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“Who Are We? Where Are We?”:  
Contact and Literary Navigation  
in *The Maine Woods*

Due largely to the work of ecocritics, Henry David Thoreau's legacy has in recent decades shifted from that of a purely Romantic transcendentalist to a proto-ecologist (Buell, Foreword ix). The distance between these two conceptions seems particularly conspicuous with regard to Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*. This posthumous collection does not neatly fit within the corpus of Thoreau the transcendentalist, as its final two essays contain far more scientific and Latinate language than Emersonian correspondence or mythic personification and as Thoreau's enthusiasm for untrammelled wilderness paradoxically turns into terror in “Ktaadn.” As a result, for many years, critics mostly ignored “Chesuncook” and “The Allegash and the East Branch,” while “Ktaadn” remained the “most misunderstood of Thoreau's writings” (Marshall 229).<sup>1</sup> Recent ecocritical treatments of *The Maine Woods* have demonstrated Thoreau's movements away from egocentrism (and transcendentalism) and his development of an ecological consciousness (Myers 69). While I agree that *The Maine Woods* reflects Thoreau's developing ecocentricity, I will suggest that Thoreau demonstrates the limits of ecocentricity. While *The Maine Woods* does contain thematic consistencies, I do not see the teleological progression found by ecocritics such as Myers.<sup>2</sup> This essay takes a different approach, focusing on how Thoreau witnesses various ambiguities and symbolic contrasts in Maine's wilderness. These moments, which I subsequently refer to as “contact zones,”<sup>3</sup> stem

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from a tripartite clash between the past and the future, civilization and wilderness, and Euro-American and native cultures. This use of Mary Louise Pratt's term remains consistent with her definition of contact zones as "space[s] of cultural encounters," where "subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other . . . in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (3, 7). I expand her definition beyond intercultural collisions to include also the arenas and effects of extra-cultural encounters. Previous studies of *The Maine Woods*, for the most part, treat only one of these contact zones and position Thoreau on one symbolic side. This essay will examine all three clashes and will argue that Thoreau actively attempts to depict himself within—rather than to one side of—the contact zones. Thoreau in *The Maine Woods*, then, does not resemble a transcendentalist in crisis or a developing ecologist so much as a travelling writer positioning himself in ways that will enable him to navigate the contact zones in Maine's wilderness while also appropriating what he finds appealing in Maine for inclusion in his subsequent writings.

Thoreau's self-fashioning within these various contact zones of Maine echoes the middle ground that Leo Marx found central to antebellum America's pastoral fantasy. According to Marx, this ideal middle space exists "somewhere 'between,' yet in transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature," and which selectively represents the symbolic value and meaning contained in both worlds (23, 150). Throughout his travels in Maine, Thoreau similarly constructs an idealized middle consciousness—in this case, a representative, literary woodsman who can personally and artistically embody, understand, portray, and navigate Maine's contact zones. In each instance, Thoreau attempts to associate himself with both contrasting sides of the contact zone. He emerges, ultimately, as a figure with a nuanced understanding of the past and the future at home in both the civilized and natural worlds and as a sojourner in both white and native spaces. Within each contact zone, Thoreau develops and demonstrates various types of imaginative and appropriative responses, ultimately fashioning a dynamic persona uniquely situated to navigate—and later publish the resultant account of—the wilderness of Maine.

In *The Maine Woods*, the landscape's harsh complexity makes travel and comprehension difficult, compelling Thoreau to focus on his own malleable persona as the best vehicle with which to navigate the land's tensions. His journeys and subsequent essays, then, become methods for self-fashioning. Thoreau first traveled to Maine

during his Walden “experiment,” wanting to compare his “sylvan” experience with the more primitive wilderness (Paul 357). This comparison quickly became complicated, however, as Maine’s landscape was not simply “primitive.” The first sentence of “Ktaadn”—the opening essay in *The Maine Woods*—sets an ironic tone, as Thoreau leaves for “the backwoods of Maine, by way of the railroad and steamboat” (3). Thoreau preemptively subverts the image of pristine wilderness, as it is only through mechanized travel that he can journey into the woods. Further, Thoreau explains that he goes to the Maine wilderness alongside a relative who was interested in the lumber trade. Doing so serves as “a tacit admission into his own complicity in this world of technology, commerce, and property” (Fink 159). From this point forward, there will be little idealized, “primitive” wilderness in “Ktaadn” or in the rest of the text. Instead, the dominant tone will reflect the unsettled landscapes of the contact zone. The scenes that Thoreau witnesses refuse easy classification, as evidence of previous inhabitants and modern capitalism interrupts his timeless idealizations. Finally, Thoreau himself problematizes depictions of the land. He had never before visited such wilderness, and in “Ktaadn” he emphasizes both the land’s rugged remoteness and its pristine picturesqueness. Maine, then, appears pastorally beautiful as well as harsh, discordant, and unwelcoming. At the same time, however, he both welcomes and mourns signs of human presence. In many ways, this narrative heterogeneity reflects the diversity that he finds in the spaces of Maine. At the same time, it demonstrates Thoreau’s own mental heterogeneity, an example of what Richard Schneider sees as Thoreau’s tendency to deconstruct his own certainty (105). As I demonstrate below, Thoreau emphasizes his own authorial familiarity and facility with the diversity that he witnesses, as if to argue that his mental heterogeneity makes him uniquely positioned to represent Maine’s contact zones.

