

Review Essays

Thoreau's Relevance in the Twenty-First Century

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Now Comes Good Sailing: Writers Reflect on Henry David Thoreau, ed. Andrew Blauner (Princeton University Press, 2021), 348pp., \$24.95 cloth.

Thoreau in an Age of Crisis: Uses and Abuses of an American Icon, Ed. Kristen Case, Rochelle L. Johnson, and Henrik Otterberg (Brill/Wilhelm Fink, 2021), 302 pp., \$58.09 cloth.

Both edited collections of essays in this review were published during the coronavirus pandemic, a time that spurred readers to consider anew Henry David Thoreau's challenge to examine where we live and what we live for. Thoreau's relevance to modern life has shifted over the years from an emphasis on his simple living during the Depression, to his civil disobedience during the Viet Nam war years, and more recently to his defense of nature in an era of climate change. While these two books do not give us yet another new Thoreau, they do remind us of his relevance to both personal and national contemporary life.

In *Now Comes Good Sailing*, Andrew Blauner offers twenty-seven essays by current writers meditating on how Thoreau has affected their lives and writing. In addition to being a naturalist, a social reformer, and an advocate of a simpler life, Thoreau was a writer's writer, a master of prose style. Critic Stanley Edgar Hyman has gone so far as to claim that "Thoreau

wrote the only really first-rate prose written by an American, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln.” Current writers can thus expect to have much to learn from him. In an essay in which he discusses Thoreau’s influence on E.B. White, Adam Gopnik reminds us that “one writer speaking to another across a century of misery” can “offer something cheerily and perhaps distinctively American” (267). Although these essays will not necessarily cheer up readers, they do offer a thought-provoking variety of perspectives on Thoreau’s influence on American writers and their lives as well as on American culture in general. They are divided into five rather arbitrary sections. The first, “Excursions Near and Far,” contains essays by writers who have taken Thoreau’s writing on their attempt to reconnect with nature or on their travels to distant lands.

Three writers attempt to replicate Thoreau’s experiences with nature. Novelist Lauren Goff retreats to a newly built cabin on her parents’ forested land in New Hampshire, and non-fiction writer Jordan Salama retreats to Pea Island, a deserted spit of land in Long Island Sound. Goff’s cabin retreat during the pandemic teaches her a new appreciation for the “wild strangeness of [Thoreau’s] close reading of nature,” and that even after a pandemic “we carry our former selves into the future” (11). Salama in a more urban setting attempts to “hold on as best I could to some semblance of Thoreau’s idyllic Nature that, near me and around the world, is quickly slipping away” (49). Novelist Mona Simpson, on the other hand, at the urging of her son reluctantly reenacts Thoreau’s climbing of Mt. Katahdin in Maine and experiences, as she feels Thoreau did, a “stark experience of humility,” of her own limitations as a mother and as a person (68).

Pico Iyer and Megan Marshall, on the other hand, take Thoreau’s writing with them on their experiences in Japan, a country where many appreciate Thoreau’s connection to nature and where there is an active Thoreau Society. Iyer discovers a kinship between Thoreau’s *Walden* and the Japanese classic *Hojoki, The Ten Foot Square Hut* by Kamo-no-Chomei. In considering the two books and in spending time in a Buddhist monastery, Iyer finds that “Thoreau was my best guidebook to Japan” and that “Japan has given me a richer and deeper Thoreau” (22). Marshall too encounters

Chomei's book during her lecture fellowship in Kyoto, Japan, and pays a visit to the site of Chomei's "ten foot square hut" just as many do to Thoreau's cabin site at Walden Pond. When Marshall returns home to deal with the death of her husband and a year later the Covid pandemic arrives, Marshall finds her thoughts returning for comfort to her time in Kyoto and to Chomei's *Hojoki*.

The two most unexpected perspectives in this section, however, are those of Gerald Early and Rafia Zakaria. Early recounts how he first encountered Thoreau's *Walden* during a stay with his sister in San Francisco after his high school graduation in 1969. This was the "summer of love" and a time of revival of Black culture. At a time when prison literature such as Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* were popular among Black readers, to young Early *Walden* seemed to be "another type of prison literature [...] literature obsessed with wanting to escape from prison" (29). For Black people in 1969, nature meant freedom by "ridding ourselves of the White man's values, of building for ourselves, of creating our own beauty standards, our own cosmology, our own reality" (28). For Black people "to create their own kind of civilized life with their own effort and to civilize the world through their effort. That was *Walden's* message to me," Early concludes (28).

