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Taking the Indian Cure:  
Thoreau, Indian Medicine,  
and the Performance of American Culture

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HENRY TUFTS was a sick man. Born in 1748, the New Hampshire native had misspent his formative years in acts of iniquity and amour and had emerged from prison destitute and debilitated at the age of twenty-four. But the same canniness that had marked his life of crime gave Tufts confidence in a cure. Embarking for an Indian encampment in Sudbury-Canada (present-day Bethel, Maine), Tufts, as he later explained in his 1807 autobiography, enlisted the aid of Molly Occut, “the great Indian doctress,” to “superintend the recovery of my health.” So fine were the medicine woman’s ministrations that Tufts “formed a design of studying the Indian practice of physic.” After moving back to New Hampshire in 1775 in hopes that he might “reap the benefit of all my acquirements,” he discovered that his newfound knowledge did indeed yield handsome returns: “My fame as an Indian doctor increased daily, and to my exertions were ascribed various extra-

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ordinary cures." Soon further schemes recommended themselves to his ambitious mind. "The æra now commenced," he wrote, "in which I was to appear on the theatre of action in a new character." No revolutionary he, Tufts found the unrest of the period the perfect stage for his mercenary acts: "Possessed of mimic powers," and "quickly in capacity to imitate" the New Lights' "canting tone, and to adopt the tenor of their discourses with precision," he took to the road as an itinerant preacher, sermonizing from town to town with "much outward zeal." One can catch Tufts's cackle as he lays out his life's work: "I found it no way difficult to cajole my ignorant followers into the belief of whatever idle tale I was pleased to fabricate; how easy to deceive is the unreflecting multitude!"<sup>1</sup>

Wily and brazen, a back-country slicker, Tufts appears the quintessential product of an era notable for its runaway theatricality: in the Age of Jackson (and of Barnum), in the season of the self-made man (and the confidence man), in the culture of self-presentation, self-promotion, blarney, and deceit, trickster Tufts is the profligate son. More specifically, Tufts is an early practitioner of a characteristically American performance—one that continues, and in no less tawdry forms, to this day—and antebellum Americans were faithful adherents of his prescription. By play-acting the Indian doctor, digesting the regimens of botanic healers such as Samuel Thomson, swallowing nostrums at itinerant medicine shows, and patronizing staged reenactments of the Indian past such as John Augustus Stone and Edwin Forrest's *Metamora; or, the Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), Tufts's followers performed the ritual I call "taking the Indian cure": taking in and taking over Indian "medicine," in both its narrow sense of native remedies and its broader sense of spiritual healing, mystery, and power.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Henry Tufts, *A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels, and Sufferings of Henry Tufts* (Dover, N.H.: Samuel Bragg, 1807), pp. 70, 73, 87, 335, 109, 110, 271.

<sup>2</sup>On white Indian "play," see particularly Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Other fine studies include Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), esp. pp. 111–39; Rayna Green, "The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe," *Folklore* 99 (1988): 30–55; and

Spreading beyond popular culture, the Indian cure also infiltrated American texts, including many that sparked antebellum literary nationalism and in time formed the core of the antebellum literary canon. Works such as James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Prairie* (1827), Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857) all feature whites masquerading as, or dabbling in the mysteries of, the Indian medicine man.<sup>3</sup> And, of course, we dare not neglect New England's most famous Henry T. In *Walden* (1854), a work many consider America's greatest literary production, and in *The Maine Woods* (1864), Henry David Thoreau enacted the Indian cure in his appeals for a natural life and a national identity. Calling him "the most Indian-like of classic American authors," Robert Sayre concludes that Thoreau "became, in part, the figure he had imitated," a figure Sayre identifies with the American Indian shaman. Richard Slotkin, similarly, reads *Walden* as Thoreau's initiation into Indian mysteries: "Thoreau begins as a civilized man seeking some unknown 'awakening' in the wilderness. He ends by acquiring the Indian's mode of perception—and this constitutes his awakening."<sup>4</sup>

Thoreau's quest for "intelligence with the earth," like Ralph Waldo Emerson's comparable pursuit of an "original relation to the universe,"<sup>5</sup> provides ready shorthand for the desire embed-

Shari M. Huhndorf, *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>On the appropriation of Indianness in American literature, see Susan Scheckel, *The Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>Robert F. Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. ix, 213; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), pp. 526–27.

<sup>5</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 138; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836), in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, ed. Donald McQuade (New York: Modern Library, 1981), p. 3. Further citations to *Walden* will appear in the text.

ded within the Indian cure: a desire for transparency, unmediated access to the Real, a true and original identity free from the shams and scams of performance. That such a desire should itself be fulfilled through performance—that to become authentic Americans, antebellum whites had to become fake Indians—is but the plainest of the many paradoxes with which the Indian cure was laden. Writing of Thoreau's penchant for Indian play, Michael West submits: "Thoreau's interest in Indians was deep and genuine. Playing the Indian was serious business for him. But it was also quite frankly a silly game."<sup>6</sup> And of course it was. Yet that game, serious and silly, was more central to Thoreau's persona and oeuvre—not to mention his nation—than has previously been recognized. The late Native American critic Vine Deloria Jr., critiquing the endless parade of "white Indians" who have traveled in Tufts's and Thoreau's train, lamented that modern perceptions of Indian medicine have been so glutted and muddled by substitutes that "when a real Indian stands up and speaks the truth at any given moment, he or she is not only unlikely to be believed, but will probably be contradicted and 'corrected' by the citation of some non-Indian and totally inaccurate 'expert.'"<sup>7</sup> It is this conflictual drama, wherein "real Indians" clash and mingle with non-Indian "experts," that Thoreau presented to his own time and that he bequeathed to ours. If we attend carefully to his act, dubious or duplicitous though it may have been, we will discover a

<sup>6</sup>Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Pundsters and the Search for the Language of Nature* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 434.

<sup>7</sup>Vine Deloria, Jr., quoted in Wendy Rose, "The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whitemanhood," in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 404. On the contemporary selling of Indian "medicine," see Ward Churchill, "Spiritual Hucksterism: The Rise of the Plastic Medicine Men," in his *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of the American Indians*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1992), pp. 215–28; and Geary Hobson, "The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism," in *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, ed. Hobson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), pp. 100–108. For a concise statement of how deeply offensive Native American peoples consider such practices and a manifesto against their spread, see the "Declaration of War against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality" (1993), reprinted in Ward Churchill, *Indians Are Us? Culture and Genocide in Native North America* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1994), pp. 273–77.