Thoreau often stresses the land’s wildness, its strangeness, its resistance to human control, and, by extension, authorial control. Doing so foregrounds the Maine woods’ literal and symbolic foreignness and creates representational space for Thoreau the author. Directly addressing his readers, Thoreau claims that the “Maine woods differ essentially from ours. There you are never reminded that the wilderness which you are threading is, after all, some villager’s familiar wood-lot” (152). To emphasize this, Thoreau details how the Maine woods contain grotesque, hostile, dangerous, and inhuman qualities: “This scraggy country . . . savage and dreary . . . so wildly rough . . . grand and desolate” seems like “the very nest of a young whirlwind” (62). Unlike domesticated and improved land,

characterized by predictability and order, this space is “Chaos” (60). In these moments, wilderness disorients Thoreau with violent reminders that he has traveled far beyond the familiar. Yet, while wilderness may be stern, it is also unthreatening and “gentle” (40). Perhaps because this celebration of wilderness fits the modern image of Thoreau as the patron saint of American environmentalism, some critics have highlighted this component of *The Maine Woods*.<sup>4</sup> While many moments in the text support the image of Thoreau as an unapologetic acolyte of nature more often Thoreau appears conflicted, alienated, and uneasy, “affected . . . strangely” by wildness (100).

By juxtaposing the strange with the familiar, Thoreau sets up the first of *The Maine Woods*'s contact zones: humans in the wilderness. Because of the resultant ambivalence, however, his literary juxtapositions do not seem fully satisfactory. It is not enough simply to oscillate quickly from the bucolic to the austere or from inspiration to terror. Similarly, narrative proximity does not necessarily produce a sense of unity. Describing images of development and wilderness within the same scene or blending the strange and familiar in his reactions do not resolve the inherent tensions, as both sets of terms define themselves against the other. From the very beginning of “Ktaadn,” tensions result from the clash in this contact zone. Thoreau may find these moments “very interesting” (90), but the inherent tensions demand resolution. In an attempt to fill this gap and alleviate its tensions, Thoreau hopefully offers himself as an ideal personification of the middle space.

Early in his text, Thoreau's traumatic experience on Katahdin forces him to realize that he must refashion his self-image. In describing his ascent, Thoreau shifts from first-person to third-person narration, which, according to John Tallmadge, reflects his interior, spiritual crisis (142). Thoreau's former confidence in his ability to move easily between civilized and wild spaces has been shaken. Approaching the summit, Thoreau claims that “Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage.” As his thoughts become ugly and unsubstantial, “his reason . . . dispersed and shadowy,” he becomes simply “the beholder . . . more lone than you can imagine” (64). While Thoreau is clearly uncomfortable physically — “this ground is not prepared for you,” he imagines the mountain saying—the ultimate tension stems from his internal inadequacies. Like Satan in *Paradise Lost*—the comparison is Thoreau's—Thoreau's problems stem from erroneous orientation.<sup>5</sup> Because of Satan's intransigence and insistence on retaining dual polarities—that he exists separately from God—he is cast out of heaven. As Thoreau retreats from

the peak, feeling humbled and devoid of his former confidence, he fears that “some of his divine faculty” has been “pilfer[ed]” (64). Thoreau’s self-glorifying adventure ends with an “experience of personal and metaphysical shock” and worry that his attempt to relate to nature might fail (McIntosh 203, 205–07). His disappointing experience on Katahdin forces him to recognize that his initial persona will not suffice.<sup>6</sup> Like Satan, Thoreau descends after his tensions come close to destroying him. He had approached Katahdin with ultimate confidence in his strengths and knowledge, but—and here he departs from the Satanic paradigm—when confronted with a “Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature,” he reevaluates and repositions himself (64). If he is to find a more satisfying intellectual and emotional persona, Thoreau recognizes that he cannot do so through stubborn, physical confrontation. His later trips in Maine and his subsequent narratives depict a continuous reevaluation and repositioning. In order to navigate the contact zones, he must do so through a more nuanced re-conceptualization of the self, one that blends the two sides rather than stubbornly clinging to one in the face of the other.

The false climax of the actual summit—which does not offer the expected satisfaction—ironically sets up the emotional climax that occurs once Thoreau descends (Tallmadge 143). He can descend physically, to alleviate the immediate, physical threat, but addressing his spiritual crisis will prove more complicated. On his descent, he recognizes that he has seen “primeval, untamed, and forever untamable *Nature*” (69, emphasis in original). The summit “was no man’s garden, but the unhandselled globe. . . . Man was not to be associated with it. . . . There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man” (70). Thoreau cannot physically remain on the summit and, as demonstrated from his shift from first to third persons, he cannot directly draw personal conclusions from his experience. But, in his role as a writer, reflecting later on this experience, he can maintain some agency. Like the marginalized groups that can “determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own” (Pratt 6), he can refashion himself when faced with a dominant force and transcend the harsh reality of the contact zones in Maine’s wilderness.