Rafia Zakaria writes as a Pakistani-American for whom *Walden* raises the question of the role of solitude in women's lives. In Pakistan, Zakaria tells us, "the common meaning attached to any wish to be alone is concern. Those who wish to be alone are imagined as feeling excluded, and in Pakistan, where families are tightly knit together, this requires correction, pity, and efforts at inclusion" (52). The other higher meaning of solitude for Pakistanis would be "what is sought by mystics" (52). Even in America Thoreau felt some of the former attitude toward solitude when neighbors kept asking him why he chose to live alone in the woods, and Thoreau sometimes felt the latter mystical solitude as well. But what Thoreau could not feel was the sense of dread amid nature that as a woman Zakaria sometimes feels. When she visits Walden Pond and the replica of Thoreau's cabin late in the afternoon, as visitors are leaving she suddenly finds herself

feeling alone and unsafe, because “places that are secluded and silent and redolent with natural beauty are also the places that provide opportunities to the male predators who lurk in the shadows” (59). For Zakaria solitude is more complicated than it was for Thoreau. “Solitude without solace,” she reminds us, “is also real and too often it is the lot of women” (57).

While this first of five sections fills a third of the volume, essays in the other four are usually briefer. The second section, “Deliberate Living,” begins with an essay in which Alan Lightman expresses concern about how the increasing pace of modern living threatens creativity. Contrasting to Rafia Zakaria’s concern about the possible dangers of Thoreau’s solitude, Lightman worries that we are losing the possibility of the “nourishing solitude” that Thoreau achieved at Walden Pond and finds a silver lining in the pandemic that forced many of us into a protective but perhaps creative solitude. Sherry Turkle also sees value in the solitary working from home so common during the pandemic and how it was facilitated by technology: “Teaching, performance, politics, family life, the pursuit of love: all of these were reimaged on Zoom” (123). But she also urges us to follow Thoreau’s example to resist too much isolation: “As we read Thoreau, what stands out is how many and various are the people he spoke to in his cabin, in nature, on walks, his intentional spaces. We need to build spaces where we can talk to people who are new to us, where we can talk to people with whom we don’t agree” (125). Given the current political divisions in the news and social media, this goal is still clearly a work in progress.

The other three essays in this section are less obviously related to the “deliberate living” theme but do nonetheless offer fresh perspectives. Robert Sullivan sees Thoreau as a performance artist whose art is best approached through humor: “a good strategy for approaching *Walden* as an art piece centers on packing your sense of humor” (106). Jennifer Finney Boylan recounts her transgender journey from being male to being female, a physical transformation Thoreau could not have imagined. Yet Boylan finds kinship with Thoreau: “Thoreau and I had been wrestling with different versions of the same dilemma all along, what one Irish song calls ‘the turning of flesh and body into soul’” (146). To conclude this section, Kristen

Case, who is editing Thoreau's "Kalendar," focuses on the way in which writing and life can come together in Thoreau's "persistent desire to double his life [...] living and writing about it, attending to *the still life in America* asleep under the snow, the tracks of which he knew how to read" (158).¹

The connection between the title of the third section, "Directions of His Dreams," and the essays therein is hard to see. The first two essays focus on Thoreau as naturalist, a topic that seems more about facts than about dreams. George Howe Colt reminds us of Thoreau's love of ice skating and makes an interesting connection between it, ecology, and climate change. In the winter of 1855 Thoreau took a long solitary skate on the Concord River, covering thirty miles, at the end of which he realized that for the first time he was able "connect one part (one shore) with another in my mind [...] to know the whole as I ordinarily knew a few miles of it only" (170). This experience offers, Colt suggests, "a window into what years later would be called ecology" (171). Thoreau's skating also foreshadowed climate change, because "In Thoreau's day, the Concord River was frozen solid almost all winter; these days it is rarely thick enough for skating" (175).

Michelle Nijhuis also views Thoreau as a pioneer of ecology, a word that would not be coined and a scientific discipline that would not develop until after his death. After reminding us of Thoreau's early interest in Darwin and his meticulous recording of phenological data, Nijhuis concludes that "Thoreau did not foresee mass extinction or climate change, but he did understand that life was not static, and that he bore witness to a world in process" (186).