Thoreau at once foreign and uncomfortably familiar and a medicine that, though we no longer believe it heals us, appeals to us still.



The Indian cure was born from a shortage (or, depending, a surplus) of confidence. As Karen Halttunen argues in her study of the mid-nineteenth-century culture of imposture, "the problem of hypocrisy symbolized by the confidence man" reflected a "crisis of social identity" that took hold during the antebellum period. Anxiety—occasioned by the loss of stable, hierarchical relationships in the social, political, and economic spheres—translated into suspicion, an ever-present dread that the individual with whom one was engaged might be merely "passing," adopting a persona not rightfully hers or his.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the urgent, even shrill, tones that suffuse the period's advice literature, as in Joel Hawes's *Lectures Addressed to the Young Men of Hartford and New-Haven* (1828):

Instead of acting in open daylight, pursuing the direct and straightforward path of rectitude and duty, you see men, extensively, putting on false appearances; working in the dark, and carrying their plans by stratagem and deceit. Nothing open, nothing direct and honest; one thing is said, and another thing meant. When you look for a man in one place, you find him in another. With flattering lips and a double heart do they speak. Their language and conduct do not proceed from fixed principle and open hearted sincerity; but from a spirit of duplicity and management.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. xv. Studies of the antebellum culture of performance frequently zero in on the representative figure of Barnum: see, e.g., Bluford Adams, *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Eric Fretz, "P. T. Barnum's Theatrical Selfhood and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Exhibition," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 97–107.

<sup>9</sup>Joel Hawes, *Lectures Addressed to the Young Men of Hartford and New-Haven* (1828), quoted in Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, p. 33.

In essence, Halttunen contends, the crisis was semiotic: "severing the link between surface appearances and inner moral nature," the confidence man represented the culture's loss of faith in its ability to read signs. For Jackson Lears, Melville's *The Confidence-Man* exemplifies this fall from hermeneutic grace. Deriding "the belief in a transparently communicative language and a plainspoken autonomous self who utters it," Melville's novel warrants neither "any trust in a providential order behind the veil of deceptive appearances" nor any "idiom of authenticity to counteract the proliferations of artifice."<sup>10</sup> Less caustically than his protégé, Hawthorne, too, captures this vertiginous feel in his late-life, unfinished manuscript "Septimius Felton":

his homely cottage . . . [seemed] an unsubstantial edifice, such as castles in the air are built of, and the ground he trod on unreal. . . . All unreal; all illusion. . . . In short, it was a moment, such as I suppose all men feel (at least, I can answer for one) when the real scene and picture of life swims, jars, shakes, seems about to be broken up and dispersed, like the picture in a smooth pond, when we disturb its smooth mirror by throwing in a stone; and though the scene soon settles itself, and looks as real as before, a haunting doubt keeps close at hand, as long as we live, asking—"Is it stable? Am I sure of it? Am I certainly not dreaming? See; it trembles again, ready to dissolve."<sup>11</sup>

The tale of a part-Indian medical novice, a sort of Henry Tufts-in-training, who pursues the "elixir of life" (or secret of immortality) only to distill a deadly poison, "Septimius Felton" conveys Hawthorne's distrust of merely mortal, material solutions to the dread of duplicity and insubstantiality that haunted both the tale's protagonist and—so it seems—its author.

If Hawthorne and Melville (who introduces a similarly suspect Indian "yarb" doctor in *The Confidence-Man*) doubted the efficacy of Indian healing as a prophylactic against the plague of

<sup>10</sup>Halttunen, *Confidence Men*, p. 42; Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 100, 101.

<sup>11</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Septimius Felton," in *The Elixir of Life Manuscripts*, vol. 13 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1977), p. 101.

artifice, many of their countrymen thought differently. As historians of medicine have shown, the herbalists and itinerant peddlers of "simples" who flooded the early-nineteenth-century market with their wares crafted messages that appealed not only to the common person's distrust of scientific erudition and obscurantism but, more broadly, to the customer's yearning for substance over show. Charging that "regular medicine's claim to scientific and even professional status was a sham and pretense," that the medical establishment's complex terminology and apparatus were tools to "aid the learned in deception and fraud," lay healers argued, in effect, that medical men were the true confidence men, whose Latinate words and arcane ways were concocted to baffle and bully.<sup>12</sup> Samuel Thomson's best-selling *New Guide to Health; or, Botanic Family Physician* (1822), for example, accused medical doctors of "pursuing a shadow and losing sight of the substance," of conspiring to "cloak" their practices "under the specious pretence of great skill and art" in their design to "blind the people."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>William G. Rothstein, *American Physicians in the Nineteenth Century: From Sects to Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 148; Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 34. The rise of herbal medicine in the antebellum era is covered by Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 123–42; Lamar Riley Murphy, *Enter the Physician: The Transformation of Domestic Medicine, 1760–1860* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), pp. 70–100; Rothstein, *American Physicians*, pp. 128–51; and Starr, *Social Transformation*, pp. 47–54.

<sup>13</sup>Samuel Thomson, *New Guide to Health; or, Botanic Family Physician* (Boston: E. G. House, 1822), pp. 5, 203. Mainstream doctors, it is perhaps needless to say, leveled similar accusations of quackery at their competitors, fuming that "if [a lay healer] have knavery enough to feign a special call from heaven to the work of doctoring; or profess to have received the 'gift of healing,' either by a dream or vision; or by learning from an Indian medicine-man the use of roots and yarbs; . . . his opinion will be sought, and his physick swallowed by thousands" (David Meredith Reese, *Humbugs of New-York, Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion; Whether in Science, Philosophy, or Religion* [New York: John S. Taylor, 1838; reprinted, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1971], p. 125). Intriguingly, despite (or because of) their points of connection, the Thomsons strove to distance their practices from those of the Indians. One antebellum follower of Thomson, for instance, termed the Indians a "great tribe of quacks," with "no remedies worth notice" and without "any knowledge of diseases"; those who pretended to be Indian healers were "rank impostors," in whom "no confidence should be reposed" (James S. Olcott, quoted in John S. Haller Jr., *The People's Doctors: Samuel Thomson and the American Botanical Movement, 1790–1860* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000], p. 33).