Leaving the mountain and traveling through the “Burnt Lands”—which William Howarth notes were, like Thoreau, “also recovering from disaster” (45)—Thoreau articulates the two sides of the human-wilderness contact zone. He reflects on man’s influence on Nature and Nature’s influence on man, wondering how to navigate these forces. Previously, he had found it “difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man” (70). But having now seen “pure Nature . . .

vast and drear and inhuman" he can recognize the "Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night" (70). Once he recognizes the elemental differences, a "Titan" possesses him. He feels "in awe of [his] body, this matter to which [he is] bound has become so strange" to him. From this personal upheaval, he starts to "Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it . . . the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact!* *Contact!* *Who* are we? *where* are we?" (71, emphases in original). In his emphases on the harsh physicality of this world, Thoreau admits that his initial attempts to bridge the wilderness and the human seem naive. Much of Thoreau's panic here seems to stem from his reluctant recognition that the unity he expected to find in the natural world does not exist; instead, he finds himself a witness to physical and symbolic clashes. Yet, despite the inherent differences between the human world and the "*actual*" world, at this moment, Thoreau recognizes his unique position at the center of an elemental contact zone, between the human–Nature clash. The emotional and epistemological upheaval that he feels forces him to reconsider his identity and location, both *who* he is and *where* he is. By re-positioning—or, more appropriately, re-orienting—himself through this moment of "contact," he has the opportunity for personal transculturation. Thoreau's former persona crumbled on the summit of Katahdin. 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, one between the clashing sides of familiarity and foreignness, between the developed and the wild.

Before, but most notably after, the "*Contact!*" moment, Thoreau emphasizes the differences between the two sides of the human–wilderness contact zone. To do so, he portrays the Maine woods as isolated and remote, an unfamiliar topography far from the locations of civilization, while still offering unique lessons for Thoreau, who wished that he could maximize his learning before leaving the woods (288). The inherent foreignness of his surroundings increases his level of exhilaration. Thoreau, with his "surveyor's eyes," is uniquely qualified both to create the sensations of distance and difference and, with his writer's mind, to appreciate them (252). Others in his party may physically trace the same trip that he does, but Thoreau more fully perceives the literal and symbolic effects of the human–wilderness contact zone.

Having recognized, defined, and emphasized the tensions, then, Thoreau positions himself as uniquely qualified to navigate (in his travels) and manage (through his writing) these tensions. His near



catastrophe on Katahdin demonstrates how, both physically and literarily, he had behaved irresponsibly. Subsequently, he must imaginatively balance human and wilderness elements more deftly so as to minimize physical risk, maintain both his poetic faculties, and not alienate his urban audience. To do so, he often blends the isolated and unfamiliar with moments in his narrative that de-emphasize distance and portray the wilderness as semi-familiar. Thoreau often manages this through personification of animals and landscape. The use of personification in nature writing, writes Lawrence Buell, can serve “to offset what might otherwise seem the bleakness of renouncing anthropocentrism” (*Environmental Imagination* 181). Relying on tropes common to the human side of the contact zone, Thoreau brings wilderness closer both to himself and to his readers' experiences, as when the ducks and loons “laughed and frolicked . . . for our amusement” or when a small spring “*peopled* all the wilderness” one night (33, 40, my emphasis). Thoreau also demonstrates, through his mocking of his guide Joe Aitteon's awkward attempts to identify a hedgehog, that this poetic incisiveness and natural sympathy are both specific to himself and necessary for successfully travelling through and writing about Maine's contact zones (117). In these instances, Thoreau implies that these familiarizing tropes do not rise *ex nihilo* from the woods. Rather, the inferences depend on Thoreau's poetic imagination and natural sympathy.

Thoreau also expands beyond the strictly anthropocentric personification in his portrayals of Maine's landscape. He often relies on civic, social, or cultural metaphors to bring the Maine wilderness closer to his readers' understanding. By expanding his symbolic navigation of the wilderness, Thoreau further implies his unique position as a poet of the wilderness. For his armchair audience, he alludes to epic poetry, Greek drama, and mythology, but he noticeably finds these examples of higher civilization in the wilderness. Similarly, he argues that “no higher civilization could be attained” than listening to the wood-thrush in “that dusky wilderness” (274). “Higher” here also refers to the shadow of Nerlumskeechticook Mountain and, by extension, Katahdin.

Thoreau occasionally juxtaposes the familiar and foreign within the same scene so as to give specific narrative examples of the mental breadth necessary to recognize and portray the complexities of this space. While Thoreau makes it clear that the pristine wilderness has been forever invaded by humanity, he also places himself above the tumult of this invasion in a privileged position as both a mountain climber and the author. As he looks out on the State of Maine, he remarks on its “immeasurable” forest, free of clearings or houses,

with nameless islands and mountains. Yet this idyllic, timeless image is ultimately—to someone with Thoreau's long-term perspective—just “a large farm for somebody, when cleared” (66). According to Thoreau's imagination, farms in the wilderness are not anomalous, but in fact resemble the nests that animals make for themselves (126). Thoreau relies on his poetic imagination to unify what he finds discordant and paradoxical, to personify what seems foreign, and to attempt to explain and naturalize the presence of men in the wilderness.

