THOREAU'S RELIGION

Thoreau's Religion presents a ground-breaking interpretation of Henry David Thoreau's most famous book, *Walden*. Rather than treating Walden Woods as a lonely wilderness, Balthrop-Lewis demonstrates that Thoreau's ascetic life was a form of religious practice dedicated to cultivating a just, multispecies community. The book makes an important contribution to scholarship in religious studies, political theory, English, environmental studies, and critical theory by offering the first sustained reading of Thoreau's religiously motivated politics. In Balthrop-Lewis's vision, practices of renunciation like Thoreau's can contribute to the reformation of social and political life.

In this, the book transforms Thoreau's image, making him a vital source for a world beset by inequality and climate change. Balthrop-Lewis argues for an environmental politics in which ecological flourishing is impossible without economic and social justice.

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— Cornel West, Professor of the Practice of Public Philosophy, Harvard University

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Thoreau's Religion

Walden Woods, Social Justice, and the Politics of Asceticism

Alda Balthrop-Lewis

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To Anat Benzvi

a writing partner
who provides wisdom and whimsy
in all the right measures

The reason why an ingenious soul shuns society, is to the end of finding society. It repudiates the false, out of love for the true.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Literary Ethics"

Contents

Preface

I care about people and their flourishing. I care about the places we live and the other things that live in those places, and about the relationship between us and the places we live. I care about growing things and making things. I care about walking, and trees. I want to follow Jesus and I think that the gospel teaches a preferential option for the poor, which just means that the poor have a special relationship to God, and that all people, but especially those with privileges, should prioritize the wellbeing of the poor. I care about communities, and about building communities in which people are supported, loved, and provided the freedom to live as they like. I care about building a future for humans in which our greatest goods are valued: our love for one another, our capacity for learning, our differences from one another.

And I also care about books. One of the books that I love is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*.

I like it because it is funny, and beautiful, and weird. It is hard. I like it because it is about people and the places they live and the relationships they have to other people. I like that it doesn't hide how cranky it is. I like that it shows me something about how much is possible outside of what I expect. I like that it doesn't seem to hide its weird messy bits, its contradictions and vices.

One of the places in the world that I love most of all is a region on the Gulf of Mexico, on the Panhandle of Florida, where I grew up, where my mother now lives and where my father farmed clams. It is an extraordinary place, one of the

biodiversity hotspots of North America, full of forests, rivers, marshes, and estuaries that host teeming ecosystems. It attracts people who care about and enjoy such things, and it is beautiful.

This place I love also has a fascinating, mostly forgotten, important history. Because of its geographical position, the British built a fort on the Apalachicola River in the last year of the war of 1812, in what was then Spanish Florida. They made alliances there with Indigenous people who lived in the region or had fled there from Alabama – especially Red Stick Creek and Seminole. They also collaborated with free Black people including some free citizens of Spanish Florida (where there was not slavery) and some formerly enslaved people who had fled to Spanish Florida from enslavement in the United States.[1] The British distributed arms and ammunitions

[1] As this manuscript is being copyedited, there is an important, ongoing debate about race and typography. The question is about whether to capitalize the words "black" and "white" when they are used to refer to a person's race or ethnicity. Until recently, many style guides have suggested they should be downcased. However, in 2020 several major style guides changed their practice in response to the Movement for Black Lives. Some people still argue that neither should be capitalized, because to do so would be to naturalize race, when racialization is a historical process that has often been used as a tool of domination. Others argue that Black (with a capital letter) as a racial and ethnic adjective is the appropriate way to describe Black Americans who identify as such, and whose longer ethnic histories were violently obscured by enslavement. Among those who capitalize Black, some think that "white" as a racial description should stay downcased, because it is not claimed as an ethnic identity in the same way except by white supremacists. Others argue that both Black and White should be capitalized, since Black is claimed as an identity by Black people, but is not a natural fact and was always in historical relationship to White identity. According to this view, capitalizing White shows up whiteness as a socially constructed racial identity, when it often otherwise remains normalized and invisible, conferring undue advantages on White people.

I want my typographical choices to show that I consider racialization a historical process that has been used as both a tool of domination and of resistance, that this historical process has real effects in social life and politics, and that I respect the self-identifications of Black people and admire their contributions to American life. With respect for many who disagree on this question and without a standardized consensus, I have chosen to capitalize "Black" and leave "white" downcased when

among their allies in the region, and when they withdrew in 1815, after learning of the end of the War of 1812, they left the fort under the control of their Indigenous and Black allies. Most of the Indigenous people returned to the places that they had lived before, but the Black British allies remained at the fort, cleared land along the river for farming, and established a growing community in freedom.[2] A Creek observer named William McGirt wrote, in the summer of 1815: "They Keep Sentry & the Negroes are Saucy & insolent, and say they are all Free."[3] I find these "saucy," "insolent" people deeply admirable. They enacted their own freedom.

This community of free Black people was only about 60 miles down the river from Georgia, where 105,218 people were reported enslaved by 1810.[4] The place was called "Negro Fort" in the press, and it was seen by some US citizens

used as racial descriptions. My sense is that the process of white people meaningfully reckoning with the history of whiteness remains nascent, and capitalizing the word in advance of white people learning our racial history is unlikely to be an effective means of carrying out that reckoning. One useful source with respect to the history of whiteness is Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York, NY: Norton, 2010).

[2] The first book-length work on this community is Nathaniel Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). "The process of comparing Prospect Bluff with other maroon settlements provides a rare glimpse into how a community of successful North American slave rebels might choose to live, when entirely on their own terms. The comparative method demonstrates how full and remarkable a version of freedom had been achieved at Prospect Bluff" (Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff*, 98). See also, Matthew J. Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola: Fugitive Slaves on the Atlantic and Southern Frontiers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 39–61. "It was the largest maroon colony of fugitive slaves in the history of the territory that would become the United States" (Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 40).

[3] Quoted in Clavin, *Aiming for Pensacola*, 52.

[4] The figure comes from census data reported in John Cummings, "Negro Population in the United States 1790–1915" (US Census Bureau, 1918), 57, www.census.gov/library/publications/1918/dec/negro-population-1790-1915.html (accessed August 20, 2020).

and politicians as a threat to the United States. Southern enslavers complained that the community served as a beacon for people escaping enslavement. Clavin writes that "according to one U.S. Army lieutenant, 'their numbers were increasing daily.'"[5] So one year after the British withdrawal, in July of 1816 when the inhabitations and gardens of the settlement stretched for 50 miles along the river, the US military surrounded the fort both on land and on the river and demanded the surrender of the 300–400 free people who were sheltered inside. The occupants refused to surrender, raised the English Jack, and defended the fort for days. Eventually, a shot from US gunboats on the river hit the gunpowder magazine and caused a massive explosion. That explosion killed many of the people inside the fort. The site of the fort and that deadly explosion is now located within what is seen as pristine national forest, the historic markers (which use the current name "Fort Gadsden") are rarely visited, and the story of the free Black people who grew gardens and fought to maintain their home is largely forgotten by the tourists who come to paddle the river. Kayaking is big.

At the beginning of my academic career, I thought my research would treat that place, whose ecology and history I loved. I planned an ethnographic project about the way people think about environmental ethics on a local level there. I went to work learning about ethnographic methods, and I spent time in Apalachicola doing fieldwork: attending local government meetings, learning about environmental activism, going out on the water with fishermen, and getting to know scientists who study the bay on which the town is located. That topic seemed to me rich and deep and ethically complicated. It also seemed that to do it well I would need to work on it for a long time. It occurred to me that a first book should be a project you can finish, not one that you can imagine working on for the rest of your life.

