

The Red Flannel Shirt: The Dynamic Clothing Metaphor in The Maine Woods

Ann Beebe

Many people are familiar with Thoreau's exhortations against fashion in *Walden*: "No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch on his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience" (47). Such statements, primarily in the "Economy" chapter, are significant, but they are sweeping. In that chapter, Thoreau is concerned with raising conceptual questions about wealth, poverty, labor, and time management, and he utilizes fashion and clothing to make broad assertions about those issues. In *The Maine Woods* (1864), a work comprised of three essays drawn from three of the six trips he took to Maine (1846, 1853, 1857), Thoreau's eye is drawn in the midst of this remote and wild environment to man-made items, clothing. The clothing worn by the lumbermen, hunters, boatmen, Native Americans, and occasional travelers is sparse and functional. Stripped of any pretense to fashionable expression, the ordinary clothing Thoreau glimpses in the woods of Maine carries extraordinary relevance. The first essay, "Ktaadn," expresses a fascination with the lives of lumbermen and boatmen. Early in *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau explains that red "is the favorite color with lumbermen; and red flannel is reputed to possess some mysterious virtues" (28). There is a playful joy in this first essay's exploration of the clothing metaphor that evolves

by the third essay, “The Allegash and East Branch.” Its fascination for the clothing worn by the Native American guides, Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis, evolves into an uncomfortable exploration of race and class differences in mid-nineteenth-century America. Overlooked by some scholars, the clothing metaphor in *The Maine Woods* is a classic case of Thoreau’s talent for observing the most ordinary of objects, functional clothing in this instance, from a fresh perspective to imbue it with unexpected meaning.

“A large flaming Oak Hall hand-bill”: Lumbermen, Masculinity, and Commercialization

Fashion has long been acknowledged as a site of political, social, and cultural significance. Intentionally, and on occasion unintentionally, clothing can be made to carry meaning beyond its practical use. Lawmakers in Great Britain attempted to control social and financial boundaries through the passage of eight sumptuary laws between 1337 and 1533, with little success (Doda 173). Attempting to deny individuals the opportunity to select their own fashion has usually resulted in the opposite result: people who would normally be indifferent to their dress wear the forbidden fabric, color, or accessory as an act of defiance. Withdraw artificial restrictions on clothing, however, and the very outcome rulers intended often results. People of the same social and economic class usually adopt similar attire. As Dorothy Jones explains, “Cloth [...] operates as a powerful symbol of social cohesion by evoking ideas of connectedness” (Jones 4). In other words, people from similar occupations – blacksmiths, miners, cobblers – frequently create their own unique costume in an effort to signify social unity. The fact that the lumbermen of Maine in Thoreau’s time adopt the red flannel shirt as a mark of their occupational pride and unity is almost inevitable. In describing the best-known industry in Maine, the anonymous writer for an 1844 article in *Hunt’s Merchants Magazine* reveals his proud enthusiasm for these icons of the forest:

It was our fortune to witness many of these rafts thus propelled by the Maine lumbermen, while ascending the Kennebec during the last season. These rafts were urged forward, by cars or poles; and from the fact that those who were thus urging them forward, were almost invariably dressed in red flannel shirts, they appeared in the distance as if in uniform, and certainly presented a very picturesque effect. Yet the lumbermen of Maine, although their peculiar habitudes of life tend to give them a distinct and strongly-marked character, exhibit some of the most valuable traits. They are remarkable for hardihood and energy, combined with an honest liberality and knowledge of the world, springing equally from the character of their pursuits and their natural sagacity and intelligence. (318)

The columnist attempts to explain the mystique of these hardy and energetic woodsmen. He feels fortunate to view them in their natural environment as they work as a unit to transport the timber to the mills downstream. Even more than their lumberjack skills, this writer admires the raw masculinity of these men. Their physical strength and singularity of purpose are aided by the men's "honest liberality," "knowledge of the world," and "natural sagacity and intelligence" (318).¹ And these paragons of American manhood are all dressed in the outfit of the Maine lumbermen: the red flannel shirt.