Further, images of trade and commerce add a literal link to his more personal and figurative connections. Thoreau frequently highlights various commercial networks as material links between Maine's wilderness and the everyday lives of his readers. But Thoreau does not simply describe examples of machines in the garden. Instead, he imaginatively naturalizes what might seem unnatural, foregrounding his own interpretive and poetic role and embedding himself, once again, at the center of this contact zone. On Katahdin's peak, he tastes the cranberries and imagines that they will inevitably become “an article of commerce,” while the peak's many clouds make it seem like a “cloud-factory” (66, 64). Though he certainly criticizes commercialism, he does not condemn industry outright. Instead, Thoreau finds signs of development and commerce to be “very interesting” (90). In his following paragraph, describing a lake interrupted by islands, he remarks that “the scenery is not merely wild, but varied and interesting” (91). These two sentences, linked by proximity and the repetition of “interesting,” demonstrate that Thoreau's attention will be drawn to whatever is “varied.” He wishes his vistas broken up and seems little concerned whether this dissonance is natural or man-made, whether his view is interrupted either by islands or by modernity, since in either case, the potential exists for him, as author, to interpret. Thoreau is interested in the clash itself and how he can make it “interesting.” His emphasis here, and elsewhere in Maine's “interesting” contact zones, creates narrative space for his artistic navigations and self-fashioning. According to Steven Fink, Thoreau tries to assess and balance the virtues of civilization and nature, to find “a middle ground that he must traverse, where he can examine the relationship between man and nature” (167). Integrated within his ambivalent portrayals of the wilderness' distinctive foreignness are Thoreau's attempts to emphasize his familiarity with, and understanding of, this landscape. In doing so, he places himself at the center of the contact zone through his own poetic agency uniquely positioned to depict Maine's wildness for his more urban audience.



In addition to juxtaposing Maine's wildness with the images and themes of civilization, Thoreau also portrays the clashes of various eras, reflecting a contact zone between a disappearing past and an encroaching future.<sup>7</sup> Thoreau sets up his journey into northern Maine as more than an exploration of the wilderness, as it also represents an opportunity for witnessing America's precontact past. He goes to Maine to learn about ecology and the Indians, both of which represent, for Thoreau, arenas for discovering aboriginal America (Paul 354–55). In his journey north, Thoreau mirrors the attitude, later popularized by Frederick Jackson Turner, that one can, through travel into the wilderness, effectively move back in time. Thoreau writes that “some hours only of travel in this [northern] direction will carry the curious to the verge of a primitive forest, more interesting, perhaps, on all accounts, than they would reach by going a thousand miles westward” (4). Upon leaving Bangor on his second excursion, Thoreau celebrates the ability to “behold those features which the discoverers saw, apparently unchanged” (84). Katahdin, especially, represents a present-day site for ancient, mythic exploration. He describes the mountain “as if it were some fragment of a wall which anciently bounded the earth” (57). In his allusion to Satan's climb through Chaos, Thoreau implies, albeit in a roundabout manner, that he has confronted a pre-Genesis moment (60). Starting his climb with an imaginative retreat into prehuman time subsequently allows Thoreau a foundational perspective, one from which he can greatly extend his scope beyond the present and into the future.

Thoreau emphasizes his present-day perspective in *The Maine Woods*, even as he looks back into the past. At times, Thoreau mourns the passing of archaic, precontact spaces. He portrays the Penobscot as “once a powerful tribe,” in striking contrast to the decidedly non-powerful images that he finds (7). Similarly, Thoreau mourns that the noble white pine has been replaced by the “dense growth of cedar, fir, etc.” (213). In both cases, the “primitive” wilderness that he found both ethnographically and ecologically “more interesting” has become noticeably less so. Because of this change, Thoreau must imaginatively recreate the precontact environment. He wonders, while paddling across Grand Lake, if it would not be “less *interesting* . . . to the white traveler, when he is crossing a placid lake in these out-of-the-way woods, perhaps [to think] that he is in some sense one of the earlier discoverers of it, to be reminded that it was thus well known and suitably named by Indian hunters perhaps a thousand years ago” (270, my emphasis). Relying on his imagination, then, he can place himself on the cusp of both human–wilderness and past–present contact.

Not surprisingly, Thoreau also mixes this elegiac tone—when he turns to the present and the future—with ambivalence, combining optimism with foreboding. Because he characterizes the Maine woods as materially and symbolically archaic, any intrusions from the present or modernity become especially jarring. Thoreau often tends to read hints of the future when confronted with signs of the present and these examples of foreshadowing vary and complicate the portrayals of Maine as archaic and timeless. These moments seem especially important when one remembers what Thoreau finds “interesting.” Throughout *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau emphasizes the unstoppable inevitability of future change to such an extent that he rarely comments on the present as such. When he does, it serves as evidence for signs of change and progress, such as a moment at the end of “The Allegash” when Thoreau reflects how “things have quite changed” since his last visit, 11 years ago. There is now a village where there used to be just a couple of houses, along with a road and “the rumor of a stage” (287). The forests may remain “distant and, as yet, inaccessible,” but “as yet” implies that the current inaccessibility will inevitably change (41). A tiny shop represents “the puny beginnings of trade, which would grow at last into a firm copartnership in the future town or city” (13). He sees a tavern along the road “plainly in a transition state” (145). Even the stolid Katahdin does not escape this characterization. At the present moment, few have climbed the peak but inevitably “the tide of fashionable travel” will reach it (4). These moments, to varying degrees, are characterized by a sort of elegiac foreshadowing, as though the present in Maine exists only to point backwards to the vanishing past or forward to the inevitable change of the future. At one moment, in excerpting a stanza from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Courtyard,” Thoreau expects the arrival, even if it takes a thousand years, of a homegrown poet to write this landscape, implying that he himself will in the mean time suffice (18).