[5] Clavin, 52.

So I switched courses, and decided to write first about a book, *Walden*, and about a dead white man rather than a living, struggling community. Because I think Thoreau is endlessly compelling, this didn't feel like a loss, exactly, more like something I needed to do first. Needed to do now. A way of getting to know myself, and practice for everything else. But there have been days when it was hard to see how the work I was doing on these nineteenth-century Yankee texts was related to the place I started out caring about.

Then, one day, deep in the middle of this project, something amazing happened. It doesn't happen often, at least not to me, but I guess every now and then when we're lucky the fates can send us a sign that we're in the place we're supposed to be, doing what we're supposed to be doing. That day I was reading in Thoreau's *Journal* from the summer of 1845, the summer he went to live at Walden. And it was as if the parts of my life that sometimes seemed remote from one another were coming together in a way I could not yet explain. Just beginning to settle in to his life at the Pond, Thoreau wrote,

> And earlier today came 5 Lestrigones – Railroad men who take care of the road, some of them at least. They still represent the bodies of men – transmitting arms and legs – and bowels downward from those remote days to more remote. They have some got a rude wisdom withal – thanks to their dear experience. And one with them a handsome younger man – a sailor Greek like man – says "Sir I like your notions – I think I shall live so my self Only I should like a wilder country – where there is more game. I have been among the Indians near Apallachecola I have lived with them, I like your kind of life – Good-day I wish you success and happiness."[6]

[6] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume 2: *1842–1848*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 160–61.

Thoreau recorded his encounter with the railroad men at work in Walden Woods in his usual, playful way, likening them to ancient Greek "Lestrigones" who had appeared in Homer's *Odyssey*, and praising the wisdom they had gained by experience. Then he quoted one of them, one who seems to have been a kindred spirit: "Sir I like your notions." It is fun to imagine what Thoreau said his notions were to elicit this response. Did he say, "I have come to the woods to live deliberately"? Did he say, "I want to see how little I can live on"? Did he say, "I love the wild, and I want to live among it"? But then, and this was what took me aback, the railroad man had been to Apalachicola! He had lived with the "Indians" there, in a "wilder country." He thought it would be an even better place to live than Walden Woods, and he told Thoreau so. I grew up with legends of old Indian tracks through the woods, grew up looking for arrowheads on the beach, grew up trekking out to see middens made of the shells of oysters and clams, just some of the "game" the Indigenous people lived on, evidence of the societies who loved the place before we settlers came. And here, in Thoreau's *Journal*, was a railroad man who had lived with them.

Because of Apalachicola's role as a port, it is not so surprising that railroad men in Concord would have been there. But to find that Thoreau wrote about the fact that they had, startled me. I jumped up, shouting. It gave me comfort, somehow, in the middle of a project I sometimes struggled to believe in, to find the Panhandle I loved in its earlier, wilder shape on those pages.

I think it made me feel that somehow, in some way I do not yet know, my life does hang together in all its half-formed pieces. The work I do is sometimes so interdisciplinary I have the feeling it will all fall apart, that the center cannot hold. This is a temptation. When I have it, I remember that Annie Dillard wrote:

> You take it on faith that the multiform and variously lighted latitudes and longitudes were part of one world, that you didn't drop chopped from house to house, coast to coast, life to life, but in some once comprehensible way moved there, a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time . . .[7]

When I am sitting elsewhere, writing, in Chicago or New Jersey or, now, in Australia, on Wurundjeri Country, and I remember how far from home, from the "wilder country" that I love, I am, I try to remember Dillard's faith. You take it on faith, she says, that the parts belong – somehow – together, in one world. And at the same time, I think, you have to remember that no matter how many parts there seem to be, there is only one you holding them together. You have to know who that is to tell us the story of your moving elsewhere "a city block at a time, a highway mile at a time, a degree of latitude and longitude at a time."

I want to write toward a wide, beautiful, complicated, suffering world. This work deals with issues related to race, religion, class, and environment. Writing about these things, I have discovered some complicated linguistic issues about how I identify myself with respect to that world, those races, religions, classes, places, beauty, and suffering. When I describe white people, or Black people, or poor people, or rich people, or Indigenous people, or people who live in places that suffer, or the pious ones, do I say "they"? "We"? I am only me. Thoreau wrote at the beginning of *Walden*, "I, on my own side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life" (I, 2).[8] I try to remember that

[7] Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 249.

[8] I give references to Thoreau's *Walden*, "Civil Disobedience," and "Slavery in Massachussetts" in the tradition of Stanley Cavell: "To make my references to *Walden* independent of any particular edition, I shall give citations by chapter and paragraph, roman numerals for the former, arabic for the latter. References to 'Civil Disobedience' are also according to paragraph, preceded by 'CD.'" Stanley

my own life shapes what I see to a large extent, especially when I write about people who are different from me, whose experience I only know distantly. I know I must often get it wrong. Myles Horton – educator for the US civil rights movement – wrote, about "Knowing Yourself,"

> You have to be careful not to think that you're somebody else. I've had to avoid thinking that I'm Nicaraguan or, when I was in India, Indian. I have a tendency to want to identify with people. I have to say to myself, "Look, Horton, get as close to people as you can, have as much interest as you can, but don't get things mixed up. You're white, and black people can't say they are color-blind. Whites and white-controlled institutions always remind them that they're black, so you've got to recognize color." That doesn't mean that you feel superior, it's just that you've got to realize that you can never fully walk in other people's shoes. You can only be a summer soldier, and when the excitement is over, you can go back home. That doesn't mean that you don't have solidarity with black people and aren't accepted; it just means that you have a different role to play.[9]

I'm a woman who grew up with all kinds of privileges, and whose early privileges have only accumulated since. Some of those privileges I am so grateful for; others have made me a smaller, more anxious, less feeling and caring person. In this work I aim to write about the issues I have come to care about, but being careful not to think that I'm somebody else. In this spirit, I identify myself as white in the text that follows, not to feel superior or inferior, but in an effort – an effort still incomplete, I think – to be clear with you and with myself about who I am and the role I mean to play.

Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 4. All references to Thoreau's other writings in this work are given in footnotes to particular editions. In addition, I have retained original punctuation for all Thoreau quotations.

[9] Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), 195.

Acknowledgments

This book began at Princeton University, where I was ably supported by a community of faculty, staff, and students whose joy in scholarship, commitment to transformative pedagogy, and natural collegiality inspired my own optimistic sense of what academic life might be. It was sustained through a visiting appointment at Brown University, where my students' grave suspicion of Thoreau's place in the history of settler colonialism deepened my appreciation for the difficulty of the task I had set myself: to help Thoreau speak to the present. I fear I have not met their challenge, but I trust they will carry the torch themselves. Since then, the book has been given the space, time, and resources it required by the Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry at Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, Australia.

I have discussed material published here with many audiences, and I want to thank them all for their engagement. I should thank Richard Miller especially, for asking a key question about asceticism in 2014. His intervention helped to shape what this book has become. I also want to thank the people I have collaborated with on various conference panels about this material, including Hans-Christoph Askani, Maria Antonaccio, Fannie Bialek, Shira Billet, Steve Bush, David Brakke, Mark Cladis, Sarah Coakley, Daniel Delorme, C.J. Dickson, Emily Dumler, Daniel Fineman, Nicholas Friesner, Brian Hamilton, Carly Lane, Dana Lloyd, Vincent Lloyd, Elizabeth Mazzolini, Raymond Malewitz, Karline McLain,

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Portions of the book have appeared elsewhere in print and I thank the publishers for permission to use the material, which has been significantly rearranged.

