

In the Company of Presentists: Defending Thoreau against Joshua Bellin’s “In the Company of Savagists”

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Abstract:

Several scholars have portrayed Henry David Thoreau as having a blind spot when it came to the persecution and dispossession of Native Americans. One of the articles that set the tone for such essays about his “Indian Problem” (Kucich 2018, in print 2021) is Joshua Bellin’s “In the Company of Savagists”, which alleges that Thoreau’s *“attempt to forge a radical position beyond his own civilization depended on the bedrock tenet of that civilization, the displacement and recuperation of an Indian Other”* (Bellin 2008: 25). Bellin’s declaration that *“It becomes evident that the drama of following in aboriginal footsteps enables him [Thoreau] at once to absorb and to expunge the Indians”* (p. 22) even makes it sound as if Thoreau were complicit in genocide. The following gloss on Bellin’s seminal paper shows how he developed his argument by ignoring and eliding passages in Thoreau’s works that disprove his contention that Thoreau never expressed indignation about the abuse of Native Americans or stood up in their defense. By examining Bellin’s omissions and rhetorical tactics, this essay shows how his case against Thoreau is grounded in a presentism that ignores prominent evidence against such an approach to understanding Thoreau’s stance on these complex issues.

Joshua Bellin’s essay “In the Company of Savagists” is fascinating because it reflects the presentism and ideological demands of the current academic climate. In what follows, I will gloss and parse his essay page by page (rather than presenting a thematic examination) to show how Bellin’s repeated use of similar and related rhetorical strategies leads to one instance of argumentative slippage after another. This largely linear and systematic analysis of his arguments will show how their construction is weak and their evidence questionable. As we’ll see, Bellin weights and slants his discussion by:

- Focusing almost exclusively on Thoreau’s Indian Notebooks while ignoring many passages about Native Americans in his journals and books where Thoreau was weighing his words and developing his ideas more fully and carefully,
- Elevating the notebooks to the status of “Books” to make them look like the result of mature reflection rather than the equivalent of a pile of photocopies and research notes, thereby setting them up as strawmen,
- Repeatedly dismissing statements from the notebooks themselves that conflict with his assertions,
- Ignoring those of Thoreau’s writings that undermine his arguments, including ones from Thoreau’s account of his conversation with John Brown (10/21/1859), that Bellin, as a Thoreau scholar, must know, as well as such a canonical work as “Civil Disobedience” (1849),
- Arranging statements anachronistically and ignoring the evolution of Thoreau’s thinking about Native Americans, thereby making some of

Thoreau's immature remarks appear to stand for mature positions and making his subsequent changes seem paradoxical and untenable.

By examining such recurrent instances, I hope to demonstrate how their cumulative effect forefronts the presentist agenda of Bellin's arguments, which seeks to occlude both Thoreau's maturation and his contribution to indigenous studies.

Bellin's thesis can be outlined in the following quotes from his paper:

"...it becomes apparent, he writes, "that the Indian Books were neither exceptional nor countercultural" (p. 2).

"Instead, they [the twelve notebooks] reveal Thoreau to have been unable or unwilling to liberate himself from the dominant mid-century complex of beliefs concerning American Indians, their relationship to Euro-American civilization, and their ultimate fate" (p. 2).

"...the ethnologic mindset was congenial—or even necessary—to his radical position in other realms of social conscience" (p. 3).

Thoreau's "attempt to forge a radical position beyond his own civilization depended on the bedrock tenet of that civilization, the displacement and recuperation of an Indian Other" (p. 25).

One of the first signs of argumentative slippage occurs in the following passage, whose logic seems dubious:

*"Brienne Keith suggests, following Dean, that "Thoreau could easily be named one of the top ten ethnologists in the nineteenth century. . . . Through the Indian Books, it may be possible to glimpse the American Indian culture through the eyes of an acute, detached, and inclusive observer (2)." This is meant as high praise, but, in fact, it is the **most damning indictment possible** [my bold face] of Thoreau's work. For nineteenth-century ethnology, particularly during the decade in which Thoreau compiled the bulk of his Indian Books, was not remotely acute, detached, or inclusive" (p. 3).*

We can address the ways in which this passage is deeply presentist by shifting the timeframe in order to examine an analogous situation from the history of science. It's easy, for example, for us to criticize medieval beliefs that bleeding was a good way of treating illness, despite the blood's fluctuations in viscosity, pressure, pulse, and temperature, or that bodily processes were linked to the heavens (although seasons and tides are indeed governed respectively by the sun and moon). But, in such criticisms, our presentist accusations about superstition and misinformation would miss the point that medieval doctors, astronomer-astrologists, and alchemists-chemists were actively exploring and testing solutions based on inherited knowledge, which they sought to develop and refine. Doing so would also miss the point that today's theories and hypotheses were built on their forward-looking efforts, adjustments, and observations.