Thoreau connects this state of transition to the State of Maine itself, believing that “Maine, perhaps, will soon be where Massachusetts is” (153). Because it is a question of “When [—and not if—] this country is settled,” Thoreau can look upon the untouched scenery and imagine “the day when this might be a brook winding through smooth-shaven meadows on some gentleman’s grounds” (66, 102). Thoreau’s emphasis on the undeniable inevitability of change demonstrates how, for him, this clash—between human development and wilderness—represents a foregone conclusion. The powers involved here are not balanced, and as such reflect the “radically asymmetrical relations of power” in Pratt’s definition of contact

zones (7). Civilization will inevitably overrun wilderness, just as the future will inevitably overrun the past. In this second contact zone, as with the first, Thoreau places himself amidst the resultant tension. By demonstrating his literary ability to move easily from the precontact past to the modernized future, he confers upon himself a sense of greater understanding, even a symbolic sense of immortality. He can selectively choose and appropriate the desirable components of each era, constituting himself as the middle consciousness in relation to both sides of this contact zone.

Finally, Thoreau's portrayals of Maine's indigenes reflect, most literally, the tensions of the various contact zones in *The Maine Woods*. With the notable exception of Joe Polis, Thoreau portrays native people on one side or another of the contact zones' divisions. Ultimately, these characters demonstrate the improvisational and varied forms of transculturation, reflecting the third contact zone of *The Maine Woods*: the clash between Euro-American and native cultures. Once again, Thoreau places himself within the contact zone. In doing so, he explores various modes of native transculturation, but ultimately offers his own unique form as he selects and appropriates characteristics from both sides of the white-native contact zone, effecting transformative operations on himself and writing the result.

In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau embraces a stadialist perspective of human history, viewing Maine's natives as living representatives of the past. Through this perspective, Thoreau has the potential to examine and understand an earlier, precontact age. According to Robert Sayre, Thoreau saw Indians as "custodians of the American past" and he wanted to examine that history (x). Just as traveling further north in Maine and climbing higher on Katahdin can take Thoreau back in time, so too—he thinks—can his interactions with native people. He tries to find literal examples of this past, as evidenced by his searching for arrowheads at the site of an ancient battle (12). Further, he looks for more immaterial signs, especially in his interactions with his Penobscot guides. In "Chesuncook" Thoreau hires Joe Aitteon "mainly that [he] might have an opportunity to study his ways" (95). From Joe Polis's backwoods experience in "The Allegash," Thoreau learns birdcalls and aspects of Penobscot language (168). Both Thoreau and Polis promise to share their knowledge with the other. In such company, Thoreau can "let science slide," abandoning his previous training, and instead come in contact with the mythical and primordial (181). He wonders why one would read history instead of traveling to "the primitive age of the world . . . Can you well go further back in history than this?" (79). Polis's singing "carried [Thoreau] back to the period of the discovery of

America," and a girl's song "was an aboriginal strain" (179, 9). The natives, in these cases, represent an escape for Thoreau from the chaos of environmental and cultural clashes. The idealization of the archaic native relies heavily on Thoreau's imagination. As such, it cannot last. Maine's discordant reality, as was demonstrated on Katahdin, will inevitably intrude on his journey. But by studying these figures, Thoreau believes he can better appreciate precontact reality, thereby enhancing his likelihood of successfully navigating the unavoidable effects of the contact zone.

In contrast to his idealization of those who maintain a precontact persona, Thoreau at times disparages native people who demonstrate the contact zone's effects. In these instances, Thoreau's writings reflect nineteenth-century stereotypes of the vanishing Indian. In his embrace of these stereotypes, Thoreau seems to move just as far from reality as he does in his idealized portrait of the precontact Indian. Although in this case, Thoreau shifts from a pre- to a postcontact portrayal and, subsequently, changes his tone from elegiac hagiography to bigoted slander. According to Sayre, these stereotypes proved true only in regards to their prophecies of native destruction (8). And this proves to be Thoreau's focal point. Thoreau's first image of "a short shabby, washerwoman-looking Indian" serves to demonstrate Thoreau's belief that "the Indian's history, that is, the history of his extinction" (6). Soon after, he meets a sluggish "dull and greasy-looking fellow" with little important business to attend to (9). Similarly, when expressing his preference for white guides, Thoreau explains how Indian boatmen are unreliable, unskilled, and temperamental (32). These stereotypical portrayals seem to serve two related purposes for Thoreau. First, they demonstrate his views on how not to navigate the contact zone. These stereotypical representatives are doomed in the face of an increasingly civilized future. Secondly, they show Thoreau's feeling that not anyone can weather the clashes of human-wilderness, past-future, and white-native contact zones. By extension, this creates narrative space for Thoreau. As demonstrated above, he frequently shows his wilderness skills and familiarity with the Maine woods. Yet, because of what he sees as his modern sensibilities—not to mention his membership within the dominant group—Thoreau suggests that he will certainly not suffer the same fate as these more-ecocentric characters.