Is it any wonder that Thoreau, on seeing these men during his trips to Maine, would be intrigued by the men and their unofficial uniform? His references to the lumbermen, usually flagged by a sighting of their red flannel shirts, are meditations on a version of American manhood essential for survival in the unsettled forests. Their shirts, crafted from red flannel for its warmth and its ability to wick away perspiration, are emblematic. And their prioritizing ease of movement over style defies the most important element of men's fashion in the 1840s, "the fit" (Zakim 51). In donning the red flannel, a man joins a brotherhood of the forest. The boatmen who navigate the rivers to convey people and supplies inland are

a part of this community as well. Their lives are in near constant peril, but they accomplish their tasks with aplomb. Thoreau commends this group of Maine men: "I could not sufficiently admire the skill and coolness with which they performed" their journeys through the rapids (49). Together the lumbermen and boatmen venture into the wilderness and retrieve the lumber necessary for the progress of the nation.

In the second section of *The Maine Woods*, "Chesuncook," Thoreau includes another sighting of the red flannelled lumberman: "we suddenly saw the light and heard the crackling of a fire on the bank, and discovered the camp of the two explorers; they standing before it in their red shirts, and talking aloud of the adventures and profits of the day" (100). Struggling to keep up with his guide, knowing that his sojourn in the forests of Maine is limited, Thoreau is brought out of his own concerns at the sight of these men. They work as a unit, unencumbered by social manners or customs. Their only concerns are "adventures and profits." The masculine world of the lumbermen has a distinct appeal, and Thoreau writes of his attraction to this lifestyle. "I have often wished since that I was with them. They search for timber over a given section, climbing hills and often high trees to look off, explore the streams by which it is to be driven, and the like, spend five or six weeks in the woods, they two alone, a hundred miles or more from any town, roaming about and sleeping on the ground where night overtakes them" (101). Reducing life to the essentials, these lumbermen have developed a community of men where the elaborate fashions of the day are simplified by a common garment, the red flannel shirt. Since the need to spend time and money with a tailor to craft a bespoke wardrobe is eliminated, these men can focus on developing their characters, enjoying their connection with each other and nature, and build their fortunes. The wisdom and focus of the lumbermen of Maine is so remarkable that they could even teach men how to view death. Toward the end of the "Ktaadn" section, Thoreau enthuses, "There certainly men would live forever, and laugh at death and the grave" (81). These rugged men, priests of the wilderness, can instruct all men how to live and die.²

The significance of the color of the flannel shirts is not to be underestimated. While the fashionable mid-nineteenth-century man might occasionally commission a colorful waistcoat from his tailor, suits in monochromatic black, navy, or brown were the acceptable attire for most men by this time in the United States. Businessmen, lawyers, bankers, and most professional men created their own uniform, in part intended to camouflage their individuality in an urban environment. The red of the lumberman's shirt defies the push to blend into an environment. In nature and in the urban environment, the color red stands out. And while some might dismiss the significance of this color only as a safety precaution in the woods, the color's significance goes beyond practicality for Thoreau. He notes the beauty of the contrasting colors when he spies a lumberman in the distance: "It was a pleasant picture when the foremost turned about and looked up the winding ravine, walled in with rocks and the green forest, to see at intervals of a rod or two, a red-shirted or green-jacketed mountaineer against the white torrent, leaping down the channel with his pack on his back" (67-68). In addition to practicality, the redness of the shirts marks an urge toward beauty. Everyone, if given the opportunity, appreciates the sumptuous beauty of pure color and color contrasts in any environment. Yet beyond the impulse toward beauty lies one more level of significance for the color red to Thoreau.

To understand this last layer of meaning for the color red, we must examine the passage in *The Maine Woods* where Thoreau sees phosphorescent wood for the first time. While the occurrence of phosphorescence had been noted as early as Aristotle, it was not until the nineteenth century that a scientific explanation had been proposed. This bioluminescence, present in decaying wood as well as other items, had been commonly called fairy light or foxfire, and it is the result of fungi embedded in the wood. Leopold Gmelin's 1848 *Hand-Book of Chemistry* lists its known properties, including the fact that "wood loses its phosphorescent properties by drying" (191). What can we make of Thoreau's reference to this natural phenomenon late in *The Maine Woods*? He describes a long-delayed observation of the substance:

I observed, partly in the fire, which had ceased to blaze, a perfectly regular elliptical ring of light, about five inches in its shortest diameter, six or seven in its longer, and from one eighth to one quarter of an inch wide. It was fully as bright as the fire, but not reddish or scarlet like a coal, but a white and slumbering light, like the glowworm's. I could tell it from the fire only by its whiteness. I saw at once that it must be phosphorescent wood, which I had so often heard of, but never chanced to see. (179)