The other three essays in this section are a mixed bag. A.O. Scott discusses Thoreau's favorite fruit. In his essay, "Wild Apples," Thoreau worries that the wild apple "is a fruit that will probably become extinct in New England." It is, Scott points out, "a complaint—not a new one, and one that never gets old—about the standardization of experience [...] about the making of wild things into commodities" (197). Zoe Pollack meditates on the difficulty of capturing the transitory connections between nature and thought. Thoreau, she observes, "found the bends of his mind mirrored in the rush of the Concord and in the flight of birds" (204); Pollack struggles

to connect memories of a walk with her father at Walden Pond to her current life in California's wildfire country. James Marcus revisits the oft noted affection that Thoreau had for Emerson's wife, Lidian. Thoreau writes of her as a sister and as "The feminine of me," an example, Marcus suggests, "of gender fluidity before we had a name for it" (215).

The essays in the fourth section, "Practicalities," fit its title more obviously. Amor Towles gives a close reading to two paragraphs from Thoreau's comments on clothing in *Walden* to illustrate Thoreau's masterful prose style: "Rather than propelling us forward with his prose toward some narrative conclusion, Thoreau invites us to put his book down at the end of every other sentence, so that we can meditate on the nuances of what we've just read" (222). He then proceeds to show how Thoreau expands a practical topic like clothing to "lead us always toward a better understanding of ourselves" (226). Adam Gopnik also focuses on the practicalities of Thoreau's writing style. In discussing Thoreau's influence on E.B. White, Gopnik claims that Thoreau "invented one form of American plain speech, or homespun" (265). However, unlike the plain style of Abraham Lincoln or Stephen Crane, which is "firm, simple, clear, tragic," Thoreau's style is "sly, sincere, barbed, and more what the kids now call 'subversive'" (266). It is, Gopnik claims, "the sound of simplicity for people not the least bit simple" (266).

The other three essays in this section consider such practical matters as work, houses, and the cost of things and experiences. Celeste Headlee argues that the "young Thoreau saw work as a necessary evil," (228) but that eventually he changed his mind. She accurately reminds us that "In his forty-four years of life, Thoreau did an astounding amount of work" and "proved that one can love one's profession, integrate that work with one's leisure, and allow the blending of the two to enhance both the labor and the respite" (237). Paul Elie sees Thoreau as a participant in, though not the originator of, the tiny house movement, which dates to the nineteenth century. It exemplifies, he says, "the aspiration to dwell, if only part-time, in a realm beyond the nature-culture divide," "to attain an uneasy peace between wilderness and civilization" (245). Geoff Wisner catalogs the many times Thoreau uses the phrase "worth the while" throughout his writing, especially throughout the

Journal. These passages, not often commented on, raise the interesting question of why Thoreau found some things worthy and some not.

While the first section of this collection focuses on writers who took Thoreau with them to distant places, the last section, "At Walden" brings writers back to Concord and Walden Pond. Will Eno recalls his childhood growing up in the Concord area. His memories of bicycling through Concord Center to a swimming hole inspire him to meditate on matters of identity and mutability. Much of Thoreau's writing, he observes, focuses on "common questions about who we are and how we got here" (276). Thoreau's Journal records his life in process, which invites us to understand that "to move between the present and a memory, and for each to occasionally feel distant and weird, is to be alive" (281).

Stacey Vanek Smith responds to her first visit to Walden Pond, which, near the end of the essay, begins with disappointment. The first things she sees are a \$30 parking fee and a sign inviting visitors to buy something at the Shop at Walden Pond. Having spent most of her essay commenting on Thoreau's critique of capitalist economy, these seem like betrayals of Thoreau's spirit. When she first read *Walden* at age sixteen, she had found the first chapter on "Economy" to be boring. Experiencing Walden Pond in person as an adult, however, changes her mind. Finding the site of Thoreau's cabin, she walks down the slope to the edge of the pond and has an epiphany: "There it was: life. And just like that I understood" (298). She realizes along with Thoreau that "If Economy curses everything it touches, nature saves everything it touches" (299). Now her advice to young readers is "to read 'Economy' carefully, and to reread it" (300).

Wen Stephenson's meditation on Thoreau focuses on three walks that he takes through places that Thoreau frequented: a walk to Fairhaven Bay on the Sudbury River near Walden Pond, another to the beaches that Thoreau explored on Cape Cod, and a third along the railroad from Concord to Walden Pond. The walk to Fairhaven Bay reminds him that "Henry saw the landscape change from decade to decade, even year to year" (312). Walking on Cape Cod also reminds Stephenson of nature's mutability: "the waves will come, the shore will shift, with us or without us" (317). And

following the tracks of the Fitchburg railroad, he ponders how technology has changed the world: “I thought of the locomotives, the steam and the coal smoke. [...] global industry and technological hubris; empire and oil and Anthropocene” (320).