In this context, we can launch an argument that Thoreau struggled with the received knowledge of his time, and managed to work his way largely free from its constraints, setting the foundations for many modern attitudes, including contemporary beliefs concerning the rights and dignity of all human beings.

A major problem with Bellin's analysis is that he makes a modern observer's nomination of Thoreau to the list of the top ten ethnologists of the 19th century (based on hindsight, of course) a strawman for tarring Thoreau with the sins of 19th-century ethnology. There is a disjoint here because Thoreau now stands out as an early ethnologist precisely because he managed to climb out of some of the traps that caught many of his contemporaries. Bellin's retrospective perspectives collide, since he uses the observer's identification of Thoreau as an exceptional ethnologist to lump him in with run-of-the-mill practitioners, who were indeed often racists. This conflation of opposing sets of modern standards goes beyond paradox, since it involves a persistently presentist sleight-of-hand.

Finally, this passage provides examples of the way Bellin often resorts to categorical statements ("*most damning possible*") and assertions that any evidence in Thoreau's favor is actually a paradoxical "*indictment*." Such flaws pervade his argument, making the dubious logic and tactics here stand for problems that occur throughout the article.

Here is the next relevant passage:

"to support this belief" - "in a pervasive, essential Indianness immune to variation or amelioration" (pp. 3-4) - "laborers in the field filled thousands of pages on everything from Indian clothing to burial practices to languages to skin color" (p. 4).

The assertion that the ethnologists of the time were gathering information *a priori* to prove that Native Americans were incapable of change seems like a stretch, especially when applied to Thoreau, since he was applying the observation-based methodologies developed by empiricists and encyclopedists, which were giving humans enough information to see for the first time how everything from species to continents actually did change. Thoreau's information-gathering did not have anything to do with supporting the immunity of anything from plants to rivers (whose flowering times and levels he recorded) to "*variation or amelioration*." On the contrary, the accumulation of ethnographic information, for example, gave Thoreau insights into the ways that Native Americans like Joe Polis were adapting to the 19th-century economy and the ways that indigenous institutions mirrored European ones. "Instead of the council-house," he noted for example, "is the legislature" (3/19/42).

The next problematic passage conflates the way some supposedly objective white intellectuals were contributing to the discourse that accompanied the dispossession of Native Americans with Thoreau's own work. Although Bellin's contention that "*... the scientific emphasis on racial incompatibility tended to justify political dispossession*" (p. 4) is true as far as it goes (I would have preferred "pseudo-scientific"), he ignores Thoreau's contempt, as expressed, for example, in the following passages, for the racist historians and intellectuals who

pretended to describe contemporary Native Americans with scientific objectivity:

“It frequently happens that the historian... [has] spoken slightly of the Indian... using only the terms – miserable – wretched – pitiful ... they have hastily disposed of this refuse of humanity (as they might have called it).... But even the indigenous animals are inexhaustibly interesting to us. How much more then the indigenous man of America! ... We wish to know particularly what manner of men [the Indians] were – how they lived here – their relation to nature – their arts & their customs – their fancies & reflections” (5/3/59).

And, second, “One [historian] tells you with more contempt than pity that the Indian had no religion.... Pray how much more religion has the historian? If Henry Ward Beecher knows so much more about God than another – if he has made some discovery of truth in this direction, I would thank him to publish it... with as few flourishes as possible” (2/3/59).

It is interesting to note in the context of this discussion of white historians that Bellin’s later condemnation of Thoreau’s supposed “*rejection of their* [Native Americans’] *ability to produce historical records*” (p. 17) also contrasts with Thoreau’s own words, for Thoreau insisted that Native Americans were actually the only ones who could record their own history properly, since any other historians were self-centered and biased: “For Indian deeds there must be an Indian memory - the white man will remember his own only” (1842-1844: 6 J2, pp. 58-60).

As one reads further, it becomes clear that Bellin’s efforts to damn Thoreau by association with the ethnologic racism of his era include the tactic of starting the essay with **seven pages** of examples of such racism, without giving much proof that Thoreau mirrored those sentiments upon reflection (let alone any acknowledgment that he ever decried them). After tarring Thoreau with the same broad brush as his racist contemporaries, Bellin ignores almost every instance in which Thoreau expressed indignation about the mistreatment of Native Americans, including his declaration in Civil Disobedience (1849) that the dispossession of Native Americans was one of the three reasons he’d chosen to go to jail, and his indignation in June 1861 at the way the Sioux were being cheated of their annuities.