In this last section of *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau's voice is more somber, almost bitter at times. The speaker sounds lost, almost dried out by the world's disappointments. Despite having travelled to Maine on numerous occasions, much of the essence of the place and the character of the people have eluded him. Finally, with the flare of this phosphorescent wood, hope returns. He muses, "I little thought that there was such a light shining in the darkness of the wilderness for me" (180). What had been missing from his Maine experience was the last lesson of the red flannel shirts: visibility. This decaying wood makes a last bid for attention and beauty by assuming the apparel of phosphorescence. In this passage Thoreau honors this natural impulse toward luminosity in the wood and leaves space for his readers to connect this impulse to human beings. The lumbermen dress for practicality, for beauty, and for visibility. They may be loud and crude, but they will not be ignored. Nor will they be made to feel ashamed of their masculinity, their love of the wilderness, and their concern for seeking out profit. Moreover, pride and regard for these areas are not mutually exclusive; there need not be a tension between masculinity and intelligence, wilderness and progress. For a lumberman, or a poet, all parts of his nature may exist in harmony provided he visibly claims his place.

This reading of the red flannel shirt has the potential to offer a new, less cynical, reading of the "Oak Hall Carry" in *The Maine Woods*. In the "Ktaadn" section, Thoreau describes an unusual sight in these remote woods:

Half way over this carry, thus far in the Maine wilderness on its way to the Provinces, we noticed a large flaming Oak Hall hand-bill, about two feet long, wrapped round the trunk of a pine, from which the bark had been stript, and to which it was fast glued by the pitch, This should be recorded among the advantages of this mode of advertising, that so, possibly, even the bears and wolves, moose, deer, otter, and beaver, not to mention the Indian, may learn where they can fit themselves according to the latest fashion, or, at least, recover some of their own lost garments. We christened this the Oak Hall carry. (50)

Some scholars have noted this passage. Steven Allaback reminds modern readers that "Oak Hall signifies a number of things worth remembering about the literary and commercial situation in nineteenth-century Boston" (Allaback 546). And Nathaniel Lewis and Daniel S. Malachuk both see this passage as evidence of the "myriad ways" the Maine woods "have been shaped [...] by human activity" (Malachuk 46). However, pairing this passage with Thoreau's commendation of the willful visibility of the red flannel shirt, this passage might be viewed as a celebration of the drive to be noticed – in nature, in life, and in business.

Indeed the Oak Hall story is unique. Founded by George W. Simmons, the clothing store became the most well-known purveyor of men's clothing in mid-nineteenth-century New England. Credit for the store's success goes to Simmons' aggressive and innovative advertising campaigns that included a delightful 1854 pamphlet of original illustrations and poems (some say doggerel) called the *Oak Hall Pictorial*. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was known to object to verses such as these: "These are the numbers over the door,/ Thirty-two and thirty-four,/ Where clothes are made of every shade,/ Where you can get a first rate trade/ At the lowest price; they will fit you nice –/ At the famous Oak Hall, in North Street" (Simmons 6).³ In the ever so proper and restrained Boston, Simmons rejoiced in an enthusiastic commercialism. Why should he hide his goods and business acumen behind a quiet façade? Why should his

store fade discreetly into the background of downtown Boston? Simmons would use every method possible to promote his commercial enterprise, including mass distribution of advertising sheets.

Therefore, Thoreau's hiking party's discovery of Simmons' reach in the Maine woods is not entirely surprising. In terrain so rough that the canoes must be carried and lifted with rope systems, the "large flaming Oak Hall hand-bill" unabashedly claims its territory. Oak Hall and George W. Simmons are flamboyantly visible – in Boston, in newspaper advertising columns, in literary circles, and in hand-bills plastered wherever men might be found. Moreover, Oak Hall does not limit itself to the upper class. Yes, businessmen can purchase suits at reasonable prices, but in its massive emporium boys can be outfitted for school, and working men, including Maine lumbermen, can purchase the clothing they need to succeed in their fields. At Oak Hall a man can purchase a single red flannel shirt or a kit with pre-assembled wardrobes for Maine lumbermen or California gold rush miners.⁴ George Simmons and Oak Hall, while providing a moment of levity in the Maine woods, also reinforce the lesson of visible masculinity first made apparent to Thoreau by the red flannel shirt. This clothing store, exclusively for men, recognizes the many types of men in mid-nineteenth-century America and caters to all of their apparel needs. Furthermore, Simmons of Oak Hall and the Maine lumbermen refuse to be ashamed of their successful commercialism. It too is to be savored and enjoyed.