What the herbalists offered in contrast to the medical mountebanks were, first, commonsense remedies that lay within the grasp—sometimes within the gardens—of the homeliest of sufferers and, second, the conviction that good health was the body's natural condition, indeed the very condition of nature, from which a debased and bedazzled populace had strayed but to which those who saw through society's shows could return. As George Catlin, painter of western Indians, put it in his quack-healing treatise *Breath of Life or Mal-Respiration* (1861), the "dissipations and vices," the "diseases and deformities," the "enervating and unnatural habit[s]" that have "corrupted" civilized societies could all be countered by heeding the example of the Indians. They, who "strictly adhere to Nature's law," held out the hope for a "Re-generation of the Human Race."<sup>14</sup>

The lay healers thus laid the groundwork for the Indian cure, which fomented the belief, in Robert Jay's words, that "the red man, in his unique communion with nature, possessed knowledge of its curative powers unrevealed to civilized man." As Virgil J. Vogel writes in his study of Indian medicine, "many of the early botanic physicians" underwent metamorphoses comparable to that of Henry Tufts, declaring that they had "absorbed their knowledge directly from contact with the Indians. . . . Some claimed to be at least partly of Indian descent."<sup>15</sup> Richardson Wright notes that the earliest known patent medicine, a 1711 cure for consumption, was branded "Tuscarora Rice"; a late-century Massachusetts "squaw," Peter Benes has learned, vied with men like Tufts in professing "the ability to

<sup>14</sup>George Catlin, *Breath of Life or Mal-Respiration. And Its Effects upon the Enjoyments & Life of Man* (1861; reprinted, New York: John Wiley, 1872), pp. 6, 3, 23, 6, 17, 75.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Jay, *The Trade Card in Nineteenth-Century America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), p. 71; Virgil J. Vogel, *American Indian Medicine* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 131. On the selling of "Indian" medicines from colonial times through the antebellum period, see Stewart H. Holbrook, *The Golden Age of Quackery* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 31-41; Vogel, *American Indian Medicine*, pp. 130-41; and James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 3-89.

cure cancers with an external application and internal administration of herbs."<sup>16</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the phenomenon of Euro-American individuals marketing their pills and powders—as well as their persons—under the banner of Indian healing assumed the proportions of a full-fledged cultural craze.<sup>17</sup> A host of products, most likely identical in composition and effectiveness but with names as varied as Indian Expectorant, Red Jacket Stomach Bitters, Old Sachem Bitters, and Indian Compound, were sold through catalogues and itinerant salespeople; meanwhile, books as uniform in both title and contents as Peter Smith's *The Indian Doctor's Dispensatory* (1813), Jonas Rishel's *The Indian Physician* (1828), S. H. Selman's *The Indian Guide to Health* (1836), Robert L. Foster's *The North American Indian Doctor* (1838), William Daily's *The Indian Doctor's Practice of Medicine* (1848), and James Cooper's *The Indian Doctor's Receipt Book* (1855) rolled off New England and Midwestern presses and were available for purchase at traveling medicine shows.<sup>18</sup> Indian medicine, antebellum Americans were convinced, possessed the power not only to heal individual sufferers but, more profoundly, to return civilized society to its putatively original, unmediated relationship

<sup>16</sup>Richardson Wright, *Hawkers and Walkers in Early America: Strolling Peddlers, Preachers, Lawyers, Doctors, Players, and Others, from the Beginning to the Civil War* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1927), p. 120; Peter Benes, "Itinerant Physicians, Healers, and Surgeon-Dentists in New England and New York, 1720-1825," in *Medicine and Healing*, ed. Benes, Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings, 1990 (Boston: Boston University Press, 1992), p. 101.

<sup>17</sup>Indeed, a possible model for Hawthorne's Septimius Felton can be found in one of the century's earliest such practitioners, the celebrated "Old Doc Hashalew," who, according to Stewart Holbrook, claimed to have absorbed the "Secret Arts and Herbal Virtues of the Great Indian Chiefs of the Seneca and Cayuga tribes" and who, in the 1810s and 1820s, marketed a drug known as "Hashalew's Elixir of Life" (*Golden Age of Quackery*, pp. 38, 39).

<sup>18</sup>On the marketing of "Indian" remedies, see Jeffrey Steele, "Reduced to Images: American Indians in Nineteenth-Century Advertising," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1996), pp. 45-64. The late-century phenomenon of the traveling medicine show is covered by Holbrook, *Golden Age of Quackery*, pp. 204-15; Brooks McNamara, *Step Right Up*, rev. ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp. 73-119; Vogel, *American Indian Medicine*, pp. 141-43; and Young, *Toadstool Millionaires*, pp. 190-202.

with nature. Even as Euro-Americans waged an escalating campaign of words and weapons against actual Indian medical practices and practitioners,<sup>19</sup> the Indian cure transfigured Indian medicine into the spiritual behest of doomed and departed sages, a tutelary vestige to be consumed by the new race of native Americans.



The same craving for natural immediacy pervades Thoreau's work, as does the belief that health could be secured by inhabiting a leftover Indian persona. Even at its most prankish, as when Thoreau and his brother John, in Robert Sayre's words, "romantically imagined themselves" to be "Savage Brothers," the underlying emphasis on the Indian cure is unmistakable. In an 1837 letter, while adopting the pidgin-Indian of savagist fantasy and commending his older brother for being "a great medicine," Thoreau portrays himself as "Tahatawan," the supposed guardian spirit of the Concord River.<sup>20</sup> In journal passages, similarly, he cites nature as "a medicative draught to my soul," "an elixir to my eyes," and a depthless font of "botanical medicines." And in his "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842), he reproduces the language of sickness and recovery popularized by "Indian" doctors:

In society you will not find health, but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid. Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so. There is no scent in it so wholesome as that of the pines, nor any fragrance so penetrating and restorative as the life-everlasting in high pastures. I

<sup>19</sup>On the Euro-American medical establishment's crusade against Indian medicine, see Ronald Niezen, *Spirit Wars: Native North American Religions in the Age of Nation Building* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 92-127. The verbal assault on the Indian "juggler" is detailed by Charles Reagan Wilson, "Shamans and Charlatans: The Popularization of Native American Religion in Magazines, 1865-1900," *Indian Historian* 12.3 (1979): 6-13.