Furthermore, even when Bellin acknowledges that passages of Thoreau’s notebooks could be construed as supporting native rights, he dismisses them as exceptions that prove his rule or, by some streak of perversity, as proof of the opposite of what they seem to mean. When you add the list of Bellin’s non-binding exceptions and inverted meanings to his failure to quote the passage from Civil Disobedience or a journal entry about the conversation with John Brown (10/21/1859), in which Thoreau expressed indignation about the massacre of Native Americans in California, it becomes clear that Bellin has decided to lump Thoreau in with the dead white males (and females) who failed to live up to presentist ideological standards.

The next passage again illustrates two of the strategies Bellin uses to load his dice: tarnishing Thoreau by association with ethnologic racists and elevating Thoreau's own pile of research notes to the status of works prepared for publication.

"... so did Thoreau find in Schoolcraft corroboration of beliefs that his many other sources—and he himself—had harbored for some time. Thoreau's Indian Books thus mirror Schoolcraft's gargantuan undertaking not only in form—page after page, volume after volume of data quarried from sources as diverse as they are undeviating— but in effect: in the Indian Books, Thoreau captured (or was captivated by) as full a panorama of ethnologic racism as the mid-nineteenth century had to offer" (p. 6).

Once again, this excerpt contains a grain of truth, but the point is that passages¹ from Thoreau's books and journals prove that he increasingly saw through those "ethnologic" beliefs, and – as we have already seen - even decried them publicly and privately.

Bellin claims in the next passage that Thoreau was *"as rigidly deterministic - and in the end, as indifferent to the Indians' cause - as any ethnology could devise"* (p. 7).² But positing Thoreau's inflexibility flies in the face of abundant evidence of his concern for Native Americans and his ultimate belief that they could and would shape their future (some of which I've cited here and in a preceding article - Caldwell 2018). After reading such a categorical attack, which expresses its own rigidity, it's imperative that we heed Thoreau's exact words in Civil Disobedience:

"Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison; The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave and the Mexican prisoner on parole, **and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race** [my bold italics] should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable, ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her- the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor."

Although both Bellin and his successors (e.g., Kucich 2018, in print 2021) deliberately ignore Thoreau's strong public stance in defense of Native Americans, the least we can do is acknowledge and honor it.

The next passage underlines Bellin's tendency to turn apparently exculpatory evidence inside-out by eliding salient details, such as the diversity of materials recorded in the notebooks, when they weaken his arguments.

¹ Such as the ones I've cited from Civil Disobedience and June 1861.

² Here are Bellin's words in context: *"I am concerned lest the apparent chaos (or subtlety) of the books disguise their underlying reliance on ethnologic methodology and ideology. ... His [Thoreau's] collection of such [ethnologic] data did, however, have the effect of refining an individual philosophy as rigidly deterministic - and in the end, as indifferent to the Indians' cause - as any ethnology could devise"* (p. 7).

“This apparent diversity, however, resolves into a rather tight range of categories: ethnologic and archaeological works of the mid-nineteenth century, ‘manners-and-customs’ writings of the early contact period, and comparative materials taking into account African, Egyptian, Mesoamerican, and other ‘primitive’ cultures” (p. 9).

Let’s back up and examine Thoreau’s motivations for reading the archeological and ethnographic texts that existed in his day. We now know these readings were themselves – pardon the descriptor - “primitive”, since the foundations of their disciplines were still being formed. Thoreau was drawn to the “ethnologic” texts because they were the first to apply the same falsifiable, observation-based scientific and encyclopedic approaches to recording and understanding cultural practices as Thoreau did. And he used such approaches to determine the facts of almost any subject before pondering its poetic, philosophical, and moral implications.

The next excerpt from Bellin’s essay is illustrative of the way he over-stretches an argument while ignoring or inverting contradictory evidence:

“In this respect [by not including enough missionary reports or protests against Cherokee and other removals], it seems that Thoreau, in common with his fellow ethnologists, was not simply assembling as copious a body of data as he could—much less making a case for the irreducible diversity of Indian peoples—but was seeking just the opposite: the connections and commonalities that would establish the Indians’ ineluctable difference as a race.”