The clothing metaphor in *The Maine Woods* is, in part, a celebration of a kind of overt masculinity. Anchored by the text's references to lumbermen and their red flannel shirts, the book explores a type of American manhood defined by physical strength and beauty, community and unity of purpose, visibility and pride, as well as an overt commercialism. In describing the power and authority of the lumbermen of Maine, M.B.G. of the *New Hampshire Statesman* might have been describing the indomitable Simmons of Oak Hall: "The lumbermen in this country are a sort of nation by themselves, and when in the Spring, the river swarms with the hundreds of brawny, muscular 'drivers' in red shirts, without

coats or vests, they constitute 'a power on earth' with whose business no outsider has any inclination to meddle" ("Western"). This is not simple bravado, but an unshakeable confidence in their own abilities and place in the world. It is this assurance that the Concord native envied more than the actual occupation of the lumbermen. These lumbermen and boatmen urge Thoreau to acclaim the physical. He exclaims in the famous "Contact" passage: "I stand in awe of my body" (71). The physicality of the body and the choices we make when we clothe it can occasion guiltless joy for those rare moments of connection.⁵ However, the clothing metaphor in *The Maine Woods* goes beyond the red flannel shirt that is more dominant in the first part of the book. By the end of the work, the clothing metaphor becomes associated with Thoreau's Native American guides and as such become the place for an uncomfortable exploration of race and class in the United States.

"His outfit was the result of a long experience": Joe Aitteon, Joe Polis, and Veils

While *The Maine Woods* is a complete text, unified in part by Thoreau's use of the clothing metaphor, the last two sections of the book and their associations with apparel are more somber.⁶ Indeed, the references to clothing signal a degree of tension bordering on anxiety. For example, in the last two sections, Thoreau's numerous asides about packing his knapsack, washing his clothes, and drying them after wet travel read as slightly obsessive (159, 214, 220, 221, 222, 225, 230, 254, 263, 283, and 318-19). Thoreau is discomforted, and his attention to his clothing marks his unease. Aside from the notices of Thoreau's irritation with his own clothing in the last half of the book, the majority of the references to dress are connected to Native Americans. In his exhaustive study of the Algonquian people, Cory Willmott reasons that "whereas nineteenth-century British and Americans 'read' clothed appearances to directly ascertain identities, including moral character, occupation and class, with a few notable exceptions, Great Lakes Algonquians relied instead upon behaviour as a primary indicator of identity" (Willmott 3).

Applying Willmott's conclusions about clothing and identity cues to *The Maine Woods* might reveal a reason for Thoreau's confusion. Thoreau details the garments of Joe Aitteon, Governor Neptune, and Joe Polis to a remarkable degree, assuming that this examination will help him determine identity and the correct subsequent assessments of social place. And while Thoreau experiences moments of temporary resolution, on the question of racial definitions and class boundaries, the text does not reach a final conclusion.

The extended descriptions of the three Native American men, Joe Aitteon, Governor Neptune, and Joe Polis, stand alone in *The Maine Woods*. It is a text noted for its erasure of individuals; most of Thoreau's travelling companions are unnamed and certainly not physically depicted. Considered alongside the joyful associations with clothing, particularly the red flannel shirt, most dominant in the first part of the text, the anxiety occasioned by the apparel of the Native American men is striking. To begin, Thoreau introduces us to Joe Aitteon at the start of "Chesuncook." After a mildly racist and patronizing aside, "He was a good-looking Indian," and an assessment of the exact pigment of Joe's skin, Thoreau describes the apparel (90). "Besides his under-clothing, he wore a red flannel shirt, woollen pants, and a black Kossuth hat, the ordinary dress of a lumberman, and, to a considerable extent, of the Penobscot Indian [...]. He was the only one of the party who possessed an India-rubber jacket" (90). Aitteon, or "the Indian" as Thoreau commonly refers to him, is the only person in the group to own the coveted India-rubber jacket. His possession of this item, noted for its practicality and status, disrupts Thoreau's assumptions of Native Americans.

