who were philosophers surely. And when he writes that “all I can learn of their conclusions...” he expresses regret about the problem Lemire came to confront in writing about the formerly enslaved people of Concord – the historical sources on the community at Walden Woods are so thin (though not as thin as most books about Concord would make you think).⁵⁵ All of this suggests Thoreau's love for those former inhabitants whose homes welcomed his visits with lilacs, even if they were gone.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ The line about pulling wool is apparently a piece of wordplay and a reference to a job that Brister and Cato likely did to earn meat. “Pulling wool referred to a black man pulling his forelock in deference to passing white folks, a way of tipping an imaginary hat. And yet the former slaves may have only acted deferential as a means of covering their tracks or pulling the wool over local people's eyes, making it difficult to know precisely what they did and thought. But even as Henry is indulging his love of word play here, he also means simply that Cato and Brister pulled wool from sheep carcasses for the local slaughtering industry, which grew in Concord from one slaughterhouse in 1791 to eleven in 1801.” Lemire, *Black Walden*, 137.

⁵⁶ Other readings are, of course, possible. Timothy Powell suggests that Thoreau's treatment of these figures is ambivalent, in that it both insists on the inclusion of Black history in contexts that often ignored it and erases contemporary Black communities of Thoreau's period. “On the one hand, Thoreau's image of the ‘covering up of wells’ and ‘the opening of wells of tears’ is a beautifully crafted metaphor of the reservoir of black sorrow that lies hidden beneath the discursive landscape of white ‘history,’ from which African Americans have been excluded.

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Concord lore in Thoreau's time was that the spirits of these people, particularly Zilpha, still occupied the woods.⁵⁷ In *Walden* Thoreau receives visitors "thought to be dead" and "invisible to most persons" more than once. In our time, not everyone believes that the spirits of the dead live on among us, but to de-people them from the pages of history is a mistake.⁵⁸ The spirits of Cato, Zilpha, Brister, and Fenda, along with the other members of Walden Woods' society – human and animal, vegetable and mineral – were Thoreau's social community and best teachers. Thoreau's insistence that the others in the woods have social standing is part of what I mean by his "nature piety." He thought that due reverence for the woods included reverence for the heroic ones who had lived there before him.

At the same time, Thoreau's descriptions of the former inhabitants also traffic in racialized representations that were part of unfolding patterns of racial thinking in New England. These patterns had themselves developed through the experience of gradual emancipation of which Cato, Zilpha, Brister, and Fenda had been a part. Joanne Pope Melish has argued that the experience of gradual emancipation in New England was central to the formation of ideas about race in eighteenth-

And yet, on the other hand, his insinuation that this revelation can occur only 'when the last of the race departed' implicitly suggests that blacks have somehow already disappeared." Timothy B. Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 88. Without disputing the horrendous habit of erasure of non-white persons from white-dominated US society, I think Thoreau's reference to when the "last of the race departed" was likely specific to the community in Walden Woods, for which Thoreau had particular piety, rather than the whole of the North as Powell seems to assume.

⁵⁷ Lemire, *Black Walden*, 3.

⁵⁸ The scholar of American religious history Robert Orsi has tried to grapple with how current historical practice should handle such phenomena. Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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and nineteenth-century New England. Melish's main object is to undermine a mythology in which New England is viewed as historically free and white, an ahistorical pattern of thought she refers to as "New England nationalism." New England was constructed, in this understanding, as "the antithesis of an enslaved south."⁵⁹ In the process, white Northerners developed "a public narrative in which the history of the relations between whites and people of color is rarely if ever glimpsed."⁶⁰ Melish argues that Northern "race" was invented during the period of gradual emancipation amid whites' uncertainty about the reasons for enslavement. "Whites' need to resolve post-Revolutionary uncertainty over susceptibility to enslavement and eligibility for citizenship provided a political justification for emerging scientific notions of 'race.'"⁶¹ "New England whites 'racialized' themselves and people of color in response to concerns about citizenship and autonomy posed by emancipation and post-Revolutionary dislocation."⁶² The way in which people in Concord felt unsettled by the freedom achieved by Cato, Zilpha, Brister, and Fenda thus also probably contributed to what they would have said about them when they gossiped with Thoreau in town.

Some of the gossip Thoreau reports refers to racialized tropes, and it is difficult to discern (as in so many other places in the book) where Thoreau participates in the tropes he deploys and where he contests them. He is frequently doing both. For example, he reports in significant detail what he heard about the various physical features of these people, especially their coloring, which is not a trait he usually describes. When Thoreau reported that people said Cato

⁵⁹ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), xiv.

⁶⁰ Melish, 10. ⁶¹ Melish, 6. ⁶² Melish, 5.

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was a "Guinea Negro," he likely referred to a usage that indicated Cato had been born in Africa, but the people Thoreau was quoting may also have been describing Cato's coloring, as "Guinea Negro" was sometimes used to describe people of so-called mixed ancestry. When Thoreau described Zilpha, he wrote she was "a colored woman." He wrote that Brister was "a man of color." In the case of Brister, however, Thoreau seems to find the phrase somewhat bizarre; he follows his usage of it with the aside, "as if he were discolored," which I take to imply a criticism of the usage itself. The "as if" insists that Brister's color was entirely wholesome.