- "Thoreau's Woodchopper, Wordsworth's Leech-Gatherer, and the Representation of 'Humble and Rustic Life.'" In *Theology and Ecology across the Disciplines: On Care for Our Common Home*, edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Rebecca Artinian-Kaiser. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
- "Exemplarist Environmental Ethics: Thoreau's Political Asceticism against Solution Thinking." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, 3 (September 2019): 525–50.
- "Active and Contemplative Lives in a Changing Climate: The Emersonian Roots of Thoreau's Political Asceticism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, 2 (May 30, 2019): 311–32.

Many readers have responded to previous versions of this book. Jeffrey Stout read the first draft with tremendous care and helped me imagine it could become something good to read. Mark Cladis, Keri Day, Molly Farneth, Eric Gregory, Martin Kavka, Susannah Ticciati, Cornel West, and the anonymous readers from Cambridge University Press all provided generous written comments. Other readers have included Leora Batnitzky, Anat Benzvi, Shira Billet, Wallace Best, Liane Carlson, Rachel Davies, Jessica Delgado, Emily Dumler-Winckler, Lexi Eikelbloom, Rick Elgendy, Eddie Glaude, Jonathan Gold, Clifton Granby, Joshua Nunziato, Seth Perry, Al Raboteau, Susan Stewart, Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, Judith

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Though I admire people who stay put, as Thoreau did, and I often wish I could do it myself, I belong to a generation and a class whose life consists mostly of coming and going. I have been coming and going from some amazing communities over

the last many years: in Tallahassee and Franklin County, Florida; in Boston; in London; in California; in Italy and environs; in St. Paul, Minnesota; in Chicago; in New Jersey and New York; in Austin, Texas; and in Melbourne, Australia. In those places – and in airports, train stations, and bus depots on the way – I have often received the kindness of strangers, who listened to me talk about this work with interest, and encouraged me by suggesting they might want to read it themselves. To those communities and to those strangers I just want to say: thank you. Many of the virtues of this work were born in my relationships to you.

Family of all kinds have given their good will and hospitality, especially Amara, Al, Sadie, Tate, Sam, and Lucy Hastings. My parents, Mary Balthrop and Van Lewis, encouraged me to read when I was a child. They left me time and space to climb trees and keep notebooks. They taught me that none of us is free until all of us are, and they showed me how to gather your people around you and love them like crazy. Their parents, Ellen and Ed Balthrop and Clifton and George Lewis, taught us all that the heart of the gospel is the call for justice.

Anat Benzvi became my writing partner before I realized it, helped me (every week, sometimes more) through the whole of this project, and continues to remind me that whatever it takes to keep writing is what you have to do. "If in order to write you need … a certain light yellow paper, a certain special pen, a dim light shining from the left, it is useless to tell yourself that just any pen will do, that any paper and any light will suffice."[1] I have dedicated the book to her because it probably would not exist without her, and in any case it would have been a lot less fun.

[1] Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 10.

Acknowledgments

I completed this work halfway around the world from where it began. From the window where I wrote the bulk of it, in Melbourne, Australia, I could see the weather and the children come and go. My thanks to David Newheiser for taking me there. We have cared together (through much contestation!) about many of the ideas presented here, and his presence in my life has shaped every page.

Introduction: Why Thoreau Would Love Environmental Justice

The Book's Aims

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

with and befriended an Indigenous guide. He got to know the poor white people who also lived in the woods. In everyday ways, he tried to get to know what life was like for others.

Eventually, he returned to what he called – with pointed irony – "civilized life." He took up residence as a rent-paying boarder in the Thoreau family home, which functioned as a boarding house. In this way, he benefitted from inherited wealth that has made much of the history of philosophy possible. Transcendentalism, like the first-generation theorists of US democracy, and for that matter like all intellectual life basically since Aristotle, famously relied on inherited wealth. As Bruce Kuklick has written about Transcendentalism, "Cambridge and Boston became the home to America's first 'intellectuals' and, assisted by inherited wealth, an associated genteel literary society."[13] Kuklick's aside about inherited wealth hides a major tension at the heart of intellectual life in an allegedly democratic culture. The tension is between the elite life of the universities and the movements for democratic equality that have unfolded over the last 300 years.

Thoreau's place in this history is as a member of the philosophical elite who had received the advantage of university education and wanted to do something with it that would enrich his life and make the world a little better. Most readers of *Thoreau's Religion* will recognize some form of a similar advantage in their own lives; in whatever form it came to you, with whatever coordinated struggles, some set of fortunate circumstances has given you the education, desire, and time to read this book. You share that, at least, with Thoreau.

[13] Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77.

Asceticism

A major feature of my interpretation of *Walden* is that it represents Thoreau as an ascetic. "Asceticism" names forms of disciplined, religious life often characterized by renunciation. In one of asceticism's characteristic forms, in the lives of Christian monks and nuns, the asceticism is given shape by three vows: of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The vow of poverty entails a renunciation of material wealth. The vow of chastity entails a renunciation most obviously of sexual activity, but also of the often-associated bonds of family. The vow of obedience entails a renunciation of individual autonomy. Even Christians who do not take such vows can practice asceticism – by fasting, for instance, or practicing silent prayer. Different forms of practices like these are prevalent across different religious traditions.

Those who do not practice such asceticism tend to think of it as rather foreign these days. Why would you deny yourself the goods of the world, when they are there for the taking?[14] Perhaps especially in the modern period, and even more certainly in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, such religious renunciation has been seen by many in Western, secular societies with deep suspicion, and the associated religious traditions have witnessed major decline.[15]

[14] Interesting answers to this question are to be found in Ross Posnock, *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Philosophers, and Artists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[15] I am thinking here of examples from the Christian tradition, that I know best. See, for example, Patricia Wittberg, *The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders: A Social Movement Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994). Of course, the coming to light – especially since the early 2000s – of the abuses of Christian churches against their members has not helped the reputation of Christian ascetic practices. I am thinking here especially of the report in 2002 by *The Boston Globe* about sexual abuse in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and the 2013–2017 Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, because those were contexts to which I had attachments in those years.

Modern worries about asceticism are diverse. One is that asceticism is bad for the person who practices it, that the self-denial entailed is unhealthy or damaging in some way. Perhaps, for example, fasting is a religious good, but it expresses a denial of the body that is subjugating.

Another worry, though, is that asceticism is bad for the world. According to this view, all ascetic practice does is offer the practitioner reassurance that she is good, without actually doing good. After all, how on earth would *my* self-denial do *you*, or the community I am a part of, any good? Perhaps those things aren't associated with one another. And to the extent that I convince myself my ascetic practice is good, I excuse myself from the actually good work I could do for my community, and in this way asceticism is a form of quietism. Under this view, asceticism acknowledges that there are problems that need to be addressed, it aims to address them, but it is so ineffective that its ultimate result is support of the status quo. By refusing to engage with the world, ascetics give the world up to the suffering it currently holds.[16]

My view is that asceticism can be both of these things, and neither, depending on the practice and the context. In Thoreau, I think, we have an example of a *political* ascetic;

[16] Contemporary critiques of Christian theologies of sacrifice go one step further from the accusation that asceticism is a form of quietism to suggest that, in many of their formulations, such theologies reinscribe hierarchies of dominant power, especially with respect to gender. See especially Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016), chapter 3. Tonstad's target in that chapter is Sarah Coakley, who is a prominent Christian interpreter of ascetic practice. But since, in Coakley's account of asceticism, its central practice is kenosis via contemplative prayer – even to the extent that asceticism and contemplation sometimes seem interchangeable in her account – she does not write much about the economic, labor concerns that I am focused on in this work. Kathryn Tanner's 2016 Gifford Lectures were concerned with the ways in which Christian teaching and practices might resist contemporary exploitative economies. Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

that is, one who was motivated to his renunciations by the instinct that our everyday choices make up our politics. On his rendering of asceticism, it entails renunciation. The first, most obvious renunciation he enacts is moving away from town, to a small house. But his asceticism is not primarily about renunciation. This book aims to show what else it is about. And the book opens new perspectives on ascetic practice as a whole.