Willmott might view this anxious depiction of Aitteon's dress as a threat to "socio-economic order" since Thoreau's culture assumes that "visual appearance was a certain sign of identity" (Willmott 23).⁷ Joe's clothing confuses the viewer. As Doda reminds us, "Putting on an article of clothing not only demonstrate[s] to any viewer the wearer's allegiances, it also invest[s] that person with the symbolic qualities inherent in that

article of clothing itself" (Doda 174). Aitteon is wearing the red flannel shirt, the garment most associated with white lumbermen. Moreover, he is wearing a Kossuth hat, the item named after Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian independence fighter. For an observant nineteenth-century person, Aitteon's appearance is perplexing. His skin color and Native American features dictate one set of racial and class suppositions, but his clothing, the India-rubber jacket, red flannel shirt, and Kossuth hat, steer a viewer to a different, and higher, assessment of the wearer's social status. Indeed, Thoreau points out that Joe had "worked a good deal as a lumberman, and appeared to identify himself with that class" (90).

Is class something that can be selected by an individual? And if class and its associated characteristics is self-determined, what of race? How astringent are the assumptions that align with racial identity? Thoreau and his party continue their journey into the Maine woods with the question of Joe's identity carefully subsumed under the designation, "the Indian." But Thoreau's discomfort reaches a new level after participating in a moose hunt. The epiphanies of the "Contact" passage are missing when Thoreau reasons: "This afternoon's experience suggested to me how base or coarse are the motives which commonly carry men into the wilderness" (119). Some men might defend their slaughter of the moose for clothing, but are they merely rationalizing their violent natures?

Leaving the Maine woods on this second recorded journey, Thoreau is granted a visit with the elderly Governor John Neptune.⁸ The old man receives his visitors in his bedroom, and once again Thoreau offers an extended account of a Native American's clothing. "He had on a black-frock-coat, and black pants, much worn, white cotton shirt, socks, a red silk handkerchief about his neck, and a straw hat" (147). Attired in the costume of a retired businessman fresh from tending his garden patch, Neptune's appearance conveys an elevated class identity. Thoreau follows the enumeration of Neptune's garments with a description of the governor's racial features: "He had very broad cheeks, and his features were decidedly and refreshingly different from those of any of the upstart Native American party" (147). Although some have identified the last phrase as an aside to the Know-

Nothing political party of the 1840s, reading the passage within the context of a physical consideration of Neptune's body, the passage might be more productively read as a literal observation of racial characteristics (Cramer 136, n. 200). Despite his clothing, Neptune's features "refreshingly" read as Native American. However, this moment of resolution is quickly forestalled. Age seems to have equalized the most significant marker of racial boundaries, skin color. Confoundingly, "he was no darker than many old white men" (147). Thankfully, "the Governor, being so old and deaf, permitted himself to be ignored" and Thoreau's party conversed with his relative, "a very sensible Indian" (148). Disregarding the man whose body and physical dress send contradictory messages about race and class, Thoreau focuses on the Native American whose unremarkable appearance – he is not named or described – allow him to ignore a burgeoning anxiety about class and race.

Many critics have rightly noted the significant and difficult presence of Joe Polis in the final section of *The Maine Woods*. Tightening our focus on the text's fascination with Joe Polis's physical appearance and clothing allows us to connect these Polis passages with the entire work. Thoreau's presentation of Joe Polis in this last section is a continuation of the book's exploration of the clothing metaphor. Thoreau opens "The Allegash and East Branch" section with a very controlled portrayal of Joseph Polis, "now addressed familiarly as 'Joe'" (157). Thoreau and Edward Sherman Hoar meet Polis in the latter's yard, while he is dressing a deer. This first advent of Polis in the text is limited to the man's physique; no mention is made of his attire. Polis is merely "stoutly built, perhaps a little above the middle height, with a broad face, and, as others said, perfect Indian features and complexion" (157). According to Willmott, this attention to skin color and facial features is in line with other nineteenth-century accounts of Native American appearance. For most white commentators on Native Americans dressed in European apparel, "the visible signs of race superseded those of dress" (Willmott 30). In this final section of *The Maine Woods* Thoreau begins by tightly controlling his clothing metaphor. The Native American, Joe Polis, is allowed to be seen to prepare the skin of an animal for sale, but his own clothes are beneath notice.