Here again, Bellin lumps Thoreau with “his fellow ethnologists”, then pulls another piece of evidence inside-out, and calls it a paradox. How can one make the leap from saying that Thoreau’s research notebooks did not include enough material in defense of Native Americans (although, as we’ll see, they include a book-length report by an ardent advocate, who also happened to be a missionary) to the conclusion that Thoreau’s long-hand version of photocopying proved that he thought Native Americans were ineluctably different?

The most questionable aspect of the last two passages is their collision with parts of the Indian Notebooks that tend to contradict Bellin’s assertions. As we’ll see, he brushes aside evidentiary impediments with such casual rhetorical gestures as “To be sure” (p. 14) and “Yet though” (p. 16) and once again “to be sure” (p. 22). These rhetorical gestures attempt to persuade the reader that apparent textual contradictions to Bellin’s arguments are just exceptions that prove his rules.

Here is an example of the way Bellin tries to turn Thoreau’s words against him:

“Nor can Thoreau be excused of ignorance of such issues: as late as 1859, he inserted into Indian Book 11 an article of unidentified source and authorship titled ‘Civilized Indians,’ a glowing report of Sioux tribespeople who had ‘adopted the habits and customs of civilized white men.’ Yet ‘civilized’ Indians were an oxymoron to Thoreau; they raised too many qualms and complications, discomfited the ethnologic dualism for which he vouched” (p. 19).

In other words, as soon as Bellin comes across the kind of entry in the notebooks that he criticized Thoreau for not including, he dismisses it with the assertion

that Thoreau couldn't have processed its evidence of Native American adaptability, since Thoreau was so set in his ways.

A particularly troublesome example of Bellin's resorting to paradox involves a 150-page transcription from a missionary's report highly favorable to Native Americans. "**To be sure**," Bellin admits, "*Thoreau devotes a considerable portion of Book 9 to Heckewelder, filling over one hundred and fifty notebook pages with extracts from the missionary's work*" (p. 14). Here's how Bellin deals with this mountainous obstacle after claiming that Thoreau did not include enough material from missionaries who viewed Native Americans positively:

"But this impressive body of material is prefaced by a cautionary note that is revealing of Thoreau's ultimate loyalties: 'H. (Heckewelder) has the tone of a partisan of the Indians -esp- the Delawares - to some extent' (9:139)" (p. 14).

Bellin's claim that this "preface" shows Thoreau taking the side of racists (rather than recording an observation) is tenuous when one considers the number of times, as Thoreau's texts prove, that he decried racist historians and expressed indignation at the way contemporary Native Americans were treated.

Bellin goes on to admit, but then qualify (and thereby twist), another exception with one of his favorite tools of rhetorical elision - "though."

*"In this light, though his meeting with Cusick lends support to Alfred Tauber's claim that Thoreau wishes to 'include the native perspective' in the record of encounter (244 n.14), such inclusion **ultimately**"* – if Bellin says so – *"upholds the exclusionary distinction that Cusick seeks to breach: a strict separation between the Indians' proper 'home'—the realm of pre-contact origins and customs—and the contemporary period into which, Thoreau insists, a doomed race has no business intruding"* (p. 19).

The most problematic thing about Bellin's argument here is his own insistence that Thoreau himself "insisted" that Native Americans were doomed and had no right to "intrude." Here, Bellin willfully and unfairly misreads Thoreau's intellectual, ideological, and, one might even claim, methodological evolution as an ethnologist. After returning from his third trip to Maine, for example, Thoreau became known for telling such friends as John Langdon Sibley and George Curtis that "the Indian was not doomed," according to Curtis, "but "damned," in Laura Dassow Walls' words, "because his enemies were his historians...." Walls goes on to note, "He startled [Bronson] Alcott and [Ralph Waldo] Emerson, too, by defending "the Indian from the doctrine of being lost or exterminated" (Walls, 420).

These facts seriously challenge Bellin's contentions that the Indian Notebooks are a monolith memorializing Thoreau's failures to express indignation at the persecution of Native Americans and to see that they would endure.

"It cannot be argued," Bellin says, *"that Thoreau might have added materials addressing such issues— missionary bulletins, political tracts, Indian autobiographies — [to the notebooks] had his life permitted"* (p. 19).

Despite Bellin's attempt to frame the argument by largely limiting evidence to the notebooks, we have already seen how they also contain lengthy passages that

contradict his thesis. What is more, they are far from the only or last source of information about Thoreau's views concerning Native Americans.