In fact, much religious asceticism is – like his – about more than what its practitioners reject. It is also about the positive practices they pursue (such as, typically, labor and prayer), which are often an expression of the piety they mean to enact.[17] And their positive practices are more about what they gain through these practices than they are about the renunciations such practices require, real as those renunciations are. Further, the gains of the individual practitioners should not be the end of our understanding of what asceticism is for and does. Attention to the context out of which ascetic practice is born often uncovers that the practices are not only formative for the practitioner but also for the society from which the practitioner withdraws. The ascetic practitioner participates in the society from which he withdraws by withdrawing from it, and he sometimes establishes or contributes to a new society through his ascetic practice. Further, these two societies are often mutually constituting. There is not just one social and political world; there are many. And withdrawing from any means reinvesting in another. Such an act is its own sort of politics. It is in this sense that I describe political

[17] I tend to use "piety" in the sense explicated by Jeffrey Stout as "virtuous acknowledgement of dependence on the sources of one's existence and progress through life," though I think when I use it it may have a somewhat more practical emphasis. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 30.

asceticism as a form of religious practice that intervenes in the political discourse and action of its world.

On Emerson and Asceticism

Thoreau's interest in ascetic practice may have been inspired by Emerson – as so much was in the period in which he wrote *Walden*.[18] But where Emerson alluded to ascetic life as a symbol, Thoreau literalized the symbol in his experiment at Walden.

Let me explain one instance in which Emerson alluded positively to asceticism, one that suggests he had the image of the monastery on his mind in the period in which Thoreau first met and befriended him. Emerson delivered an oration before the Literary Societies of Dartmouth College on July 24, 1838, a mere nine days after delivering the famous "Divinity School Address." It was entitled "Literary Ethics," and in it, Emerson described the "resources, the subject and the discipline of the scholar."[19] Especially the section on "discipline"

[18] Readers interested in the friendship between Thoreau and Emerson can turn to Harmon Smith, *My Friend, My Friend: The Story of Thoreau's Relationship with Emerson* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); John T. Lysaker and William Rossi, eds., *Emerson and Thoreau: Figures of Friendship* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); David O. Dowling, *Emerson's Protégés: Mentoring and Marketing Transcendentalism's Future* (New Haven, CT Yale University Press, 2014), 66–100; Jeffrey S. Cramer, *Solid Seasons: The Friendship of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2019). I extend some of the material in this section to a broader interpretation of Emerson and Thoreau's relationship and its contemporary significance in Alda Balthrop-Lewis, "Active and Contemplative Lives in a Changing Climate: The Emersonian Roots of Thoreau's Political Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, 2 (May 30, 2019): 311–32.

[19] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Poems*, ed. Joel Porte, Harold Bloom, and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1996), 96.

offered a gentle but urgent call for those gathered to take up a more rigorous form of scholarly life.

In the "Divinity School Address," Emerson had addressed graduating divinity students who wanted to respond to "the evils of the church that now is." He had suggested that what was required of them was to breathe the breath of new life through the forms already existing. "Let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing."[20] In "Literary Ethics," Emerson took up one of those forms. There, Emerson said that in order to create an American intellectual culture, the scholar would need to adopt a "rule of his ambition and life." The language of a "rule" related Emerson's understanding of the scholarly life to traditions of Christian monasticism, in which monastic communities were governed by a rule, usually written by their founder. The earliest examples of these rules – for example in the Rules of Basil, Benedict, and Augustine – remain important in contemporary Christian life.[21] The rule organized everything about communal life – when to pray, when to work, when to be alone, when to gather together, how to settle conflicts. Emerson's use of "rule" alluded to these monastic communities and introduced a series of paragraphs in which intellectual life was implicitly likened to monastic life. Those paragraphs took an old form and tried to breathe new life into it.

In those paragraphs, Emerson again evoked life in the monastery by his appeal to the benefits of solitude, which he described in glowing terms. "But go cherish your soul; expel

[20] Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 91.

[21] They are also figures of appeal for a wide variety of contemporary thinkers. One interesting example is in journalist Andrew Nikiforuk's analogy between slavery and the use of fossil fuels, which ends with an appeal to medieval monasticism. Andrew Nikiforuk, *The Energy of Slaves* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2012). "The rise and fall of the Benedictines reads like an energy fable" (248).

companions; set your habits to a life of solitude; then will the faculties rise fair and full within, like forest trees and field flowers; you will have results, which, when you meet your fellow-men, you can communicate, and they will gladly receive."[22] Solitude, such as that in the monastery, was not utterly desolate. It could even be achieved around other people. "Think alone, and all places are friendly and sacred. The poets who have lived in cities have been hermits still." The solitude of the "hermit" (another invocation of ancient forms of asceticism) was for thinking. It was not for itself. Emerson wanted to make this clear. He said, "Of course, I would not have any superstition about solitude. Let the youth study the uses of solitude and society. Let him use both, not serve either." Indeed, solitude had society as its end. "The reason why an ingenious soul shuns society, is to the end of finding society. It repudiates the false, out of love for the true." In this sense, Emerson echoed the ancient Christian practice in which the monk's retreat to the desert hermitage was not primarily a rejection of society, though there was a sense in which it required that. The eremitic life was undertaken in an effort to grow closer to God – it repudiated the false, not for the sake of that repudiation, but because love for the true required it.

The desert monks left the cities of Egypt to pray in the desert. Emerson said, "You can very soon learn all that society can teach you for one while. Its foolish routine, and indefinite multiplication of balls, concerts, rides, theatres, can teach you no more than a few can." It was not that balls, concerts, rides, and theaters were worthless. The point was that to learn from them you need not indefinitely multiply your attendance at them. Instead, Emerson said, you have

[22] Emerson, 105.

another option. "Then accept the hint of shame, of spiritual emptiness and waste, which true nature gives you, and retire, and hide; lock the door; shut the shutters; then welcome the imprisoning rain, – dear hermitage of nature."[23] In this image, the scholar need not retire to the desert to find a hermitage, but can welcome the weather, in this case "the imprisoning rain," as his hermitage.

And then he said, continuing the extended allusion to monastic life and finally making it explicit, "You will pardon me, Gentlemen, if I say, I think that we have need of a more rigorous scholastic rule; such an asceticism, I mean, as only the hardihood and devotion of the scholar himself can enforce."[24] In this sentence, Emerson's allusion to monastic life came out full force. "Scholastic" has at least two significances. First, it referred to the scholar to whom he spoke and his scholastic life of study. But second, it referred to the traditions of Christian learning that flourished in medieval monastic communities, which were centers of intellectual life in Europe in the early medieval period.[25] Emerson's asceticism was thus partaking in what had been the practices of medieval Christians. It would breathe the breath of new life into the forms already existing.

But, of course, Christian asceticism had its own roots in the ancient Greek and Roman philosophies with which it was in conversation as it developed. Emerson also alluded to those ascetics, when he wrote, "Let us sit with our hands on our mouths, a long, austere, Pythagorean lustrum." The "lustrum"

[23] Emerson, 105. [24] Emerson, 106.