<sup>20</sup>Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians*, p. 45; *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 18.

would keep some book of natural history always by me as a sort of elixir, the reading of which should restore the tone of the system.<sup>21</sup>

At the root of Thoreau's discourse lay the precepts of the Indian cure: rejecting the tantalizing displays of social theater for the enduring rhythms of primitive life, he sought, in common with his less esteemed colleagues, to return society to its original relation to Nature.

It is from this perspective that *Walden*, as Joan Burbick suggests, "can be read as a self-help manual of health."<sup>22</sup> "The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well nigh incurable form of disease," Thoreau opines (p. 11), disdaining "the luxury which enervates and destroys nations" (p. 15). Sounding very much like the health reformers whom, pages later, he twits, he insists, "a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength" (p. 61). He continues: "Those plants of whose greenness withered we make herb tea for the sick, serve but a humble use, and are most employed by quacks. . . . If, then, we would indeed restore mankind by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or natural means, let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores" (pp. 77, 78-79). His sojourn in the wild, "in whose odorous herb garden I love to stroll sometimes, gathering simples" (p. 137), al-

<sup>21</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 6: 1853*, ed. William Rossi and Heather Kirk Thomas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 235-36 (22 June 1853); Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906; reprinted, Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1984), 5:394 (23 August 1853); Henry David Thoreau, "The Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842), in *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup>Joan Burbick, *Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 58. On the affinity between Thoreau's Walden experiment and discourses of nature, health, and sickness during his time, see also Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, pp. 87-93; and David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 140-50. As Stephen Nissenbaum points out, "it is no coincidence that Thoreau, who moved to Walden Pond in 1845 in order to live 'deliberately' and thereby to avoid 'desperation,' adopted something close to [Sylvester] Graham's regimen of temperance, vegetarianism, sexual abstinence, and (above all) minimal consumption" (*Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980], p. 138 n. 9).

lows Thoreau directly to tap the "tonic of wildness" (p. 317) whose virtues others merely preach:

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! . . . What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented? Not my or thy great-grandfather's, but our great-grandmother Nature's universal, vegetable, botanic medicines. . . . For my panacea, instead of one of those quack vials of a mixture dipped from Acheron and the Dead Sea, which come out of those long shallow black-schooner looking wagons which we sometimes see made to carry bottles, let me have a draught of undiluted morning air. [P. 138]

If Thoreau resembles the Indian healers of his time in seeking out the "simple and natural" route to health, his diagnosis of society's ills likewise recalls theirs: vanity, illusion, spectacle, theater, all the dross of a society clogged with trifles rather than truth. In "Economy," for instance, he strives to strip fashion of its seductive, deceptive power:

I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit? If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes. All men want, not something to *do with*, but something to *do*, or rather something to *be*. [P. 23]

Likewise, railing against the foolery of a college education, he advises scholars not to "*play* life, or *study* it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end" (p. 51). Surveying the landscape beyond the ivory tower, he finds more of the same: "As with our colleges, so with a hundred 'modern improvements'; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. . . . Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things" (p. 52). Thoreau's rage against fraud culminates in the indictment and entreaty of "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For":

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. . . . By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to

be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit every where, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. . . . I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be. . . . Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake. . . . Be it life or death, we crave only reality. [Pp. 95-98]

The man capable of such an impassioned and uncompromising battery against social delusion would likely not have recognized his resemblance to the itinerant quacks, peddlers of the Indian cure. Indeed, one of his principal exhibits of the era's duplicity was this class of confidence men and their too-easy marks. In "The Succession of Forest Trees" (1860), for example, he can only shake his head in disbelief at the obtrusiveness of traveling illusionists and the gullibility of those who swallow their wares: "farmers' sons will stare by the hour to see a juggler draw ribbons from his throat," Thoreau sighs, "though he tells them it is all deception. Surely, men love darkness rather than light."<sup>23</sup> Yet if Thoreau believed that, like all their swindling brethren, the droves of medicine men crossing the antebellum countryside were mere hucksters of inefficacious nostrums, the very urgency of his campaign makes it clear that, like them, he was engaged in a struggle against rival salespersons, whose medicine had to be exposed so that he might carve out a greater share of the market for his own. Because he was such a virtuoso trickster, however, because he could magically transform the baldly physical, pecuniary terms of the white medicine man's sales-pitch into the apparently disinterested discourse of the transcendentalist (or nationalist) poet, the extent of his artful dodge has not been fully appreciated.<sup>24</sup> Or to put this another

<sup>23</sup>Henry David Thoreau, "The Succession of Forest Trees" (1860), in *Natural History Essays*, p. 92.

<sup>24</sup>I am not the first modern critic to name Thoreau something of a confidence man, though I am, to my knowledge, the first to find his game somewhat less than edifying. See also Robert A. Cross, "The Great Bean Field Hoax: Thoreau and the Agricultural Reformers," in *Critical Essays on Thoreau's "Walden,"* ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G. K.

way: it is at least in part because the Indian cure performs such a powerful role in the national imaginary that Thoreau, as its consummate practitioner, has been so rightly—if troublingly—celebrated for his art.

Thoreau's potentially appealing reenactment of the Indian cure is exhibited in an early journal entry in which he writes of his experience of discovering "the relics of a race which has vanished as completely as if trodden in with the earth." Granted this opening, Thoreau takes the Indians' apparent absence as an opportunity for his own and his fellows' re-creation:

Everywhere I go, I tread in the tracks of the Indian. I pick up the bolt which he has but just dropped at my feet. And if I consider destiny I am on his trail. I scatter his hearthstones with my feet, and pick out of the embers of his fire the simple but enduring implements of the wigwam and the chase. In planting my corn in the same furrow which yielded its increase to his support so long, I displace some memorial of him. . . . What a new aspect have new eyes given to the land! Where is this country but in the hearts of its inhabitants? Why, there is only so much of Indian America left as there is of the American Indian in the character of this generation.<sup>25</sup>

The "turn" in this passage signals the peculiar effectiveness by which Thoreau, while offering Indian medicine to salve or save white souls, denies the seamier side of his profession: having raided Indian habitations (perhaps even burial sites) for their spoils, he declares that these fragments of "Indian America" may be transformed into the substance of the nation's originality, a trick that lends his appropriation of Indian goods, ways, and identity the aura of reverence, of duty, even of destiny. In this sense, the Thoreauvian project reproduces not merely the scams of shysters like Henry Tufts but the foundational dodge of American national identity, which constructs a putatively untrammelled origin from the very acts of appropriation and elision pitchmen like Thoreau are selling.