Tatiana Schlossberg focuses on Thoreau’s observations of commercial ice cutters harvesting ice from Walden Pond as an example of “the risks of treating nature as a commodity and doing so on a global scale, since in our time, we know the long-term environmental and climate costs and yet continue as if we didn’t” (304-5). Comparing Thoreau to environmental activist Greta Thunberg, Schlossberg disagrees with Thoreau’s “assessment that changes cannot be made by working within the system” (309). “You also need people like Greta,” she says, “who can bring people together, even as they begin by acting alone” (309).

The volume concludes with a charming cartoon by Sandra Boynton illustrating Thoreau’s simplicity theme.

Thoreau scholars will not find new information in these essays, but they will find some fresh perspectives on Thoreau’s relevance to twenty-first century culture. There is the all-too-rare Black perspective offered by Gerald Early, and dissenting comments on Thoreau’s praise of solitude from Pakistani feminist Rafia Zakaria. A Black view of nature as escape from a cultural prison, and a feminist view of solitude in nature as a source of fear will be new to most readers. Although Thoreau has already sometimes been considered homosexual, Jennifer Finney Boylan finds his writing also impactful on her experience as a transsexual; and Paul Elie sees Thoreau as a forerunner of the tiny house movement. For general readers this is a volume to be savored in small doses, a book to place by an easy chair or on a nightstand so that one can read one essay at a time at leisure. Because all the contributors are professional writers themselves, the reader can rest assured that each essay will be thoughtfully and skillfully written.



In *Thoreau in an Age of Crisis: Uses and Abuses of an American Icon*, the editors have gathered essays from a symposium held in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2018 on “The Uses and Abuses of Thoreau at 200.” While

Blauner's collection above demonstrated the relevance of Thoreau to individual writers today, this more scholarly collection attempts to demonstrate his relevance to the broader human experience. In her foreword to the volume, Sandra Petrulionis suggests that "In this, our age of crisis we can best ensure Thoreau's relevance for troubled times to come by insisting on the radicalism of his questions," and she cautions those who venerate him about the danger "in rendering Thoreau uncritically, in sanitizing him, in reading him in isolation removed from the crises of his time" (xi). "We abuse Thoreau," she says, "by *not arguing* with him" (xi). Although the writers in this volume do not always argue with or question Thoreau, or even show him addressing any kind of crisis, they do offer fresh perspectives organized around five crisis-related themes: grief, science, the more-than-human, race, and Thoreau's reception.

The volume is bookended by two essays on the topic of grief. In the first essay Rochelle Johnson focuses on the kingfisher bird to show how Thoreau connects the natural world to human politics. Citing a Journal entry in which Thoreau includes both observations of kingfishers on his daily walks and comments on the evils of slavery, Johnson sees the kingfisher as Thoreau's way of grieving for a troubled world: "In a world wrapped up in defying even human liberty, what chance is there for civilization to value a bird hunting along the Assabet river?" (9). She also cites Thoreau's familiarity with the myth of Alcyone and Ceyx in which Alcyone is drowned at sea, and as his wife Ceyx grieves for him they are turned into kingfishers. The lovers lose their humanity but are granted the consolation of a quiet space and time for adjusting to their new forms, a time referred to as "halcyon" days. Thoreau uses this symbol of a peaceful paradise both in *Cape Cod*, where it is a heavenly afterlife for drowned immigrants, and in "Walking," where the west is imagined as an earthly paradise. The west and the wild, Johnson concludes "serve, for Thoreau, as halcyon days, a hope in troubled times" (21).

Although Thoreau grieved deeply for his brother John, he was known among friends as someone seldom given to empathy, someone not easy to get close to. As his neighbor Elizabeth Hoar famously said of him, "I love

Henry, but do not like him.” In the grief essay at the end of the volume, Kristen Case focuses on Thoreau’s “Kalendar,” his detailed notes on seasonal changes, to suggest that he was more emotionally vulnerable than even his friends might have guessed. Case sees Thoreau’s increasing awareness of the cyclical nature of time as a defense against mortality: “the cyclical, retrospective temporality of the Kalendar seems to me to represent an adaptive response to both physical confinement and the recognition of mortality” (255). This essentially feminist turn toward Thoreau’s vulnerability and grief, Case suggests, “brings Thoreau into closer conversation with contemporary political movements that emphasize vulnerability, precarity, and death” (262).