Joe Polis, however, because of his experiences in both Maine's wilderness and urban centers, seems to represent the ultimate synthesis of Maine's contact zones. Thoreau's detailing of Polis's actions, thoughts, and sayings comprise the bulk of "The Allegash." Thoreau makes clear his debt to Joe Polis, for being both his guide and his

teacher. Thoreau admits that he has “much to learn of the Indian” and Polis shows Thoreau how to work with the materials of the woods and write on birch bark (181, 274). Polis represents the potential for successful navigation of Maine’s contact zones: one who can canoe 40 miles in a day before coming home to his newspaper (296–97). Many critics have argued that it is Polis, and not Thoreau, who emerges as the superior navigator of Maine’s clashes. Philip Gura writes that while Emerson looked to Europe to find his “representative” men, Thoreau looked to Maine (371). Joseph Moldenhauer sees Polis as the character most suited to navigate Maine’s tensions (134–35). Thoreau, in his revisions, emphasized the mythic heroism of Polis (Adams and Ross 210). Polis helped Thoreau “in enlarging his capacities for observing” (Richardson 363). These views, however, do not address how Thoreau ultimately disparages Polis’s ability to thrive in urban areas, claiming that while Polis has been a traveler himself, visiting many eastern cities, he himself recognizes “what a poor figure he would make there” (197).

While Polis helped Thoreau with his observations and in reading the woods, Thoreau implies that Polis cannot help him with narration or writing, the skills that Thoreau finds most crucial in his project. In *The Maine Woods*, writes Linda Frost, Thoreau relies upon a hierarchy of language, where the Maine natives are “‘brutes’ who may speak but cannot write the language of culture [and so] remain fixed as predominantly natural beings, part of a larger entity Thoreau himself is able to ‘read.’ But the Indian who can read will in effect dissolve this opposition and complicate Thoreau’s definition of nature itself” (27). Polis does dissolve the “opposition” inherent to Maine’s contact zones, but only partially. Frost and the other critics who focus on Polis’s exemplary character as the ideal representative have not sufficiently emphasized that the ability to read Maine’s wilderness as well as metropolitan newspapers are not themselves entirely sufficient for navigating the contact zones. One must go further, Thoreau implies, in unifying these disparate spheres: one must write an account of navigating these clashes. Concerned that Polis might read his account, Thoreau delayed publishing “The Allegash” (*Correspondence* 504). Thoreau did not, one can imagine, see any risk in this delay that Polis himself would write about the Maine woods.

Ultimately, Thoreau juxtaposes Polis’s intellectual and authorial deficiencies with his own persona, thereby presenting himself and his narratives as the most versatile and representative of Maine’s contact zones.<sup>8</sup> Thoreau defines himself against Polis as a storyteller, for one must not only navigate the contact zone but also narrate that

same journey for civilized audiences. According to Ann Lundberg, Polis has difficulty expressing the knowledge that remains in his own head, since “being at home in the woods does not, in the end, require the ability to translate. Such knowledge is not universal, but local and circumstantial, bound to the immediacy of time and place” (173–74). Thoreau claims that Polis is a typical native storyteller, whose tale “did not amount to much” more than a “vague puff of smoke” (172, 162). The natives, in general, lack the ability “to convey an abstract idea,” groping “about in vain for the words with which to express it” (140). Polis does value education, but for teaching math, not expression (293). Further, when “an Indian tells . . . a story [it is] as if he thought it deserved to have a good deal said about it, only he has not got it to say, and so he makes up for the deficiency by a drawling tone, long-windedness, and a dumb wonder which he hopes will be contagious” (172). As his essay represents an example of Thoreau’s storytelling ability, one can easily assume that Thoreau sees his own narrative as exceeding Polis’s in each of the listed categories. Perhaps most crucially, Polis’s “gazette” is stuck on a tree, with a circulation that consists of only those who travel deep into Maine (285). Polis might be able to translate (199), but Thoreau ultimately publishes. By virtue of his familiarity with both worlds, his ability to conceive of multiple eras simultaneously, and his authorial skills, Thoreau nominates himself as uniquely qualified to be a new type of representative man, what Sayre calls a “synthesis of savage and civilized man . . . a literary Leatherstocking, a poetic pioneer” (ix–x, my emphases).