Hall, 1988), pp. 193–202; and Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Man in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 167–80.

<sup>25</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 1: 1837–1844*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 381–82 (19 March 1842).

It is no coincidence, then, that the site of Thoreau's most famous literary performance was (according to him) formerly a stage for Indian medicine-performance:

My townsmen have all heard the tradition . . . that anciently the Indians were holding a pow-wow upon a hill here, which rose as high into the heavens as the pond now sinks deep into the earth, . . . and while they were thus engaged the hill shook and suddenly sank, and only one old squaw, named Walden, escaped, and from her the pond was named. [P. 182]

Even in this sketchy genealogy, Thoreau's method of co-opting Indian medicine is evident: the Indians having, in this case literally, sunk into the earth, the white man who builds his habitation on the ground he is now free to claim consequently has access to the healing spirit that continues to rise from that ground. Thoreau's bean-field, too, establishes him as heir to the Indians' hearth and health: "in the course of the summer it appeared by the arrow-heads which I turned up in hoeing, that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and planted corn and beans ere white men came to clear the land, and so, to some extent, had exhausted the soil for this very crop" (p. 156). Though their own planting has borne no fertile issue—or, rather, precisely because of this—the "extinct nations" who preceded him have created the conditions that will both physically and spiritually provide for their white successor's needs.

The vital importance of Indian medicine for Thoreau's project is perhaps most evident in the *Walden* passage in which he details a medicine performance originally conducted by Indian peoples: the "busk," or earth-renewal rite, of the Creek or Muskogee Indians. Thoreau explains:

The customs of some savage nations might, perchance, be profitably imitated by us, for they at least go through the semblance of casting their slough annually; they have the idea of the thing, whether they have the reality or not. Would it not be well if we were to celebrate such a "busk," or "feast of first fruits," as Bartram describes to have been the custom of the Mucclasse Indians? [P. 68]

For three days, Thoreau reports, the Indians take medicine and fast. On the morning of the fourth day, "all the fire in the town



is extinguished" (p. 68). In the ritual's dramatic, culminating moment, Thoreau notes (quoting Bartram), the "high priest, by rubbing dry wood together, produces new fire in the public square, from whence every habitation in the town is supplied with the new and pure flame" (p. 68). Thoreau remarks, "I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament, that is, as the dictionary defines it, 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,' than this, and I have no doubt that they were originally inspired directly from Heaven to do thus" (p. 69).

This medicine ceremony, it is perhaps needless to say, reproduces for Thoreau the rhythms of his own sacramental experiment: the withdrawal from daily business, the sloughing off of worldly goods, the partaking of nature's medicine, and the re-birth into wholeness. It is thus telling that, although Thoreau initially suggests that the ceremony may be mere "semblance," the "imitation" of which he only tentatively endorses, the passage concludes with a reading of the Creek ceremony as the very essence of the "reality" he craves, a reality beyond imitation and re-semblance. True, original, and direct, healing the rift between "outward sign" and "inward" nature, the Creek Indian performance both prefigures and authorizes Thoreau's own Indian performance, granting him the uncanny power to perform the real.

Facilitating Thoreau's act of appropriation, of course, is the Creeks' temporal and geographical remoteness.<sup>26</sup> Yet, when dealing with the Indians of his own time and place, Thoreau proves equally intent on erasing their material presence so that he may inhabit their husks and imbibe their spirit. Indeed, in *Walden's* single extended reference to Concord's contemporary Indian inhabitants, he employs the logic of the Indian cure to create himself as the representative and his book as the repository of the real, authentic spirit of America. He writes:

<sup>26</sup>For Bartram's quite different, eyewitness reaction to the Creek "busk," see my "Wicked Instruments: William Bartram and the Dispossession of the Southern Indians," *Arizona Quarterly* 51.3 (Autumn 1995): 1-23.

Not long since, a strolling Indian went to sell baskets at the house of a well-known lawyer in my neighborhood. "Do you wish to buy any baskets?" he asked. "No, we do not want any," was the reply. "What!" exclaimed the Indian as he went out the gate, "do you mean to starve us?" Having seen his industrious white neighbors so well off . . . he had said to himself; I will go into business; I will weave baskets; it is a thing which I can do. Thinking that when he had made the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be the white man's to buy them. He had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so, or to make something else which it would be worth his while to buy. I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth my while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them. [P. 19]

A rumination on his own freedom from economic necessity—a rumination, as I have elsewhere argued, that is itself something of a pitch<sup>27</sup>—this passage manipulates the "strolling Indian" and his wares in the interest of selling the "medicine" *Walden* offers. The Indian, a pathetic enough cousin to the traveling root peddler, has not only failed in this particular case to score a sale; in order to do so, Thoreau implies, he will have to adopt the scurrilous tactics of the white medicine man and dupe customers into thinking they need his goods. The passage thus finds Thoreau displacing the very "cure" that authenticates his work: while the basket-selling Indian—a member of an artisanal community that found marketing its traditional crafts to be one of its few footholds in antebellum economic culture<sup>28</sup>—is left to starve for his art, Thoreau's purer products transcend

<sup>27</sup>See my *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 65-68.

<sup>28</sup>On the antebellum Indian basket industry, see Daniel R. Mandell, *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp. 199-200; and Ann McMullen, "Many Motives: Change in Northeastern Native Basketry Making," in *The Art of Native American Basketry: A Living Legacy*, ed. Frank W. Porter III (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1990), pp. 45-78.

such mean business and ally themselves with the very "native" essence they surpass or suppress.<sup>29</sup>

A journal entry written while Thoreau was preparing *Walden* for publication clarifies the correlation between identification with and displacement of the basket maker's art:

Still here and there an Indian squaw with her dog—her only companion—lives in some lone house . . . making baskets & picking berries her employment[.] You will meet her on the highway—with few children or none—with melancholy face—history destiny . . . weaving the shroud of her race—performing the last services for her departed race. Not yet absorbed into the elements again—A daughter of the soil—one of the nobility of the land—the white man an imported weed burdock & mullein which displace the ground nut.<sup>30</sup>

And in *Walden*, a further reference to the groundnut reveals how, through and in a distinctively "American" literature, Thoreau amalgamates his "imported" race with the native peoples that race has overpowered:

This tuber [the groundnut] seemed like a faint promise of Nature to rear her own children and feed them simply here at some future period. In these days of fatted cattle and waving grain-fields, this humble root, which was once the *totem* of an Indian tribe, is quite forgot-

<sup>29</sup>Many critics have detailed the omissions and contradictions in Thoreau's economic rhetoric. See Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 35–51; and Richard F. Teichgraber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 44–74. Yet notably, even those who question Thoreau's economic rhetoric accept his rhetoric of the Indian as absent and available for poetic appropriation. See, e.g., Nicholas Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 88; and Michael Newbury, "Healthful Employment: Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Middle-Class Fitness," *American Quarterly* 47 (1995): 706. For a critique of the move in *Walden* whereby Thoreau, not satisfied "simply to erase the physical presence of Indians from the imagined community of the nation," must "go one step further and actually occupy the cultural subject position of the 'Native American,'" see Timothy B. Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 84.

<sup>30</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Journal, Volume 3: 1848–1851*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer, Mark R. Patterson, and William Rossi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 93 (after 16 July 1850).

ten, or known only by its flowering vine; but let wild Nature reign here once more, and the tender and luxurious English grains will probably disappear before a myriad of foes, and without the care of man the crow may carry back even the last seed of corn to the great corn-field of the Indian's God in the south-west, whence he is said to have brought it; but the now almost exterminated ground-nut will perhaps revive and flourish in spite of frosts and wildness, prove itself indigenous, and resume its ancient importance and dignity as the diet of the hunter tribe. Some Indian Ceres or Minerva must have been the inventor and bestower of it; and when the reign of poetry commences here, its leaves and string of nuts may be represented on our works of art. [P. 239]

Conflating the botanic pitch of the "Indian" healer and the clarion calls of the literary nationalist, this complex and compact reading of American racial, national, and literary history recovers the groundnut, the "totem" of a bygone Indian people, as the rightful and proper diet of those who have taken the Indians' lands, assaulted their gods, and—as in the case of the clients who spurn the basket maker—mishandled and misapprehended their "works of art." Yet in naturalizing (or spiritualizing) a history of violent conquest, the passage fulfills Thoreau's fantasy of "proving himself indigenous," of becoming, indeed, "more indigenous even than the natives" (p. 127), with "health" that is "ever good" (p. 127) and "a strange liberty in Nature" (p. 129). That Thoreau should enjoy such unbridled liberty is not, of course, strange at all; what is strange is that he should so thoroughly fail to notice, or at least to acknowledge, that his own liberty was purchased at the expense of another's.



The liberty Thoreau enjoyed enabled him not only to set up shop by the Walden shore, absent Indians serving as his Muse, but to tour farther afield and consort with actual Indian guides, an experience he recounted in *The Maine Woods*. Whether Thoreau knew it or not, Maine, with a long history of the practice, was a particularly suitable locale for the performance of Indian medicine. There, the Abenaki Indians had reputedly

given the boost to Henry Tufts's oily empire. Too, as Alan Taylor reports, Maine's Revolutionary frontier had been a hub of "white Indian" activity, much like that which gripped James Fenimore Cooper's upstate New York a generation later, where groups of settlers in Indian costume engaged in extralegal activities to protest their dispossession by a new class of landed proprietors. Calling themselves "Liberty Men" during the Revolutionary period, these downeast advocates of the common person later changed their name to "White Indians" as they "imaginatively elaborated the mock-Indian identity that they originally adopted simply to disguise their identities as a shield from criminal prosecution." This performance involved, as Taylor notes, "more than a little ironic hypocrisy," given the fact that "many White Indians were the sons and grandsons of mid-eighteenth-century settlers who had wrested the land away from Maine's real Indians." But if, as Taylor argues, it was the real Indians' reduction to "an impoverished and ineffectual few dwelling on a restricted and shrinking reservation along the Penobscot River" that licensed or liberated white performers to "appropriate [Indian] identity for use against the proprietors," Thoreau's travels reveal that real Indians, too, could put the power of Indian medicine to imaginative use as they sought to secure their own rights, liberties, property, and identity as Indian Americans.<sup>31</sup>

In many ways, then, *The Maine Woods's* more novel story is the one Thoreau does not fully relate, the one he does not, in fact, fully comprehend. The story he knows and recounts at length follows the well-worn path of the Indian cure: "It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom," Thoreau marvels, going on to say that this invigorating drink so intimately received "would acclimate and naturalize a man at once."<sup>32</sup> As in *Walden*, Thoreau contrasts the natural grace of

<sup>31</sup>Alan Taylor, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 189, 190.

<sup>32</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (1864), ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 27, 28. Further citations will appear in the text.

the wilderness with the grubbing artifice of commercial society: "How much more respectable also is the life of the solitary pioneer or settler in these, or any woods,—having real difficulties, not of his own creation, drawing his subsistence directly from nature,—than that of the helpless multitudes in the towns who depend on gratifying the extremely artificial wants of society" (p. 244). In *The Maine Woods*, however, the critique of social frippery functions within an overtly conservationist ethos. Mourning the plundering of the land, Thoreau comments:

the Anglo American can indeed cut down and grub up all this waving forest and make a stump speech and vote for Buchanan on its ruins, but he cannot converse with the spirit of the tree he fells—he cannot read the poetry and mythology which retire as he advances. He ignorantly erases mythological tablets in order to print his handbills and town meeting warrants on them. [P. 229]

In *The Maine Woods*, accordingly, Thoreau's faith in natural wholeness—his belief that in this "bran new country" (p. 16) one could "begin life as Adam did" (p. 14)—assumes a more urgent, or at least more utilitarian, goal: his quest to "converse with the spirit of the trees" his fellows are intent on toppling becomes a plea for the preservation of a wildness that, as he promised in "Walking" (1862), vouchsafed in turn "the preservation of the World."<sup>33</sup>

In this quest, the Indian serves not only as Thoreau's literal guide but as his spiritual alter ego, indeed as the one who transmits to him nature's pure medicine. In *The Maine Woods*, however, Thoreau has grown more suspicious of the Indians than he was in *Walden*, less convinced of their closeness to or stewardship of nature; instead, he perceives the Indians for the most part as having become too degraded by contact with civilization to serve as alternatives or antidotes to its afflictions. Some critics, including Robert Sayre and David Shi, have argued that by bringing him into sustained contact with real Indians, Thoreau's Maine experiences modified the primitivist preconceptions of *Walden*; in Maine, they suggest, Thoreau became

<sup>33</sup>Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862), in *Natural History Essays*, p. 112.