This introduction to Polis is followed quickly by a scene describing a group of other white visitors to the area. He marvels at their leader: "a handsome man about thirty years old, of good height, but not apparently robust, of gentlemanly dress and faultless toilet; such a one as you might expect to meet on Broadway" (161). According to this appearance and the cue of his "faultless" apparel, this man should be a hapless tourist, unprepared for the rigors of the Maine wilderness. But Thoreau is deceived. Indeed, he writes, "I was surprised to find, [...] he was probably the chief white hunter of Maine" (161). Moreover, this expert hunter with the façade of a dandy is an acquaintance of Joe Polis. Both men recognize and respect the other, seemingly unfazed by their supposed differences in class and race. The white man notes that Polis is likely worth "\$6,000," and Polis calls the gentleman a "great hunter" (162). They use the terms of each other's culture to assess the value of the other. Physical appearance and clothing are not allowed to limit the identities of these two men. In response to this exchange, Thoreau returns to his habit of calling his Native American guide "the Indian" and remarks on his habit of near silence in stages or taverns (162).⁹

Joe Polis, and the clothing metaphor, are silently obscure for the next few pages, until the onslaught of "insect foes": no-see-em midges, black flies, moose flies, and mosquitoes (222). These pests are "said to get under your clothes, and produce a feverish heat" (222). Thoreau and his companion attempt to deflect this bombardment with veils which seem to protect them initially from contact with these denizens of the Maine woods. But his defenses are weakened, and only a few pages later Thoreau is led to ponder the significance of Joe Polis's apparel. The observation is quite extensive:

I observed that he wore a cotton shirt, originally white, a greenish flannel one over it, but no waistcoat, flannel drawers, and strong linen or duck pants, which also had been white, blue woolen stockings, cowhide boots, and a Kossuth hat. He carried no change of clothing, but putting on a stout, thick jacket, which he laid aside in the canoe,

and seizing a full-sized axe, his gun and ammunition, and a blanket, which would do for a sail or knapsack, if wanted, and strapping on his belt, which contained a large sheath-knife, he walked off at once, ready to be gone all summer. This looked very independent [...]. (226)

The apparel of Joe Polis is so individual and expert that it cannot be ignored. Joe disregards the garment that is meant to convey status, the waistcoat, but is of limited practical value in the woods. And his other garments are of materials best suited for heavy and active use – flannel, cotton, wool, and cowhide. He is also wearing the symbol of political independence whose spirit swept the United States in the 1840s, the Kossuth hat. Lastly, Polis exemplifies the hardiness of the Western American hero with his range of weapons and tools – axe, gun, and knife. He is the embodiment of independent manhood able to adapt to his environment. Notice his conversion of a blanket into a sail or knapsack. Polis’s “outfit was the result of long experience” (226). Thoreau and his companion are left to “soften [their] stiffened boots and shoes with the pork fat” left over from breakfast and follow Polis’s guidance (226). Despite his attempts to control this final section by excluding references to Polis’s clothing, and hence visual evidence of the Native American’s independence and experience, Thoreau ultimately records his appearance in the text.

Polis continues to eschew the use of a veil to place a barrier between himself and the wilderness. Thoreau wears the veil and gloves around the campfire at night, trying to read. Polis demonstrates his ingenuity and fashions a candle out of a piece of birch bark (282) so that Thoreau can read the texts about life in the forest written by Europeans like René Menard or Jérôme Lalemant (282). Thoreau favors the distant opinions of other white men rather than the knowledge and stories of the Native American expert sitting at his own campfire. Thoreau’s veil and gloves metaphorically separate him from more than the insects in Maine. They give him the false courage to issue one more challenge to Polis’s expertise and subsequent elevated status. On 2 August, “One of us observed to the Indian, ‘You did not stretch your moosehide last night, did you, Mr. Polis?’” (289). As an

example of a passive-aggressive attack, this question is textbook. Thoreau records an answer by Polis that some might first read as simple bluster, but upon reflection contains a complicated assertion of linguistic difference and valuation: "Suppose I stretch 'em, you see 'em. May be your way of talking, may be all right, no Indian way" (289). And here Thoreau adds that Polis was not always silent on their journey. He had shared stories from the Native American oral tradition, which Thoreau infamously dismisses as "a long-winded narrative of his own accord" (289). Thomas Lynch marvels at Thoreau's "surprisingly inattentive" reaction to the stories of Joe Polis: "Thoreau was interested in gathering the original place names from Polis, but was unaware of the importance of the stories behind those names" (Lynch 44, 45).¹⁰ The respect and value given to Polis by the white hunter, the visual significance of Polis's clothing, and Polis's own understanding and acceptance of the knowledge in Thoreau's books are irrelevant. The veil and gloves might as well be ear plugs; Thoreau refuses to recognize the value of the Native American tales when given by a man who, seemingly with little effort, occupies an elevated social status at odds with his "perfect Indian features and complexion" (157).