Between these two essays, the first section focuses on Thoreau and science. Robert Sattelmeyer offers an overview of how critical scholarship has slowly evolved to an increased appreciation of Thoreau as scientist. He offers two reasons why this appreciation has taken so long to arrive. The first, he says, involves “the evolution of critical and scholarly appreciation (and sometimes dismissal) of [Thoreau’s scientific] work” (26). “The second and more interesting evolution,” he suggests, “is that of Thoreau’s own scientific practice during the last ten years of his life” (26). Thoreau’s turn toward science in the last decade of his life was positive, rather than negative as some critics have suggested, and important “to scientific research in ecology, environmental studies, and climate change in our own time” (31).

As counterpoint to Sattelmeyer’s advocating the relevance of Thoreau’s science today, Denis Noson explores the relevance of today’s acoustical science to our understanding of Thoreau in his own time. Although past critical studies have attended to Thoreau’s deep interest in sounds as a source of literary metaphor and imagery, Noson applies modern acoustical science to suggest that Thoreau “over time developed an ever more sophisticated ear” (41). Using graphs and charts, he analyzes Thoreau’s accounts of three kinds of sound: bird songs in a forest, winds at the Cliffs and Walden Pond, and the echoes of his own voice at Fair Haven Bay. Thoreau’s intense attention to the nuances of sound, Noson claims, “establishes him as an acoustic ecology visionary” (43).

The next section focuses on "Thoreau and the More-Than-Human." The first essay in this group adheres to this theme by focusing on the transcendental. Ronald Wesley Hoag reprises and extends his groundbreaking argument that Thoreau's experience on Mt. Katahdin in *The Maine Woods* was one of reverence for the sublime rather than, as many critics claim, one of fear. To Edmund Burke's standard definition of the sublime, which includes both the element of fear and reverence for a higher power, Hoag adds the category of the "mild sublime." The mild sublime adds the element of beauty to fear and reverence. Thoreau, Hoag asserts, finds a "continuum—often a conjunction—of sublimity and beauty in wild nature and its milder counterpart, with spiritual significance their communicated essence and reverence in the beholder the conscious response" (71). This addition of beauty to the definition of the sublime allows Hoag to extend his argument both to other parts of *The Maine Woods* and to other of Thoreau's texts, from *Walden* to *Cape Cod* to "Walking" and "The Dispersion of Seeds." If read together with Hoag's 1982 essay "The Mark on the Wilderness," this essay offers a thorough and convincing account of Thoreau's deep interest in the sublime.

Mark Luccarelli explores how Thoreau was torn between two conflicting concepts of time. On the one hand, synchronized time is the linear concept of time associated with the progress of civilization. Desynchronized time is a less linear, more cyclical concept of time to be found in the natural cycles of the landscape. Luccarelli proceeds to explore Thoreau's conflict between these two types of time in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River* and *The Maine Woods*. In *A Week*, he says, "Synchronized time gives way to landscape [...] to actual landscapes that reflect in moments of apprehension the potential unity of inner and outer, mind and matter, and meaning and substance that could unite natural fact and culture" (96). In *The Maine Woods*, Luccarelli argues, Thoreau sees that "as a vast and still largely unexplored territory, Maine might demonstrate the salutary effect of close contact with nature" (102). In both books, "Thoreau struggles to see human history as identical with the higher purpose of nature" (106). Luccarelli concludes that the globalization of life in our era

represents a growing synchronization of linear time that could benefit from Thoreau's attention to the wisdom inherent in the desynchronized natural cycles of nature.

The actual Maine Woods is the subject of James Finley's essay on the creation of the Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument in 2016. Finley considers why the Maine Woods was named a national monument rather than a national park. National Park status would have meant that any use of Maine Woods resources would be precluded and that even current residents could not continue to live there. Finley chronicles the history of the debate over national park or national monument status and argues that the national monument designation is more appropriate and more consistent with Thoreau's own experience of the Maine Wood because it allows for multiple uses rather than total preservation. In the famous passage at the end of the "Chesuncook" chapter of *The Maine Woods* arguing for preservation of the woods, Thoreau's concern, Finley observes, "is not wildness or ecological phenomena, but instead villages threatened by civilization" (123). He concludes that *The Maine Woods* in general and the "Chesuncook" chapter specifically should be seen as "decidedly political documents that protest Native dispossession and the destruction of ecological resources" (124) consistent with the goals of a national monument.