Now let's look at another passage in Bellin's essay, which generated five conclusions that Bellin didn't intend:

"A quotation near the end of [note]Book 2 cements this divide: 'They say 'the Great Spirit gave the white man a plough, and the red man a bow and arrow, and sent them into the world by different paths' (2:77). In this light, Thoreau's aim in commencing his research appears to be less 'to trace the entwined stories of Indian and white' (Rose, 'Tracking;' 151) than to drive a wedge between the two races: the disjointed snippets of Indian custom with which the notebook begins, their static oddity emphasized by their lack of context and connection, take on the character of museum displays, frozen artifacts of Indian material culture that cannot be pieced together meaningfully except in the sense that they announce the extremity or Indian difference from the collector's own civilization" (p. 10).

To which I'd reply:

- 1) The saying that Thoreau quotes reflects the technological differences (borne out by research synthesized, for example, in Jared Diamond's Guns, Germs, and Steel) that gave Europeans such an advantage over Native Americans. Bellin seems to think that noticing such technological factors is itself reductive or racist, when doing so could actually bespeak the opposite.
- 2) Bellin tars the accretion of research notes and transcriptions in all twelve notebooks with the impression left in his mind by the early ones – that the entries are “disjointed” and sprawling. But such would be the impression left by the notes gathered at the start of almost any extended research project, since the researcher is still groping for and establishing the grounds for finding information.
- 3) Bellin loads his argument with pejoratives including “static” and “oddity”;
- 4) Bellin jumps to the conclusion that the puzzle pieces, which Thoreau was gathering, were so “static” and “disjointed” that they “cannot be pieced together” - or, if they can, that they would inevitably end up meaning just one thing. This belies that fact that good researchers stitch together and revise their hypotheses as they learn more – unless they seek one *a priori* answer.
- 5) Bellin seems to buy into the idea of “races” himself when he accuses Thoreau of wanting “to drive a wedge between the two races.”

In his effort to turn Thoreau's fascination with Native American origins against him, Bellin reveals his own prejudices when he casts Thoreau as an “antiquarian” (which seems to have a pejorative whiff for him) and is dismissive of scholars who work on human origins:

"Yet he is obviously fascinated with the question [of Native American origins], for the Indian Books palpably gain in excitement (as measured by authorial commentary) whenever talk of origins enters their orbit" (p. 10). "Taken as a whole," Bellin sums up later, "then, the Indian Books prove Thoreau to be far more the antiquarian than the advocate, ever looking back on the comfortingly remote saga of the Indians' past rather than forward to the far more treacherous and pressing matter of their present and future" (p. 19).

First, one might wonder why Bellin thinks that Thoreau couldn't possibly be interested in and indignant about the persecution of living Native Americans at the same time as he was fascinated by the question of how people got to the Western Hemisphere.

Furthermore, why does the *whole* of a pile of research notes amount to more than one published passage from Civil Disobedience or Thoreau's later journals (and there are many), which prove that Bellin's hypothesis doesn't account for *all* the evidence.

Bellin holds Thoreau's fascination with prehistory and origins against him because he believes that it suggests that Thoreau was more interested in past Native Americans than present ones, although that is hardly the case, and, even if it were so, would not necessarily be a moral failing. Bellin even goes so far as to suggest that Thoreau's questionable enthusiasm for archeological subjects meant that he was aping the predilections of "ethnologic racists."

Bellin goes on to say that Thoreau's collection of ethnographic and archeological information amounted to "*Indian play*" and "*the appropriation of an imagined 'Indianness' (through literature, drama, performance, and other forms of cultural reproduction including ethnologic collection itself)*" (p. 20).

Here, Bellin posits that archeologists and ethnographers (even Native American ones) are basically stealing information, instead of trying to follow clues to evidence in order to move towards tentative understanding. Through this argumentative sleight-of-hand, Bellin suggests that the mere recording of people's testimony and artifacts becomes appropriation and theft.

Another way that Bellin deals with apparent exceptions to his arguments is by diminishing them with a pejorative word like "stray." Here's an example:

"Thoreau overlooks almost entirely the author's [Lewis H. Morgan in League of the Iroquois] commentary on the trials and triumphs of contemporary Indian communities; with the exception of a stray quotation noting that some tribes within the League are 'actually increasing in numbers, and improving in their social condition' (8:401)" (p. 14).

This is an example of Bellin's tendency, as he constructs his argument, to belittle or reshape exceptions in such a way that they support his point, rather than permitting them to make the subject more ambiguous or potentially to refute his theses.