Thoreau ends the *The Maine Woods* with a short and seemingly digressive description of Mrs. Polis, who "wore a hat and had a silver brooch on her breast" (296-97). Her clothing, like that of her husband, signals her independence. The nineteenth-century woman's hat is a marker of her femininity and style, and the silver brooch is evidence of her financial status and taste. The presence of this rare woman in the text, detailed by her accessories alone, adds another layer to the clothing metaphor explored by Thoreau. What begins as a joyful attention to the red flannel shirts of the lumbermen to celebrate their type of masculinity, visibility, and commercial success becomes a confused exploration of race and class boundaries by the end of the work. When Thoreau leaves the Maine woods and returns to town life, his attention to clothing while in the forest has made him unusually aware of the apparel of women. This clothing metaphor had already become dangerously complicated when associated with the race and class of men. What would happen if he tried to expand the metaphor to include women?

Thoreau resigns himself to the impossibility of the task. While the metaphor does not achieve a resolution in the text, it successfully helps to unify the three sections of *The Maine Woods* and complicate our reading of masculinity, commercialism, race, and class in this undervalued member of the Thoreau canon.

University of Texas at Tyler

Notes

¹ For more information on the culture of the Maine lumbermen, see Tomczik.

² In this respect Stan Tag reminds us of the advantages of reading Thoreau's *The Maine Woods* in the context of memoirs of the lumbermen, especially one written by John S. Springer, *Forest Life and Forest Trees: Comprising Camp-Life Among the Loggers, and Wild-Wood Adventure* (1851).

³ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote to the future senator, Charles Sumner, to complain about Simmons' advertising campaign. "Simmons of Oak Hall has at length carried his poetic joke so far, as to put my name at full length over his doggerel advertisements. Is not this to be prevented?" See Allaback 548.

⁴ Oak Hall ran daily advertisements in most of the major New England and New York periodicals. Citations for six of these advertisements from the *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Boston Daily Atlas*, *The Liberator*, the *Maine Farmer*, and *The National Era* are included in the bibliography.

⁵ James Finley offers a persuasive reading of the "Contact" passage, eventually concluding that "From this crisis emerges the potential for using this contact zone as a space for personal restructuring. Thoreau, then, can refashion his self into a middle space" (Finley 341).

⁶ In viewing *The Maine Woods* as a unified, but flawed, text, I am following the assertions of Linda Frost and James Finley. See Frost 43-44, n. 19 and Finley 351-52, n. 2.

⁷ Thoreau's relationship to Native American culture and Native

Americans has been a topic of interest for many scholars. Robert F. Sayre, Linda Frost, and Joshua Bellin have made significant contributions to this discussion. In connection to *The Maine Woods* more specifically, John J. Kucich contends that the work reveals "an attitude that is shifting, ambivalent, and elusive, marked in turn by primitivist celebration, savagist scorn, and transformative contact" (Kucich).

⁸ Annette Kolodny's work is a wonderful resource for those who wish to understand the Penobscot people and literary culture. She has edited the reissue of the 1893 narrative by Joseph Nicolar, *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, and published her own study of Nicolar's narrative strategies.

⁹ Richard Schneider remarks on Thoreau's seeming admiration for Joe Polis and explains that "Although throughout the chapter Thoreau repeatedly refers condescendingly to Polis as 'the Indian' or 'our Indian' rather than by his name, Joe Polis is nevertheless a reminder that to Thoreau the enlightened individual is finally the goal of history" (Schneider).

¹⁰ Linda Frost asserts that Thoreau's text "crumbles" in this third section, in part due to Joe Polis. She explains, "I believe Polis complicates Thoreau's conception of nature itself, his access to written texts of Anglo culture actually upsetting the nature/ culture dualism" (Frost 25, 37).

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