[25] Benedictine monks in particular adapted the motto "pray and work" from the Rule of Benedict to include scholarship as part of the command to work. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 318. On Christian scholasticism more broadly see Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

referred to a ritual from the Roman republic, in which censors made a purificatory sacrifice on behalf of the people once every five years. The word therefore also meant a five-year period. Pythagoras was famous for valuing silence, and those he taught were required to spend a five-year period in silence. This was in marked contrast to the schools of traditional Greek education, which emphasized public speaking.[26] Emerson thus compares his asceticism to that of an ancient philosophy purposefully marked by silence. "Let us live in corners, and do chores, and suffer, and weep, and drudge, with eyes and hearts that love the Lord. Silence, seclusion, austerity, may pierce deep into the grandeur and secret of our being, and so diving, bring up out of secular darkness, the sublimities of the moral constitution."[27] The aim of such labor was not self-abnegation, though the weeping and drudging could make a reader think that. But beyond the suffering and chores, there was a clear positive aim. It was the renewal of "the moral constitution."

This constitution was at risk, in Emerson's view, threatened by a "secular darkness." His own religious upbringing and training had been thoroughly Unitarian, and Unitarianism was in turn a reform of Puritanism, which had been a reform of Calvinism. In this context, Emerson's use of the images of the monastery – the rule, the hermitage, the asceticism – appealed to a more ancient Christianity. It may have been because of this that he had to say, "You will pardon me, Gentlemen." He was likely apologizing because of Proestant suspicion of monasticism. His appeal to a more ancient Christianity aimed to breathe the breath of new life into a form that had been thoroughly criticized.

[26] Carl Huffman, "Pythagoras," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/pythagoras/ (accessed August 14, 2020).

[27] Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 106.

My reading of Thoreau is marked by attention to the sense in which he was working within the traditions to which he appealed, perhaps especially within Christianity. This is uncommon in literature on Thoreau, where many scholars accept the common view that he rejected religious tradition in general.[28] One reason people have sometimes considered Thoreau areligious is that the traditions to which he appealed in his defense of the way of life he promoted in *Walden* were extremely diverse. Thoreau invokes a wide variety of spiritual authorities, people he takes to have had insight into the making of a good day and the relationship of that daily structure to the good life as a whole. These are people he hopes to emulate and to encourage his readers to emulate.

The quintessential examples of the benefits of asceticism and what he called "voluntary poverty" for Thoreau were in the practices of "the ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek" (I, 19).[29] But he found more recent – and

[28] Contemporary readers of Thoreau sometimes seem to resist the resonances of Transcendentalist asceticism with that of Christian monks and nuns. For example, literary scholar Robert Harrison contrasts Thoreau's retreat at Walden with that of Christian monks and nuns: "Thoreau goes into the forest not like medieval Christian saints who sought out an extreme condition where a preestablished truth could impose itself more rigorously upon them, but as one who would put to the test the meaning of being on the earth." Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 221. It is a mischaracterization of "medieval Christian saints" to assert that they all agreed that their retreats, when they undertook them, were aimed at the imposition of "a preestablished truth."

[29] I am convinced that the diversity of global influences on previous generations of American thinkers has been obscured by structures of white supremacy in the American academy. For an account of American literature in its global context, including Thoreau, see Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). She writes, "I have in mind a form of indebtedness: what we called 'American' literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and

perhaps therefore makes more frequent appeal to – examples of simple living in the practices of American Indians, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Thoreau thought American Indian practices of simplicity were worthy of imitation. In addition to his continual appeal to the wisdom of ancient philosophers and Indians, Thoreau also had traditional Christian practice in mind as a model, both one to imitate and one to be overcome. He seems to have had in mind not only the Protestant movements for simplicity in North America ongoing in his time among Quakers and Shakers, but also ancient and medieval Christians, as had Emerson.[30] Three examples: Thoreau pines for an Abelard for his own period in a passage in which he suggests that the village should spend its money on education: "Can we not hire some Abelard to lecture to us?" (III, 12). Abelard had started a school of philosophy sometime soon after 1100, in Paris, when he was just past twenty.[31] Thoreau thought his sort of teaching would be good for Concord. Second, Thoreau writes of a neighbor, "he belonged to the ancient sect of Coenobites" (IX, 2).[32]

out of other geographies, other languages and cultures" (3). Thoreau read in seven languages: English, French, Latin, Greek, German, Italian, and Spanish.

[30] One of the many ways that Thoreau would have known about Shaker spirituality, Charles Lane published an essay on a visit to a Shaker community in the same issue of *The Dial* as Thoreau's essay "A Winter Walk." Charles Lane, "A Day with the Shakers," *The Dial*, October 1843. Lane wrote about arrival at the village, "No formal introduction is required; on the contrary, there is a general disposition on the part of both the more intelligent men and women to enter into free conversation at once upon their distinguishing practice of self-sacrifice" (166). Medieval examples were also very present for Thoreau. "The Middle Ages as an idea, however, held great appeal for Thoreau." Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "Medievalism," in *Henry David Thoreau in Context*, ed. James S. Finley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 71.

[31] Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism*, 79. Abelard was also first to use the term "theology." MacCulloch, *Christianity*, 398.

[32] This is also a pun. The man he describes turns out not to be a very good fisherman, thus see-no-bite.

Coenobitic monasticism refers to communal forms of Christian ascetic practice, as opposed to those that emphasize eremitic practice. Where eremitic monks live alone in hermitages, praying with others only intermittently, coenobitic monks live together in cooperative communities. And finally, when describing the fish in Walden Pond, Thoreau makes a pun on the name of a twelfth-century Christian poverty movement by calling the fish Waldenses (XVI, 5).[33]

Some interpreters assume the diversity of sources Thoreau was drawing upon demonstrate that he was areligious, and especially that he had rejected Christianity. On this understanding, true identification with one tradition requires the disavowal of others, and people who are influenced by many traditions have renounced religion entirely. Yet, diversity of influence does not areligiosity make.[34] An insistence on purity of influence would leave out most of the people we take as examples of their religions. Take Thomas Aquinas as an example. He was a medieval Christian theologian whose

[33] For more on the political significance of the movement that Waldo of Lyons was part of, and that Thoreau was thus appealing to, see Brian David Hamilton, "The Politics of Poverty: A Contribution to a Franciscan Political Theology," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35, 1 (2015): 29–44. Unlike in Thoreau's treatment of ancient philosophy and American Indian economic practice, none of these references to Christian practices of simplicity is a thoroughgoing commendation of a particular practice. Yet they do show that Thoreau was aware of Christian ascetic traditions and to some extent identified with them. The Abelard reference in particular seems to indicate that he took them to be in some sense authoritative, though it is also, as in each of these cases, a sort of joke. I discuss the significance of Thoreau's humor further in Chapter 5.

[34] Contemporary scholarship in American religious history on the practices of those who are "spiritual but not religious" makes this abundantly clear. For example, Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010). I do not investigate the relationship of those contemporary practices to Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists, but readers who are interested in that might look to Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2005).

Summa Theologica is a classic work of Christian theology and is taken by many theological traditions as a normative standard for orthodox teaching.[35] But in Thomas's time, his independence of mind and attention to a wide diversity of sources – especially his willingness to take Islamic theology seriously – often got him in trouble with bishops and professorial colleagues in Paris.[36] This eagerness to attend to diverse sources in pursuit of the truth is a hallmark of traditional theology, not contrary to it.

In taking them as authoritative, Thoreau cast himself as carrying on these traditions in some sense.[37] By appealing to them as authorities, he also affirmed a view of knowledge as socially – rather than independently – achieved.

On Truth as Thinking in Place

In "Literary Ethics," Emerson anticipated that his audience might worry the form of asceticism he enjoined was pointless, in that it hid from the world the fruits of its efforts. He knew about the quietist objection to asceticism, that it retreats from the world. Such a worry, he insisted, was unnecessary, given the nature of thought.