In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau attempts to construct a metonymic poet who mitigates the tensions and dissonance of modern life in the wilderness and constructs a sophisticated narrative from the raw materials of the woods. In Thoreau’s explicit discussion of this interpretive figure, his poet “makes the truest use” of wilderness, recognizing “a higher law” and using Nature for “employments perfectly sweet and innocent and ennobling” (120–22). Thoreau believes that “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” (156). Thoreau’s emphasis on “use” here demonstrates the importance of the poetic action of turning raw material into text, something that neither Joe Polis nor the logger can do. Further, for Thoreau, Nature is explicitly a contested and dynamic environment containing the Indian as well as the logger, the past and the future, the developed and the wild. The poet, then, can create from within the spaces of these contact zones. At the end of



"Chesuncook," he most concisely and explicitly demonstrates his interest in the spaces between the contact zones. He expresses his

relief to get back to our smooth, but still varied landscape. For a permanent residence, it seemed to me that there could be no comparison between this and the wilderness, necessary as the latter is for a resource and as a background, the raw material of all our civilization. The wilderness is simple, almost to barrenness. The partially cultivated country it is which chiefly has inspired, and will continue to inspire the strains of poets. . . . A civilized man, using the world in the ordinary sense, with his ideas and associations, must at length pine there, like a cultivated plant, which clasps its fibres about a crude and undissolved mass of peat. (155)

Thoreau's collection focuses not on the woods themselves but rather what they can offer to the civilized man who can "pine there," root out their beneficial nutrients, and take their raw material back to civilization in the form of a book, in contrast to Polis who can write only on birch bark and trees (274, 285). Like the loggers who send boards to Massachusetts, Thoreau has taken this raw material with him in his notebooks, but Thoreau clearly distances himself from the logger who "cannot read the poetry and mythology which retire as he advances" (229). The essays of *The Maine Woods*, then, contain Nature's raw material alongside poetry and mythology. In addition, this collection depicts the processes by which Thoreau transforms himself into the representative man, so as to narrate Maine's contact zones.

Throughout these essays, Thoreau uses Maine's "crude and undissolved" raw material for his literary constructions. Into these spaces, he inserts his poetic traveler persona as the ideal figure, a metonymic representative uniquely qualified to navigate and narrate the various spaces. While Thoreau at the end of "Chesuncook" comes closest to an endorsement of a literal, physical middle ground, it is this juxtaposition of the subjective (the poet's inspiration and creativity) with the physical (the raw materials) that demonstrates how *The Maine Woods* internalizes, personalizes, and imaginatively narrates pastoralism's middle ground. Like the marginalized groups that Pratt depicts creating unique subjectivities through transculturation, Thoreau too creates a unique subjectivity through the asymmetrical interactions within the contact zones that he confronts. The loggers, whom he later disparaged, at the end of "Chesuncook" represent pioneers. But also, "like John the Baptist," they clear the forest, humanizing nature

for—one can infer—the redeemer poet to follow (156). This poet, embodied in the persona that Thoreau constructs in *The Maine Woods*, can drink from the Muses' fountain and transpose the lessons of the deep wilderness onto civilization. He has become stronger, wiser, and more multitudinous—with new subjectivities and self-conceptions—from navigating the contact zones. The Thoreau who emerges, then, from the pages of *The Maine Woods*, reflects neither the patron saint of the environmental movement nor a transcendentalist recluse crying in the wilderness, so much as a poetic traveler, embedded in a variety of clashes, trying to transform himself.

#### NOTES

1. Marshall follows Ronald Wesley Hoag who sees the summit and Burnt Lands sections of “Ktaadn” as possibly “the two most persistently misinterpreted passages in all of the Thoreau canon” (23). Both Marshall and Hoag respond to earlier critics who find Thoreau terrified by the wildness that he finds on Katahdin and unable to interpret what he sees. For example, James McIntosh characterizes “Ktaadn,” with its portrayal of the “hidden, dark power of nature” as a point of “stress in Thoreau’s career as a romantic naturalist” and therefore an atypical moment for Thoreau (179). Sherman Paul hypothesizes that, were Thoreau to have witnessed “the alien, cold, indifferent nature of naturalism” earlier, he would have had a different career (361). Hoag, in his emphasis on the sublime and correspondence, finds evidence of Thoreau’s transcendentalism in “Ktaadn” (33). John P. O’Grady sees awe in “Ktaadn” and argues that this tone is consistent with the majority of Thoreau’s work (39). For O’Grady, Thoreau’s transcendentalism is shaken up on the summit, but is ultimately reaffirmed through realizing the wildness in his own body (43). Don Scheese also finds examples of transcendentalism in “Ktaadn” (52). According to Scheese, Thoreau can understand the moments of sublime mystery that he has on the mountain only while back in Concord (56). Marshall too, despite his ecocritical approach, sees confirmation of Thoreau’s transcendentalism in these passages, arguing that Thoreau “finds God lurking behind the bare rocks of Ktaadn,” loses his ego and particularity, and has a moment similar to Emerson and his transcendental eyeball (232). While Ning Yu sees confirmation of Thoreau’s transcendentalism, this treatment of Thoreau’s journey to Katahdin as the reverse order of the hydrological cycle—where Thoreau challenges anthropocentrism and teleological views of natural cycles—represents a critical transition and the beginning of ecocritical analyses of *The Maine Woods*.