Perhaps Thoreau's interest in a more accurate description of color, rather than the euphemistic and vaguely insulting "man of color," was part of what motivated his description of Fenda who was, according to Thoreau's reports of what he heard, "large, round, and black, blacker than any of the children of night, such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord before or since." But while Thoreau may have intended his description as a mark of respect, given that the rising of the sun was one of the main symbols of spiritual awakening in the book, his intense focus on Fenda's physical description marks her, and all of the formerly enslaved people he describes, as different from – for instance – the woodchopper, whose description does focus on his physical traits, but to much different effect. The description of Fenda as a "dusky orb" troubles me in particular. Still, when I look for poetic precedents of the term, I find many in books Thoreau could have read (though I have no evidence that he did): Petrarch's "Triumph of Time;"⁶³ "Ossian's

⁶³ Francesco Petrarca, *The Triumphs of Petrarch* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 193.

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Apostrophe to the Sun,” published in the *American Reader* of 1820;⁶⁴ John Dryden's *Oedipus: A Tragedy*.⁶⁵ Like Thoreau's other portraits of these formerly enslaved people, his description of Fenda may participate in what Eric Lott described in his landmark history of minstrelsy *Love and Theft* as a “mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation.”⁶⁶ My own appeal to these figures as Thoreau's heroes may participate in a similar dynamic.⁶⁷

New England nationalism, idealized white abolitionist histories, and the general tendency in nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography to obscure the ongoing relations between whites and people of color hide one of the most important facts of US American history: African Americans enacted their own freedom. One piece of that long history has been told recently in Martha Jones's *Birthright Citizens*, where she argues that the actions of Black Americans – “petitioning, litigating, and actions in the streets – are a record of how people with limited access to legal authority won rights by acting like rights-bearing people. They secured citizenship by comporting themselves like citizens.”⁶⁸ In the Civil Rights

⁶⁴ John Hubbard, *The American Reader Containing a Selection of Narration, Harangues, Addresses, Orations, Dialogues, Odes, Hymns, Poems, &c.* (Bellows Falls: Bill Blake & Co., 1820), 187.

⁶⁵ John Dryden, *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Walter Scott, vol. 6 (London: James Ballantyne and Co. Edinburgh, n.d.), 152.

⁶⁶ Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

⁶⁷ I have become especially attentive to the way in which I may be doing something like this since reading “Coda: Some of Us Are Tired” in Jennifer Nash's *Black Feminism Reimagined*, where she describes and criticizes a contemporary “vision of black women as the saviors of American political life.” Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 134.

⁶⁸ Martha S. Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 10.

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Act of 1866, "free men and women of color likely recognized the claims they had already long been pressing."⁶⁹

Some readers fail to see Walden Woods as the alternative place of social life that it was, a place where freedoms that were not yet secure were nonetheless enacted by people without sufficient protections from the nation they inhabited. When those readers forget or suppress that story, they may be doing it because of their failure to understand free Black society as real society. Like New England nationalism, like histories that attribute civil rights gains to growing enlightenment of elites rather than to the work of those coalitions that won the political gains required, the erasure of society from Walden Woods is, bluntly, a feature of white supremacy. It is a problem that has afflicted Thoreau's reception ever since.

This will not be surprising to many US historians. The important point for my purposes here is to point out that the excision from US history of the village Thoreau described distorted interpretations of *Walden*. Readmitting the members of Walden Woods to the story of social life there ought to transform our understanding of Thoreau's experiment and of his book.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that rather than departing from society when he went to Walden, Thoreau was invested in a neighborhood while he lived at the Pond. By this I mean that he cultivated relationships with a broad array of creatures and other beings. We get the mistaken impression of his departing society when we make two characteristic mistakes that

⁶⁹ Jones, 14.

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Thoreau's writing challenges: first when we think of "the village" as the center of all sociality, and second when we constrict our understanding of social actors to the particular class to which Thoreau belonged. Thoreau challenges both of these assumptions. First, in response to the view that the village is the center of social life, Thoreau raised a conceptual problem – what we take to be the center of anything depends on where we are and what we think is important. We can make a perspectival switch, and take ourselves to be part of a different field. Such a change in perspective will also, often, transform our understanding of who counts as members of our society. Which leads to the second point. In response to the view that sociality belonged only to the class of which Thoreau was a part, Thoreau insisted that every being participates in social life: frogs, birds, trees, winds, rains, but also foreigners, outsiders, and even the now-dead. His perspectival shift integrated into his society figures otherwise viewed as "outcasts." In this way I have argued that Thoreau's life in the woods was a social life. In the next chapter, I shall argue that Thoreau's cultivation of relationships with the other inhabitants of the woods formed the ground for his political activity.