> You will not fear, that I am enjoining too stern an asceticism. Ask not, Of what use is a scholarship that systematically retreats? or, Who is the better for the philosopher who conceals his accomplishments, and hides his thoughts from the waiting world? Hides his thoughts! Hide the sun and the moon.

[35] Thomas was also a member of the Dominican order, an order that arose out of the Waldensian movement for poverty to which Thoreau had jokingly appealed. "Dominic's reform movement arose out of Waldensianism." Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 26.

[36] I thank Denys Turner for conversation and instruction on this point.

[37] "To find oneself in a cultural tradition is the beginning, not the end, of critical thought." Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), 73.

Thought could be hidden no more than the sun and the moon could be hidden. This was because, "Thought is all light, and publishes itself to the universe. It will speak, though you were dumb, by its own miraculous organ. It will flow out of your actions, your manners, and your face. It will bring you friendships."[38] Thought cannot help but "publish itself to the universe." Thought takes place in a person, one who is necessarily situated in the world, who could no more retreat from the world than he could hide the sun or the moon. And a person's thought has "its own miraculous organ." It "flows out of" the very living of the person who thinks. And crucially it brings him friendships, through which he lives in society, and a society that will welcome his thoughts. Because of this, the ascetic scholar must retire to his hermitage to welcome thought, and trust that thought will, in the end, publish itself to the world.

This was part of a theory of truth Emerson articulated in "Literary Ethics," one that must have appealed to Thoreau. Emerson said,

> Truth is such a flyaway, such a slyboots, so untransportable and unbarrelable a commodity, that it is as bad to catch as light. Shut the shutters never so quick, to keep all the light in, it is all in vain; it is gone before you can cry, Hold. And so it happens with our philosophy. Translate, collate, distill all the systems, it steads you nothing; for truth will not be compelled, in any mechanical manner.[39]

Truth's refusal to succumb to systems was part of what made his *Journal* and other ephemeral forms so important to Thoreau. Sharon Cameron and William Howarth argue that the *Journal* is Thoreau's great work, and it seems like it would

[38] Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 112. [39] Emerson, 103.

have made sense for someone with this theory of truth to develop loyalty to such a form.[40]

What is appealing about the *Journal*, given this theory of truth, is that it does not attempt to compel truth into a mechanical manner. It relates to ideas through time, as thought can only run through time. Thought is a primary way of relating to truth, but without time, there is no thought. What it means that truth will not be compelled in a mechanical manner is that truth must develop over time. This gives Thoreau's cyclical reflections on the seasons over the years of the *Journal* a significance that may be difficult to see at first. Every thought comes in a context, and develops through time. That old "slyboots" truth must be seduced, with gentle reverence and patience, through daily practice, into an organic form rather than a mechanical form.

This means that philosophy is not a system, as a machine is a system, one that can be ordered with ease into parts. The asceticism is the ordering, which is to say it is the rule of living, in which thought and thus truth can thrive.

Emerson had said thought will "publish itself" when ordered in an ascetic life. That phrase appeared also in Thoreau's *Journal* soon after Emerson delivered "Literary Ethics." On August 10, 1838, Thoreau wrote – under the heading, "Truth" – "whatever of past or present wisdom has published itself to the world, is palpable falsehood till it come and utter itself by my side."[41] Emerson and Thoreau

[40] Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); William L. Howarth, *The Book of Concord: Thoreau's Life As a Writer* (New York: Viking Press, 1982). Ian Hasketh has also argued that the journal form played an important role in the nineteenth-century development of "the scientific self." Ian Kasketh, "Technologies of the Scientific Self: John Tyndall and His Journal." *Isis* 110, 3 (September 1, 2019): 460–82.

[41] Henry David *Thoreau, Journal, Volume 1: 1837–1844*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 49.

shared a commitment to the idea that truth "publishes itself," that the scholar's duty is to establish the discipline that will allow her to hear it uttered by her own side, and that this is part of what it means to live a good life. But *Walden*, Thoreau's own experiment with ascetic life, suggests Thoreau thought that Emerson's use of the image of the monastery did not go far enough. It did not actually *breathe* into the old ascetic forms.

Thoreau responded to Emerson's use of monastic allusion both by literalizing it, and by playing with it in *Walden*. In perhaps the most playful reference of all to Emerson's call for a more ascetic scholarship, Thoreau describes the fish in Walden Pond as ascetic (IX, 6).

My methodological orientation in this book assumes that for Thoreau, truth requires thinking in place; that is, it requires thinking in relation to all of the members of one's imagined society and one's imagined ethical inheritance. This commitment drives my argument in Chapter 1 about the importance of Walden Woods as a neighborhood, my argument in Chapter 2 about the rhetorical posture of *Walden* as a piece of public reasoning with the townsmen, my suggestions in Chapter 4 about the sociality of reason, and my argument in the Conclusion against what I call there "solution thinking." In each case, the point is to say that thinking well is impossible without attention to the social and political context of thought.

On History and Nature as Lively

Thoreau thought truth could only be uncovered by thinking in place. He also thought history was significant for the present. He came to this view in part through his response to the failures of his own formal education, especially a curriculum at Harvard that he viewed as pointless. American nature

writing has had a central role in reflection on religion and ecology across the university for some time now. Let's say you take Thoreau as the progenitor of a nature writing tradition that runs down from him through John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey to Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Lauret Savoy, and so many others. You needn't think of Thoreau as the beginning, since he had his own sense of progenitors, but you might.[42] Many do. In such a case, you might say that the nature writing tradition began as a response to what Thoreau saw as the failure of the university – his example was Harvard – to take reflection on religion and ecology seriously.

Teaching and learning at Harvard in Thoreau's generation focused on recitation and the collection of points to what was considered an absurd extent by students. Teachers were expected to deliver content and to score student performances in every aspect of college life. But teachers were not expected to cultivate the intellectual lives of young students. Robert Richardson writes that "the curriculum was largely fixed and generally detested."[43] Josiah Quincy III had been made the president of Harvard after losing his seventh election to remain mayor of Boston. He was appointed at a moment when Harvard seemed particularly vulnerable. "He had been chosen by the Corporation neither for his scholarly attainments which were considerable, nor his teaching experience which was non-existent, but for his demonstrated capacity to

[42] Michael Branch tells the story of American nature writing before Thoreau and proposes "a corrective thought experiment" that tries "to imagine the American nature writing traditions slowly building toward Thoreau, rather than spontaneously issuing from him." Michael P. Branch, *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2004), xvi.

[43] Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 10.

govern the recalcitrant."[44] He designed and kept the books on the elaborate, standardized marking system, meant to forestall both the grading that had up to then been left to the discretion of teachers and the complaints of favoritism that such a system risked. In the course of a four-year career, a student could accumulate as many as 29,920 points.[45]

Students despised Quincy's firm hand. This was true to the extent that in the spring of Thoreau's freshman year, 1834, the most violent student rebellion in Harvard's history broke out. The conflict went on for weeks. Quincy's effigy was burned by the Junior class. In this context, curricular activity at Harvard may have been attached in Thoreau's mind to the conflict that had raged on campus at Harvard. His extracurricular reading seems to have been more indicative of his interests than any of his schooling. Withdrawal from the melee could have seemed the most important way to get an education.

A big part of what Thoreau found inspiring about his relationship with Emerson was that Emerson had a more capacious understanding of what learning was for, and from whence it came, than the marking system at Harvard would have implied. This included Emerson's philosophy of history, which was based largely on what he knew of German philosophy. Whereas the Harvard curriculum emphasized rote memorization, which set the history it covered at a distance from the students who were obliged to do that memorizing, Emerson believed that history was vivid and lively in a way Thoreau found freeing.