2. In this essay, because I emphasize Thoreau’s reaction to Maine, I both differentiate between the three essays that comprise *The Maine Woods* and view Thoreau’s posthumous work as a single—though not unified—text. In doing so, I follow Joseph J. Moldenhauer who argues in his “Textual

Introduction" to *The Maine Woods* that, because Thoreau had completed a plan and title for his collection at the time of his death, it is "beyond question [that] Thoreau intended to issue [*The Maine Woods*] as a single volume" (355). According to William Howarth, Thoreau conceived of a coherent text depicting his three journeys to Maine (218). Further, Thoreau spent his last days working on his Maine papers (Harding 460). I also agree with Moldenhauer when he writes elsewhere that the three essays "predictably vary in style, thematic emphasis, and authorial attitudes" ("*Maine Woods*" 131). Jeffrey S. Cramer argues that "*The Maine Woods* fails as a unified volume and is better considered as a collection of three thematically related but separate essays" (xx). Others have convincingly demonstrated the stylistic changes across *The Maine Woods*. According to Linda Frost, Thoreau describes Maine's natives and natural spaces in progressively less mythical terms during his essays as his overdetermined representations break down (25). Jeffrey Myers finds an increasingly ecocentric perspective in *The Maine Woods*, as Thoreau seems more receptive to the wilderness and natives (65). My analysis comes closest to Ann E. Lundberg who believes that "Thoreau is caught between two worlds: by culture he is a logger, a maker of signs and possessor of meanings; by desire, he would be an Indian" (172). I agree with Lundberg when she writes that Thoreau begins to grasp in Maine that "our contingent connection to the natural world takes the form of dialogue" (175). But I expand and complicate the forms of dialogue that Thoreau witnesses and engages in his trips to Maine. In my analysis, I often juxtapose examples from the three essays. I do not take this liberty based on assumptions of textual unity; however, I take the liberty of treating the text as a whole because of my interest in how Thoreau positions himself when confronted with the variety of Maine woods. This essay, then, while not discounting the thematic, authorial, and stylistic variety in the text focuses on one aspect of authorial unity that has not been addressed in previous scholarship: how Thoreau consistently places himself in-between all the variety that he witnesses.

3. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt explores colonialist constructions in travel writing. While I depart from Pratt's explicit focus on race and gender, her text and her term "Contact Zones" provide a valuable lens through which to view the clashes that Thoreau witnesses in Maine. For Pratt, contact zones are interactive and improvisational "space[s] of cultural encounters, often characterized by coercion, racial inequality and conflict" (6). More specifically, within these moments of copresence, subordinated or marginalized groups can—through what Pratt terms "transculturation"—select and invent new forms of subjectivity (6).

4. In his introduction to *The Maine Woods*, Paul Theroux writes that Thoreau "became our first and subtlest environmentalist" with his passion for the local and his demonstrations of how to care about the country (xi). Marie L. D'Avanzo believes nature to be Thoreau's church (5). Hoag focuses on the pure spirituality, religious ecstasy, and sublimity that Thoreau experiences on Katahdin (23–24, 33). For McIntosh, Thoreau's Romantic sensibilities enabled a view of Nature as a unified aggregate of things (50).

5. Milton's Satan rebelliously sees power and authority in himself and maintains this agonistic perspective rather than adapt to a more accommodating identity. Milton's narrator in *Paradise Lost* makes clear that Satan's opposition was a "vain attempt," implying both the ineffectiveness and pride of such an approach (I.44). Satan's mistake, writes Stanley Fish, is his "illusion that the self has an independent status and independent powers," and seeing struggle as the self's defining characteristic (39, 43). Thoreau's allusion demonstrates that his attempt on Katahdin reflects both physical impudence and mental pride.

6. In finding Thoreau's experience disappointing, I conditionally depart from treatments of this moment as either an example of romantic sublime or an insolvable problem. Hoag, for example, writes that Thoreau's experience on Katahdin was "emphatically uplifting" (24). My reading, however, does not return to earlier critics who view this moment in light of Thoreau's transcendentalist views of nature, as I agree with Hoag that Thoreau recognizes his "unworthiness" (36). I depart from Hoag and earlier critics most notably in arguing that, since Thoreau is disappointed with that unworthiness, he subsequently attempts to repair that disappointment throughout the rest of his journeys in Maine by repositioning himself and by depicting himself with more nuance as between, rather than against, the sides of the contact zones.

7. Ostensibly, this clash does not strictly follow Pratt's definition. But because Thoreau associates the past with wildness—and, by extension, what he views as a sort of indigenous primitiveness—and because he defines the future as a period of white control, Pratt's definition remains useful.

8. In addition to celebrating Polis's wilderness skills, Thoreau notably disparages lack of maturity and refinement. Whereas Thoreau had reached Katahdin's summit, Maine's highest peak, Polis has trouble ascending only one-third of the way up Mt. Kineo because of "superstition" (177). Despite Polis's reputation as a guide, Thoreau catalogues a list of blunders. In attempting to rid their camp of mosquitoes, Polis nearly sets the woods on fire, an example which Thoreauvians will find ironic, considering how Thoreau burned down a portion of the Concord Woods decades earlier (192–93). Further, Thoreau criticizes Polis's navigation as instinctive and animalistic unlike his own "all labelled and arranged" style of navigation which more effectively serves their travel (185). Emotionally, Polis seems immature and lazy, always trying to squeeze in a nap (202). After they rescue Thoreau's companion, Polis selfishly demands to eat "his breakfast first, [before Thoreau] reminded him that [his] companion had had neither breakfast nor supper" (261).

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