Interestingly, this same Morgan (whom Bellin sets up as Thoreau's foil by celebrating Morgan's advocacy of Native American rights while condemning Thoreau's perceived failure to shake ethnologic racism) follows a similar trajectory to Thoreau's, as Morgan moves from seeing Native Americans as "vanishing" to seeing them as "enduring" (Caldwell 2018). Bellin raises this unintended parallel, only to dismiss its relevance to Thoreau:

"There are, Morgan writes in his preface, 'many important questions concerning their future destiny' still to be determined (ix), a point on which he expands in the jeremiad comprising his final chapter. 'Philanthropy and Christianity are not

wasted upon the Indian' (447), he insists, avowing that under a federal policy dedicated to saving Indian lives rather than stealing Indian lands, 'it is not too much to conjecture, that specimens of the highest genius, and of the most conspicuous talent hereafter destined to figure in the civil history of our Republic, may spring from the ranks of the Indian citizens' (456)."

Here's Bellin's immediate dismissal:

*"That Thoreau might have entertained some small curiosity about such predictions is suggested when, at the conclusion of Book 8, he lists as a work yet to be read 'Morgan's series of letters on the Polit. Qus't of the Iroquois in the Am. Review for '47' (8:507). But he later crossed out this entry, **presumably** [emphasis mine] because he realized that the letters were the basis for League, which he had just read. And judging from the extracts he took from Morgan's 'elaborate and distinct work on the Iroquois' (8:507), it **seems unlikely** [emphasis again mine] Thoreau would have gleaned **anything new** [my emphasis] from Morgan's letters; for he had **apparently** [my bold face] decided by this time that the 'political question' of the Indians had already been answered" (p. 15).*

Although literary criticism may not be held to the same standards as science when demonstrating causality, the language I have noted shows how Bellin builds his claims by piling presumptions (*presumably*) on improbabilities (*seems unlikely*), absolute rejections (*anything new*), opinions (*apparently*), and fudged data. Bellin, after all, chooses to leave out passages like Thoreau's explanation for his motives for going to jail that contradict his assertions that Thoreau never deplored the persecution of Native Americans and accepted that they were racially incapable of adapting and surviving.

One of the best rejoinders to Bellin's questionable claims are Thoreau's own words about the Sioux, which I mentioned earlier. He wrote them after attending a gathering of 5,000 Native Americans on June 20, 1861 (in other words after the last entry in the Indian Notebooks) and seeing through the double-speak of such officials as the Federal "Indian agent," Thomas Galbraith, who promised to take care of the Dakota Sioux "as a father should for his children," and the state Governor, Alexander Ramsey, who said that a new fort, Fort Ridgely, had actually been built to protect them from whites. Upon hearing the Dakotas' spokesman, Red Owl, forcefully list all the promises the government had broken, including its failure to pay annuities on time, Thoreau noted that they "probably have reason to be" angry and that they had "the advantage in point of truth and earnestness, and therefore of eloquence." One of the reasons why Bellin's argument fails to be persuasive is that it does not engage such passages as these, which would have complicated, if not downright refuted his claims.

Such failures of engagement and suppression of countervailing evidence arise elsewhere as well. For example, on page 16, Bellin moves from admitting that Thoreau had a volume by Ojibwa activist George Copway to the presumption that he never read it. Here he swerves from the inconvenient truth of Thoreau's ownership with another dismissive connective phrase - "Yet though" - and then escalates from the speculation that Thoreau never read the book to the unqualified assertion that he failed to do so.

*“Yet though a marginal note beside his Copway entry announces ‘have it’ (7:111), there is no indication in the notebooks or elsewhere in his writings that he read it (or, for that matter, the Brown volume). **That his failure to do so** reflected a disinterest in the questions such works raised is suggested by his approach to the Native-authored texts he did read” (p. 16).*

The rapid slippage from “no indication” to “failure” leaves this claim dangling as a specious allegation.

As the essay moves forward, Bellin persists in diminishing the worth of Thoreau’s researches into Native American history and culture.

“Thoreau,” Bellin writes, “chose to mine these texts for heaps of inert ‘facts’ from the Indians’ ruined past while bypassing their pointed remarks on the political grievances of living Indian Nations” (p. 16).

Bellin’s argument seems to have a troubling investment in diminishing historical and archeological interest in the past in order to pit it against the possibility of having profound engagement with the present. For him, here and earlier, as I have noted, such interest seems capable of producing nothing but “inert” “static” facts, with no possibility that it can, on the other hand, show a profound respect for life in the past (and by extension life generally). Thoreau and other archeologists have shown repeatedly that those facts (which Bellin would leave buried) have consequences and implications not only for the present but also for the future.