[44] Robert A. McCaughey, "The Usable Past: A Study of the Harvard College Rebellion of 1834," *William and Mary Law Review* 11, 3 (April 1, 1970): 596.

[45] McCaughey, 597.

Indeed on Emerson's account, one of the things that nature provided was help understanding what history is and means. I think you can see this in his lecture "Literary Ethics." In the first part, on the resources of the scholar, he describes a young person who is so "intoxicated with his admiration of a hero" from history that he doesn't see the things he has in common with that hero. This is the danger Emerson saw in the form of education being practiced at Harvard; it stressed in history "the distinctions of the individual" rather than "the universal attributes of man."[46] The youth in Emerson's illustration has read about the Emperor Charles the Fifth, and in imagining who the Emperor was, "He is curious concerning that man's day. What filled it?" Emerson suggests that if the youth can understand that what he admires in the Emperor he can also find in his own soul, he'll see things – especially the promise of his own life – differently. In response to the youth's question about the Emperor's day, "The soul answers – Behold his day here!" The youth has in common with the Emperor, on Emerson's description, the sighing of the woods, the quiet of gray fields, the cool breeze that sings out of the northern mountains, the hopes of morning, ennui of noon, regrets at want of vigor – all aspects of nature in some sense, those things that exist in the world. Emerson describes features of the world that he thinks will have persisted from the period in which the Emperor lived to the period in which the youth lived. Nature persists. This means that the world we belong to is like that world in which our heroes lived. Which in turn means that the things we admire in them are also accessible to us. What was a day of his? "Day of all that are born of women."[47]

[46] Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 99. [47] Emerson, 99.

This, in turn and perhaps counterintuitively, means that a person ought not think of themselves as living at the climax of history. To do so would be to misunderstand history itself.

> The whole value of history, of biography, is to increase my self-trust, by demonstrating what man can be and do. This is the moral of the Plutarchs, the Cudworths, the Tennemanns, who give us the story of men or of opinions. Any history of philosophy fortifies my faith, by showing me, that what high dogmas I had supposed were the rare and late fruit of a cumulative culture, and only now possible to some recent Kant or Fichte, – were the prompt improvisations of the earliest inquirers; of Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes.[48]

History teaches that we have access to the same possibilities now that we read about in history. The sentiment is at the same time optimistic about human possibility and, perhaps more subtly, demonstrates Emerson's exacting doctrine of human responsibility. Emerson is famously a perfectionist – in that he thought that humans could always attain a better self. His perfectionism has become one of the intellectual tropes for which he is most famous.[49] And this has led some of his readers (and those who do not read, but think they know) to imagine that Emerson expected human progress would come about necessarily through history also. But Emerson's philosophy of history – even as it expressed perfectionist hopes for individual humans – also shows that he did not think perfectionism was inevitable in history or in any

[48] Emerson, 98.

[49] Perhaps especially because of Stanley Cavell's "Emersonian perfectionism." Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism: The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005).

human life.[50] Moral progress was uncertain and required moral effort by individuals in every age. This contributed to the central argument of the conclusion of *Walden*, that there is no moral progress without moral effort.

According to Emerson's view of history, every telling of history uncovers both something about the teller and an important feature of the past itself, a feature only discoverable by that telling of history.

> Is it not the lesson of our experience that every man, were life long enough, would write history for himself? What else do these volumes of extracts and manuscript commentaries, that every scholar writes, indicate? Greek history is one thing to me; another to you.[51]

This is not to say that all is relative, because there is of course the material record to which each of us is obligated. But in this understanding of the nature of historical practice, it is our uncovering of the past, as it speaks now. One of the things that education can give is the capacity to see the history we have been taught anew through our own eyes.

This doctrine of history was what enabled Thoreau to connect, as he did, his daily life in the woods – for example, the wars of the ants – to the heroic periods he knew from classical history. History was always encroaching, sneaking through the cracks of the present. And this, in turn, enabled Thoreau to believe that he might himself, though living far

[50] Christopher Lasch argues that Emerson (relying on his Calvinism) was among those who resisted doctrines of progress, insisting on human limitations. "The 'terror of life' cannot be 'talked or voted away,' and freedom is not something that can be guaranteed by a constitution, a 'paper preamble.'" Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 262.

[51] Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 103.

from heroes, write a heroic book. The same spirit that had inspired Virgil's *Georgics* lived on, even in Concord.

It also means that the profusion of interpretations of Thoreau reflect how Emerson and Thoreau themselves thought of history. Controversy over what to make of Thoreau began even before he died, and has continued unabated ever since. Interpretations can be more and less justified by the evidence, but the understanding of history that Emerson gave Thoreau would have indicated not that one account of Thoreau will be vindicated in some far future, but instead that we learn more than we knew before from each person's telling – both about the teller and about the people and places in his story. Were life long enough, each of us would have their own Thoreau. This requires that we embrace readings of him across what we now call disciplines, though of course even to separate them is somewhat of an anachronism, since in Thoreau's period they were not what they are now.[52]

Social History

Where the mainstream view among interpreters is that Thoreau was a Transcendentalist, my interpretation seeks to draw him to a certain extent away from the historiography of Transcendentalism – which has so often focused on famous men – and back into the diverse world in which Thoreau actually lived.[53] In this, I have been inspired by historians

[52] Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

[53] The historiography of Transcendentalism is changing, however. Sandra Petrulionis has been especially important for the recovery of Concord's women in the history of Transcendentalism. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

who have challenged our assumptions about what sorts of histories the sources enable us to tell, especially women's historians and historians of African American communities. From these historians I have learned that to claim we lack sources is often a sophisticated way of perpetuating a silence that was always unjust. As Albert Raboteau wrote in his groundbreaking *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution*," "it is the neglect of slave sources by historians which has been the main cause of this invisibility."[54] In women's history, too, historians have often assumed that sources did not exist. But those historians who have uncovered histories of everyday people, people who left less of a written record than the elite who have generally made history, have inspired my interpretation of Thoreau.

In the interpretation of *Walden* I offer in this book, I make use of the broadening of history accomplished by the social historians of the past fifty years. Most readings of Thoreau situate him in the history of ideas, whether as a Transcendentalist, an inheritor of classical sources, or the progenitor of the nature writing tradition that so deeply influenced – for good or for ill – the environmental movement. My starting point is, rather, to situate Thoreau in US labor and social history, including especially the history of working women, free Black people, and those who defied enslavement. In this I join a growing edge of Thoreau scholarship, advanced especially by Lance Newman's *Our Common Dwelling*, which insists that the material and economic context of Thoreau's writing has been largely neglected and ought to be recovered.[55]

[54] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), x.

[55] Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

While Thoreau is famous for his opposition to slavery, that opposition is most often read apart from Thoreau's interest in nature. I read these two strands together. Thoreau's focus in *Walden* was, after all, not only on the contemplation of nature, but also on doing his own work. This was, I think, his way of finding out the material needs of citizens and resisting forms of unjust labor. His experiment at Walden was contemplative, and it was also an experiment driven by his political and moral disappointment toward a politics that could sustain social justice for all.