(as Sayre believes) more sensitive to Indians as human beings or (as Shi maintains) more clear-eyed about their all-too-human limitations.<sup>34</sup> I would argue, to the contrary, that Thoreau's view of the Indians—and of his own relationship to them—held steady: their place, their culture, their identity he still took to be *his* merited birthright. Confronted with an Indian who is present in *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau demonstrates his marked preference for the one who has vanished from *Walden*. Only the vanished Indian, he insists, is capable of safeguarding nature's sacred trust; *only* the vanished Indian can give rise to a regenerative Indianness to which Thoreau, as poet and prophet, has privileged access. *The Maine Woods*, then, represents Thoreau's boldest plug for the Indian cure: supplanting the Indians absolutely and bodily, he seeks to re-create himself as the sole vessel worthy of dispensing their medicine to a whitened nation.

To accomplish this task of supplanting the Indians, Thoreau borrows from his culture's master narrative of native enfeeblement and declension, according to which, as fellow artist, traveler, and medicine performer Catlin put it, the Indians' "native pride and dignity have at last given way to the unnatural vices which civilized cupidity has engrafted upon them."<sup>35</sup> Thoreau likewise rues the "resemblance between the degraded savage and the lowest classes in a great city. The one is no more a child

<sup>34</sup>See Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians*, pp. 155–87; and Shi, *Simple Life*, p. 146. D. M. Murray argues that as *The Maine Woods* progresses from "Ktaadn" through "The Allegash and East Branch," Thoreau's perception of the Indians becomes increasingly accurate ("Thoreau's Indians and His Developing Art of Characterization," *ESQ* 21 [1975]: 222–29); because I believe the three essays work jointly in the service of the Indian cure, I make no particular effort to distinguish them.

<sup>35</sup>George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, 2 vols. (1841; reprinted, New York: Dover, 1973), 1:7. In terms that perfectly suit *The Maine Woods*, Brian Dippie discusses the antebellum belief that "civilized" Indians were, in effect, diseased Indians: "Americans who mourned the disappearing wilderness and the Vanishing Indian were forced to reconcile their ideal with the real. . . . The key to reconciling expectation and actuality was in building backward from the present reality to the past ideal, letting the gulf between serve as a measure of civilization's deleterious effects. Assuming that the Indian was once noble, then it followed that the degraded contemporary specimens proved contact with the white man inimical, confirming the theory that the Indians were doomed to perish before civilization's advance" (*The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982], p. 25).

of nature than the other. In the progress of degradation, the distinction of races is soon lost" (p. 78). The vast majority of Indians Thoreau meets in Maine are decidedly degraded, avatars of drunkenness, laziness, speciousness, unreliability. They have forfeited many of their original virtues: they get lost in the woods, become "quite sick . . . with the colic" (p. 289), and give in to the civilized sin of "pretense" (p. 296). Estranged from the shamanistic tradition from which they originally drew power, they have become stump speakers, handbill posters, party men: "Politics are all the rage with them now. I even thought that a row of wigwams, with a dance of pow-wows, and a prisoner tortured at the stake, would be more respectable than this" (p. 7).

Thoreau's guides, to be sure, are rather less corrupted than the common run; yet even they generally fall short of expectations. As Siobhan Senier observes, "the Indian river guide . . . created a dilemma" for writers like Thoreau who wished to present themselves as "the true natives": "spectacle of a vanished race," the guide "was also very much alive. Thoreau finesses the problem by reading his Penobscot guide, Joe Polis, as less Indian for living in a wood-frame house, farming, negotiating his own fees, and receiving the Bangor newspaper."<sup>36</sup> Hemmed in by such "un-Indian" effects, these counterfeits reveal scant likeness to the "real" Indian of the past. Indeed, it is at the very moments when Thoreau's escorts show a glimmer of past glories that they most fully reveal the distance between the natural man and his misbegotten scion. For instance, when Joe Polis narrates a traditional story—when, in other words, he provides a rare, if modest, glimpse into the "mythological" tradition that Thoreau believes is being erased with the leveling of the forests—the man strikes Thoreau as little better than a braggart and a windbag, discoursing in a style of "dumb wonder which he hopes will be contagious" (p. 172).<sup>37</sup> The Indians, it seems,

<sup>36</sup>Siobhan Senier, "Employing the Local: A Penobscot Modern in the Federal Writers' Project," *New England Quarterly* 75 (2002): 357, 358. On Thoreau's difficulty accepting Polis's "civilized" ways, see also Tom Lynch, "The 'Domestic Air' of Wilderness: Henry Thoreau and Joe Polis in the Maine Woods," *Weber Studies* 14.3 (1997): 38–48.

<sup>37</sup>The one time in *The Maine Woods* when Thoreau believes himself to have discovered "purely wild and primitive" Indians (p. 136) involves an episode in which he cannot understand their words—and thus, as Linda Frost points out, he is able to "replace"

are but poor guides in these degenerate days; far from offering health, they threaten to repay civilization for its baneful gifts with a new outbreak of "contagion." In light of this discourse that identifies the Indian not only as a victim but as a carrier of disease, Thoreau's unusually vehement outburst in "Chesuncook" seems not altogether startling: "What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of nature! No wonder that their race is so soon exterminated" (p. 120). Thoreau's apparent lack of regret over this eventuality—indeed his hopeful augury of it—signals his belief that most of what made the Indian worthwhile, indeed most of what made the Indian *Indian*, had already been exterminated.

Thoreau's recital of the Indians' lives of quiet desperation could, of course, have prompted an indictment of the reservation system and its overarching colonial apparatus. But because Thoreau participates in a comparable, indeed interdependent, cultural colonialism, that analysis never emerges, for according to the tradition of the Indian cure, in the Indians' extermination lay the hope of renewal for those who embraced their nature. In Thoreau's eyes, the Indians' failure to live out their distinctive virtue justifies their absorption within the proper elements of white society; or, more precisely, since "real" Indians have succumbed to civilized vices, it is the elixir of original Indianness that will be extracted and dispensed by the poet-shaman. Thus, in the speculations that conclude his "Chesuncook" idyll, Thoreau's hunt for the restorative powers of the wild leads to his imagining a national park where, "not only for strength, but for beauty, the poet" might

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.