Bellin’s contention here that Thoreau “bypassed” passages that discussed Indian political grievances is also tenuous, since he bases it on a supposed absence of evidence and ignores contradictory information, including Thoreau’s indignation over the massacres in California and the cheating of the Sioux.

Before leaving page 16, Bellin writes,

“Ignoring ... appeals, Thoreau restores the authority of ethnologic discourse, reproducing its partisan portrait of a fallen race fated to extinction” (p. 16).

In so doing, Bellin persists in ignoring and engaging the passages about the abuse of Native Americans from Thoreau’s journals and Civil Disobedience.

One cannot deny that Thoreau’s copious writings contain sections that mirror the bigoted positions of some of his contemporaries. But Bellin’s argument is reductive in its failure to contextualize such passages in terms of

- the gradual, if uneven maturation of Thoreau’s views concerning Native Americans (Caldwell 2018),
- Thoreau’s tendency to reconsider his initial reactions, which were often impulsive,
- and Thoreau’s occasional stupidity on what may have been “off-days”, when he was ill or dying.

For these reasons, my take-away from the following passage, which Bellin quotes from Thoreau’s journal, is different from his. The excerpt catches Thoreau’s all-too-human readiness to react stupidly at first, but, as Bellin himself acknowledges, Thoreau goes on to have serious second thoughts.

“Almost entirely fabulous and puerile— only valuable as showing how an Ind. writes history!” Thoreau records his initial, jeering reaction. Later, having exchanged his pen for a pencil, he reconsiders, adding in a cramped hand just after his original comment: ‘& perhaps for some dim traditions.’ Returning once more, pen in hand, he makes a final addition between the lines of his opening remark: ‘on the whole, interesting and imaginative’ (Notebook 10:109)” (p. 18). This passage can be read as paradigmatic. The evolution of Thoreau’s response, despite his first impulse, is representative of the overall evolution of his relationship with Native Americans.

Bellin concludes his essay by repeating his attacks on Thoreau. He argues for example, that:

“Thoreau’s deafness to this auto-ethnographic text [by Cusick], one that engages in ‘partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror’ (Pratt 7), manifests his failure to accept any challenge to the fundamental tenets of the ethnologic project” (p. 19).

Two things about this passage are notable: first, Bellin’s categorical statement that Thoreau *never* challenged *any* of the tenets of the supposedly monolithic “ethnologic project” - although Thoreau’s words prove otherwise - and, second, the irony of Bellin’s claim that Thoreau was deaf, when Bellin is the one who seems unable to hear what Thoreau is saying loud and clear in his commentary on Red Owl or his declaration after going to jail.

Bellin’s next attack continues:

“... it was this powerful identification with the Indians that attracted Thoreau to ethnology while thwarting the possibility of advocacy” (p. 21).

To repeat, one doesn’t have to go any further than Civil Disobedience to see that Thoreau went on the record as an advocate for Native Americans. That Thoreau did so simply falsifies Bellin’s assertion.

Bellin adds to this attack by stating that:

“Thoreau found living Indians a positive hindrance, for they challenged his right to inhabit a vacated Indian subject-position as the site of his own regenerative critique” (p. 21).

If that were true, then Thoreau would not have gone around button-holing Sibley, Emerson, Alcott, and Curtis after meeting Joe Polis during his third trip to Maine to tell his friends that Native Americans were “not doomed” and were not going to be lost or exterminated (Walls, 420).

Bellin caps this condemnation by saying:

“It becomes evident that the drama of following in aboriginal footsteps enables him [Thoreau] at once to absorb and to expunge the Indians” (p. 22).

Here, Bellin comes close to finding Thoreau complicit in genocide by casting him as emblematic of a “project” that lent support to the extermination of Native Americans, although Thoreau actions and words belie such an insinuation.

One of the real interpretative problems here is that Bellin seems to be denying that Thoreau’s response to Native Americans, living and dead, was imbued with his efforts to go beyond sympathy towards empathy. Despite the fact that Thoreau gave advice that opens him to sociologically-inflected literary criticism

like Bellin's, his attempt to occupy the subject position of an indigenous American was more than a white man playing Indian or trying to go native. Rather, it was a genuine attempt to understand Native American individuals and cultures on their own terms, even as his own culture had cast them as "other." Although Thoreau knew – as his remark about the need for histories written by Indians illustrates – that he'd never be able to completely break through into full understanding, his sustained effort to achieve empathy was the stance of a poet or novelist, rather than that of a simple ethnographer.