Local history was of great interest to Thoreau. Take, for example, a passage in *Walden* that describes the former inhabitants of the woods. Later in his life, Thoreau was especially interested in the history of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and he planned to write a book on the subject. But even early, in the period he spent living in Walden Woods, Thoreau was invested in knowing the history of the place. As with much else in his life, he thought he could learn this history from nature, by which he meant the world he could observe. And so he went on a walk in the woods. Not only a natural historian, but an oral historian as well, as interpreters often forget, Thoreau took his knowledge of the past from the world around him, and from the people he knew. This was a walk through woods that "within the memory of many of my townsmen . . . resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants." He remembered when the road was heavily covered by pines, so close that they "would scrape both sides of the chaise at once" (XIV, 1). Thoreau goes on to write a paragraph on each of four formerly enslaved Black people who had occupied the woods before him.

History, like that of Walden Woods, was alive for Thoreau in ways we might sometimes find quite foreign. Same too with what he called nature. Indeed, as I have described, one of the

reasons that nature is as important for Thoreau as it is, is that it allows access to what the heroes had. The meaning of histories stayed in places, and the meaning of the leaf could be found in the tree.

As Sandra Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls wrote in 2007, with reference to Lance Newman's "Thoreau's Materialism," attention to the concrete historical situation in which Thoreau wrote *Walden* offers new views on how its contents reveal Thoreau's own political aims, even when his writing seems most politically sedate.[56]

Social Justice

The title of this book is *Thoreau's Religion: Walden Woods, Social Justice, and the Politics of Asceticism*. The three terms of the subtitle are intended to summarize my interpretation of what Thoreau's religion is: an ascetic practice that aims to set right his social and political relationships as he came to understand them through the course of his life in Walden Woods. His life in the woods revealed to him an alternative social world to the one he knew in Concord. It suggested to him that setting right all of his relationships – including those with the more-than-human, those with outsiders to Concord society, and his own relationship to himself – could contribute to a more just social and political world. And it taught him a form of ascetic practice that would give due reverence to God, enable delight in the practitioner, and contribute to the just reformation of relationships.

Thoreau's religion, perhaps surprisingly, was oriented by both reverence for the woods and a form of social justice. This

[56] Sandra Harbert Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls, eds., *More Day to Dawn: Thoreau's* Walden *for the Twenty-First Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 244.

reading of Thoreau finds in him a contrasting understanding of justice from one that has been taken for granted by many political philosophers, especially twentieth-century liberal political philosophers who are often interested in Thoreau and read him as invested in their conception of justice. Liberal political philosophy considers liberty the primary political value (as opposed to, for example, equality or belonging), and often seeks principles to guide the governance of the modern liberal state. On one influential liberal view, justice obtains when fairness is enacted.[57] In much liberal political theory, what justice requires is knowing the right principles and then applying them. In my reading, Thoreau thinks something else. He thinks that justice obtains not when a principle from outside is applied to our situation (whether fairness or something else), but rather when we set the relationship between us right.[58] This kind of justice, when we get our relationship to each other right, is a kind of relational justice, which is to say that it ought to be worked out between us not outside of us. Thoreau thought social justice (which is to say, a society in which all enjoy justice) required this kind of relational justice.

This is important because imagining justice as a principle applied from outside often fails to offer requisite attention to the particularities of the relevant relational situation. In fact, when people try to enforce an external principle, it can further

[57] The early articulation of this view in the twentieth century, often summarized "justice as fairness," is found in John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1971). Rawls was deeply concerned that society should be just. I take it he had a different understanding of what justice is than Thoreau.

[58] Carol Gilligan argued in the early 1980s that moral philosophy had been dominated by a masculinist vision of justice that focused on abstract principles. She studied women who conceptualized morality in more relational terms, asking not, "what principle applies?" but instead, "how should I respond?" Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

contribute to injustice. I discuss this further in Chapter 3, where I interpret Thoreau's critique of philanthropy as resting on the grounds that it fails to render this kind of justice.

Justice as fairness has often assumed, like much Western philosophy, that humans are the morally salient members of society. Thoreau's vision of justice, in which relational setting right *just is* what justice is, included from the beginning human relationships to the natural world. As I argue in Chapter 1, Thoreau considered every thing in Walden Woods a member of society there, and thus a member of a community in which he sought to cultivate social justice. As I argue in Chapters 2 and 3, he opposed contemporary economic practices, on the grounds that they failed to render this kind of justice. As I argue in Chapters 4 and 5, his asceticism aimed to sustain deeper relationships to all the world's delightful goods. This is an explosively expansive account of social justice.

Chapter Plan

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapters are focused on responding to common interpretations of Thoreau as, first, fiercely independent, second, inconsequential with respect to politics, and, third, spiritually eccentric to the point of being irreligious.[59] Too often, the Thoreau of *Walden* is

[59] There has been a relatively recent turn to studying religion in the wider historical study of the Transcendentalists. K. P. Van Anglen, "Transcendentalism and Religion: The State of Play," *Literature Compass* 5, 6 (November 1, 2008): 1010–24. That trend is still growing among scholars of Thoreau. The best available book-length work on Thoreau and religion is Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). An early foray into the study of Thoreau's religion is William J. Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist* (Philadelphia, PA: United Church Press, 1974). Catherine Albanese wrote that Wolf's book tended "to make the results of present-day biblical scholarship and theological inquiry normative," but that it might be a

imagined as asocial, apolitical, and areligious. By way of addressing these caricatures, the first three chapters respond to each in turn. Chapter 1, "Thoreau's Social World," presents a view of his time in the woods as taking up membership in an alternative society – not the one people expected him to belong to, admittedly, but a society nonetheless. Chapter 2, "The Politics of Getting a Living," describes how Thoreau's time in the woods instantiated his political views in ways the literature on Thoreau does not usually highlight. Chapter 3, "Thoreau's Theological Critique of Philanthropy," begins to explicate some of Thoreau's theological commitments. It offers a close reading of Thoreau's critique of philanthropy at the end of "Economy." This critique was motivated by Christian theological commitments and a theological ethics oriented by relational justice. Chapter 4, "Political Asceticism," describes Thoreau's interest in ascetic practice and voluntary poverty, which I interpret as his own positive social, political, and religious response to his strong critique of philanthropy. Chapter 5, "Delight in True Goods," responds to worries that asceticism is dour. The chapter is motivated by a concern that contemporary environmentalism is often tempted to despair, confronted as it is by an apocalyptic

"harbinger of future work on the religious meaning of Henry David Thoreau." Catherine Albanese, review of *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, by William J. Wolf, *Church History* 44, 1 (1975): 133–34. For a helpful footnote that collects some of the scholarship on Thoreau and religion before Hodder, see John Gatta, "'Rare and Delectable Places': Thoreau's Imagination of Sacred Space at Walden," in *There Before Us: Religion, Literature & Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry*, ed. Roger Lundin (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 25. Laura Dassow Walls is quite sensitive to religion in her excellent new biography, Walls, *Henry David Thoreau*. Stanley Cavell is the interpreter of *Walden* most attentive to the influence of Christianity on Thoreau. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*. Other recent book-length works that attend to the influence of religion on Thoreau include Malcolm Clemens Young, *The Spiritual Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009); Kevin Dann, *Expect Great Things: The Life and Search of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 2017).

future. The chapter focuses on the puzzling coincidence of Thoreau's earnestness with his humor. I argue that there are some things – political asceticism may be one of them – that are best articulated while laughing. Dark jokes about the end of the world sometimes help us through, but true engagement with the goods that remain will sustain whatever future we have.

In the conclusion, "The Promise of a Delighted Environmental Ethics," I look at what significance my interpretation of *Walden* might have to work ongoing among those who study religious environmental ethics. Finally, the epilogue "On Mourning" returns to the Florida Panhandle I discussed in the preface, where Hurricane Michael hit in the summer of 2018. There, I discuss the importance of mourning goods as they pass away. Such mourning is an important way of valuing good things and thus relating justly to them.