The next four essays deal with Thoreau and Race, the first two with Thoreau's interest in Native Americans and the other two with his involvement with the abolition of slavery. John J. Kucich presents a balanced discussion of "Thoreau's Indian problem": "how to square [Thoreau's] deep interest in Indian history and culture with his conspicuous silence on Indian genocide" (127). Thoreau's encounters with Native Americans such as his Maine Woods guides, Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis, shifted his interest "from Native Americans per se to what it means to be native in America" (123). Thoreau's interest in Native Americans should be seen, Kucich argues, "not as a disappointing counterpoint to his antislavery writing but as a component of his interest in natural history" (123). The problem, Kucich points out, is that "for every instance where Thoreau plays Indian as a way of celebrating a naturalized cultural succession, there are others where Thoreau learns

respectfully from Native people" (142). After considering Thoreau's intense interest in Native Americans both in *The Maine Woods* and in the Journal, Kucich suggests that "we need to acknowledge both the power of Thoreau's vision [of Native Americans] and its limits" (142). Thoreau's writings, he argues, "insightful and problematic as they are, can help foster" an on-going conversation about how to build a community in which all of us can flourish. [...] but they can't be the last word" (142).

Thoreau was not only interested in Indian history and culture but was considered by some of his contemporaries to have absorbed Indian characteristics into his own demeanor. Emerson was heard to say of Thoreau that he "was more like an Indian [...] than a white man" (145). Brent Ranalli explores how Thoreau adopted his interest in Indians not only into his personal mannerisms but into his philosophy. Ranalli reviews Thoreau's well-known interest in Indian customs and artifacts, but his main emphasis is on how Thoreau tried to exemplify certain virtues frequently attributed in his day to Indians: virtues such as manly heroism, personal independence, simplicity, stoicism, and sympathy with wild nature. This "virtue ethics" philosophy, Ranalli argues, dates as far back as Aristotle but can also be found in one of Thoreau's assigned Harvard textbooks, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* by the Scottish Enlightenment writer Dugald Stewart. Virtue ethics, Ranalli argues, suggests that "Thoreau must have subscribed to a sort of theory of character formation that would explain how *cultivation of virtue* is facilitated by *imaginative role play*," that is, playing Indian (156). These two essays on Thoreau's interest in Indians address how Thoreau dealt or failed to deal with the plight of Indians in his own day but only hint briefly at relevance to Native American issues today.

The next two essays deal with the racial issue of slavery both in his day and its relevance in ours. Rebecca Kneale Gould first argues that Thoreau should be read alongside African American writers. Against Thoreau's pastoral view of nature, ornithologist J. Drew Lanham writes about how his excursions looking for birds among the trees remind him of trees used in earlier eras as lynching sites, and theologian Christopher Carter is reminded by a student that planting an urban garden is too reminiscent of the forced

agriculture of slave life. Gould next points out that there are passages in *Walden* in which “Thoreau’s white, privileged position shines through in ways that can make a modern reader squirm” (171). Nevertheless, she says, “Thoreau’s broader view is clear: the rampant materialism of his day is built on *both* the backs of struggling mill-workers in the North *and* enslaved laborers in the South” (171). She concludes with a close reading of the “white lily” passage at the end of “Slavery in Massachusetts.” Connecting the passage not only to slavery but also to Thoreau’s grief over the death of his brother John, Gould recognizes “the potentially escapist stance that Thoreau’s place of privilege provides,” but she also sees “Thoreau exerting a tremendous force of will against both the forces that threaten to destroy his country and those that threaten to destroy his spirit” (179).

In the last essay in the “Race” section, Mark Gallagher demonstrates a direct influence of Thoreau on African-American writer William Melvin Kelley, the originator of the term “woke” and the author of the novel *A Different Drummer*. The plot of Kelley’s novel involves its protagonist, Tucker Caliban, declaring his emancipation from an oppressive white society by burning his own farmhouse and leading an exodus of his neighbors away from a racist society. The novel, Gallagher argues, “challenges the American myth of individualism from the perspective of the African-American self” (183). Recognition of Kelley’s novel is important, Gallagher asserts, because “there have been few African-American writers who have claimed Thoreau as a major influence,” and because “by studying Kelley’s work we can correct a critical blind spot in which Thoreau seems to have a limited cultural appeal and challenge the idea of Thoreau as part of a more racially-blind literary tradition” (184). Together with Gerald Early’s essay in the Blauner volume above, Gallagher and Gould’s essays thoughtfully challenge the common assumption that Thoreau, despite his abolitionism, has little relevance to racial issues and African-American writers in the twenty-first century.