As Bellin closes in on the end, he forces his argument by saying that:

"... Thoreau cannot see Indian peoples as other than ethnologic plays—for should they become 'civilized,' they would lose all capacity to serve his race's need for 'recreation': Indian play and cultural renewal" (p. 25).

To which I'd reply that finding inspiration in an alternative subsistence model and way of life does not mean that one is condemning peoples who live by that model to extinction. What Thoreau feared was the disappearance of a way of life that some Native Americans were still living, since he thought it was exemplary, not, in the end, that they would go extinct biologically or that their cultures would entirely disappear. Quite the contrary, since his third Maine trip taught him that they were resilient and adaptive and were definitely planning for the future (Caldwell 2018). Bellin conflates cultural disappearance with biological disappearance. He also fails to acknowledge the irrefutable evidence in Thoreau's writings that he was outraged at the persecution and killing of Native Americans. His outrage proved that he cared about their survival and quite separately that he cared about allowing them to continue following what he thought were exemplary lives, if some Native Americans chose to do so.

Before concluding his essay, Bellin is forced to mention publications which argue that Thoreau's book, *The Maine Woods*, showed that Thoreau was becoming "a budding, sometimes fumbling, anthropologist whose consecutive journeys to Maine display a gradually increasing sensitivity to the natives he sought to understand" (372)" (p. 23) (Gura 1977). Bellin goes so far as to make the following concession:

"And to be sure, the Indian portraits of this work take on layers of subtlety and sophistication that are lacking from the lone stragglers of Walden" (p. 22).

But he dismisses claims by Gura and others that Thoreau's views of Native Americans evolved by warning that

"One should be cautious, however, before concluding that Thoreau's fieldwork necessarily facilitated cultural understanding" (p. 23).

I agree: there is nothing about going "into the field" that "necessarily" means that any anthropologist will become more sensitive. But that's beside the point, since the conclusion that Thoreau advocated for Native Americans and was indignant about injustices visited upon them is based on his own words.

Bellin continues by recasting Thoreau's "oldest convictions" for him in unflattering and presentist terms:

"... it seems that Thoreau's 'oldest convictions' were indeed confirmed in the Maine woods: the discourse of essential difference, the identification of the Indian mind with the woodland life, and the quest for redemptive contact with

these wild Others were all perfectly consistent with ethnologic racism and its elaboration as Indian 'play'" (p. 24).

Bellin's tendency to see Thoreau's complex and evolving relationship with Native Americans in black or white terms is especially evident in his interpretation of a passage from *The Maine Woods* in which Thoreau called for a national park system (p. 156):

*"But though the Indians might in this way redeem the world for Thoreau and his people (a redemption signaled in *The Maine Woods* by its potent environmentalist critique), no such redemption is possible for Indian peoples themselves; receding ever deeper into the wilderness preserves that Thoreau imagines for them, their only option is to nationalize his act of Indian inheritance..." (p. 25).*

In his categorical condemnation of Thoreau for leaving Native Americans with "only" one option in his call for parks, Bellin willfully ignores the implications of the first words of Thoreau's appeal, in which he links two of the groups he thought could produce "noble" individuals – workers and Native Americans (Caldwell 2018). As Thoreau wrote – "not only for strength, but for beauty, the poet must, from time to time, travel the logger's path and the Indian's trail, to drink at some new and more bracing fountain of the Muses, far in the recesses of the wilderness."

Finally, I wonder what Bellin would have said about a prehistorian like me? Does my fascination for the past and even the deep past make me an ethnologic racist too? Is there any reason to reduce Thoreau's complex and evolving views of Native Americans to a dualistic and reductive tension between an "antiquarian" and an "advocate"? One of the signs of reductive thinking is that it tends to view the world and its multi-dimensional problems in terms of polarities. It has trouble imagining a man as mercurial as Thoreau, who was determined to improve himself after reflecting deeply – a man who let his mind fly into jazz-like improvisations that encompassed everything from outrage to stand-up comedy as he tried to see beyond his own moments of stupidity and catch glimpses of the truth concerning everything from Native Americans to his own evanescent being. Bellin's reductive thinking would render fixed and static an imagination in constant flux as it evolved through many frames of mind.

By ignoring the poet in Thoreau, Bellin ignores the possibility of empathy as the poet might experience it. The fact that Thoreau was trying to save wild spaces through the creation of parks does not exclude the fact that he also expressed increasing outrage over the ill treatment of Native Americans, wherever they lived, and wanted everyone from loggers to Native Americans to live better lives.

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