The last group of essays focuses on “Thoreau’s Reception,” a topic that pertains to the “uses and abuses” focus of the volume. Michelle C. Neely considers *Walden* in the context of American utopianism by contrasting it to B.F. Skinner’s *Walden Two*. *Walden* is seen by some scholars of

utopianism as a failure because it urges us to begin our lives anew but refuses to show how to do it. Both books, however, share an emphasis on experimenting with a new vision of an ideal life. Skinner's experiment involves engineering a social structure in which every individual's need will be met. Thoreau's experiment takes place in the individual self, on the assumption, as Neely says, that "transforming the self has the potential to transform the public sphere" (207). For Thoreau, "not only individual lives but America itself should be a constantly transforming experiment," and rather than more obviously social utopian plans such as Skinner's, "it is to *Walden's* utopian legacies that we should attend" (215).

The next essay, by Icelandic scholar Bergur Þorgeirsson, is not about Thoreau's reception by later generations but rather about an Icelandic writer's reception by Thoreau. Early in Thoreau's writing career, translations of medieval Icelandic literature were appearing in English translation; of particular interest to Thoreau were the heroic sagas of Snorri Sturluson. About the same time Thoreau was introduced by Emerson to the works of Thomas Carlyle. The emphasis on the heroic that Thoreau found in both Snorri and Carlyle enriched Thoreau's sense of their shared Anglo-Saxon heritage and of the virtue in being a hero willing to march to the beat of a different drummer. "In the spirit of the hero" Þorgeirsson argues, "Thoreau stretches far in his pursuit to mold his experience" and to be "the poet of his own life" (230).

The last essay in this section is a lively memoir by Andrew McMurray about how he copes with the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump (which he dubs the Trumpocene) through two disparate activities: stand up paddle boarding and reading Thoreau. Paddle boarding offers some relief from anxiety over Trump: "As the summer wore on, I found that my energetic paddling moderated Trump-induced angst, but not sufficiently" (235). After pointing out some amusing parallels between Trump and Thoreau and considering some of Thoreau's advice, he finally realizes that the best of that advice is to "write while the heat is in you." And so he starts writing the essay we are reading. In acknowledging Thoreau's influence on him as a writer, McMurray's essay could have as easily fit into the Blauner volume, because it is not so much about Thoreau's reception as about his own use of Thoreau.

The volume closes with an Afterword by Henrik Otterberg that brings us back to the main theme of the book: crisis. Thoreau warned us, Otterberg reminds us, of many of today's crises: "He warned of proliferating encroachments and traps; craven rather than responsible political classes; uninformed, entertainment addicted rather than knowledgeable and engaged voters; a popular and pandering rather than alert and critical press" (276). His response late in his career was to call for "Nature reserves and parks to be set aside as refuge against the onslaught" (276), a partial solution at best to a crisis of his day. Thoreau, Otterberg claims, "arguably helps us see and act on our own [crises]. We must call out, protest, and hinder depredations of our common environments; stand up for those disenfranchised by global warming; and reform our economics toward longterm sustenance" (278).

Academic conferences such as the one from which these essays are gleaned are necessarily "big tent" events. To make a conference financially viable, papers and panels that do not specifically target the conference theme are included. So it is with this collection of essays. Some of them, though interesting and useful themselves, have little or nothing to do with the book's title topics. It is hard to see how Thoreau's interests in bird songs or Icelandic epics relate to Thoreau and crisis or to "uses and abuses" of his writing. That said, the essays that address the book's main themes do open fresh perspectives on Thoreau's concerns with grief, with race, with abuse of nature, with social reform, and with their relevance to our own time. *Thoreau in an Age of Crisis* will be essential to academic libraries. Also, as not only a resource for research but as a handsomely printed volume complete with vivid color illustrations and a ribbon page marker, it would be a welcome addition to the private collections of literary scholars.

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Note

- ¹ All italicized words within quoted matter are original emphases.