The kings of England formerly had their forests "to hold the king's game," for sport or food, sometimes destroying villages to create or extend them; and I think that they were impelled by a true instinct. Why should not we, who have renounced the king's authority, have

their discourse "with his own signifying figures" ("The Red Face of Man," the Penobscot Indian, and a Conflict of Interest in Thoreau's *Maine Woods*," *ESQ* 39 [1993]: 33).

our national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be "civilized off the face of the earth,"—our forests, not to hold the king's game merely, but to hold and preserve the king himself also, the lord of creation,—not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains? [P. 156]

Commenting on this passage, Lawrence Buell commends Thoreau's forward-looking conservationist sensibility, next to which, Buell chides, the majority of us look sick indeed: for Thoreau, "a deeply personal love and reverence for the non-human led in time to a fiercely protective feeling for nature, which later generations have rightly seized on as a basis for a more enlightened environmental ethic and polity than the prevailing dispensation built on the view of American nature as an endlessly exploitable resource. . . . In this light," Buell concludes, "Thoreau's ragged progress through his various nature projects looks admirable, our quibbling shameful."<sup>38</sup> To our quibbling over the protection of the environment, one might apply an even less delicate adjective. But one need not doubt the failure of the environmental imagination in our own time to find fault with Thoreau's scheme, which melts nonhuman nature and nonwhite human beings into a common pool of natural/national resources for the pleasure—one might say for the endless exploitation—of a white nation seeking escape, consolation, redemption: "a resource and a background," as Thoreau puts it, "the raw material of all our civilization" (p. 155). In constructing this nationalist utopia, Thoreau insists, "no villages need be destroyed"; but he means, of course, no *white* villages, for clearly many Indian villages had already been razed and others repurposed for the white tourist trade. (The basket-making industry, for one, thrived in just such places.)<sup>39</sup> For all

<sup>38</sup>Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 137, 139.

<sup>39</sup>On the basket industry of the Maine Indians, see Pauleena MacDougall, "Native American Industry: Basket Weaving among the Wabanaki," *American Indian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Contemporary Issues*, ed. Dane Morrison (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 167–92.

its earnestness, then, Thoreau's blueprint fails of its aim in two respects: first, it is but a spiritualized version of the very commodity fetishism he scorns, and, second, it is a disguised yet no less deceptive or dangerous version of the Indian cure. Anticipating the late-century creation of the national parks, in which, as Mark David Spence writes, "wilderness preservation went hand in hand with native dispossession," Thoreau's environmentalist progressiveness furthers the obfuscating performance of the Indian cure, collapsing Indians so completely with the spirit of the woods that they are for all intents and purposes in(di)visible.<sup>40</sup>

An even more dramatic instance of cultural colonialism appears in a moment of ecstatic awareness that crystallizes for Thoreau the significance of his wilderness vocation. Straying from camp one night, as he recounts in "The Allegash and East Branch," he stumbles upon the transcendentalist equivalent of a gold mine: chunks of phosphorescent wood, which, he writes, "I had so often heard of, but never chanced to see" (p. 179). Though the find at first suggests to Thoreau the devices of "In-

<sup>40</sup>Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 3. In the recent wave of interest in Thoreau as a pioneer preservationist, a man who avoids what Buell terms "environmental racism" (*Environmental Imagination*, p. 138), there is an unfortunate tendency to overlook his human racism. Richard J. Schneider, like Buell, extols the plan for a nation's park envisioned by Indian-cure enthusiasts like Thoreau and Catlin ("Climate Does Thus React on Man: Wilderness and Geographic Determinism in Thoreau's 'Walking,'" in *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, ed. Schneider [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000], p. 59); J. Scott Bryson, meanwhile, favorably compares Thoreau's environmentalism to that of poet Gary Snyder ("Seeing the West Side of Any Mountain: Thoreau and Contemporary Ecological Poetry," in *Thoreau's Sense of Place*, pp. 136-37), seemingly unaware that many Native Americans consider Snyder's *Turtle Island* (1974) the poetic equivalent of the white shaman's medicine acts (see Leslie Marmon Silko, "An Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts: Part One: Imitation 'Indian' Poems. Part Two: Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*," in *Remembered Earth*, pp. 211-16). This is not to question Thoreau's (or his followers') commitment to the environment; it is simply to note how subtly the logic of the Indian cure may operate. For critiques of Thoreau's erasure of Indians from the landscape of *The Maine Woods*, see Bruce Greenfield, "Thoreau's Discovery of America: A Nineteenth-Century First Contact," *ESQ* 32 (1986): 80-95; and Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, pp. 21-23. For an analysis that places Thoreau's national park project in the context of Indian attempts to retain their own claims to the land, see Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p.

dian jugglers," who "had imposed on their people and on travellers, pretending to hold coals of fire in their mouths" (p. 180), he is soon transported: "I little thought that there was such a light shining in the darkness of the wilderness for me," he muses (p. 180), and continues in what is perhaps the most intimate and intricate reflection on Indian medicine in all of antebellum literature:

The next day the Indian [Polis] told me their name for this light,—*Artoosoqu*,—and on my inquiring concerning the will-o'-the-wisp, and the like phenomena, he said that his "folks" sometimes saw fires passing along at various heights, even as high as the trees, and making a noise. I was prepared after this to hear of the most startling and unimagined phenomena witnessed by "his folks," they are abroad at all hours and seasons in scenes so unfrequented by white men. Nature must have made a thousand revelations to them which are still secrets to us. . . . I exulted like "a pagan suckled in a creed" that had never been worn at all, but was bran new, and adequate to the occasion. I let science slide, and rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow-creature. . . . It suggested to me that there was something to be seen if one had eyes. It made a believer of me more than before. I believed that the woods were not tenantless, but choke-full of honest spirits as good as myself any day . . . and for a few moments I enjoyed fellowship with them. . . . One revelation has been made to the Indian, another to the white man. I have much to learn of the Indian, nothing of the missionary. I am not sure but all that would tempt me to teach the Indian my religion would be his promise to teach me *his*. [Pp. 180-82]

Exceptional for its intensity and forthrightness, Thoreau's confession is at the same time valuable for the light it sheds on the tradition of the Indian cure—the ways, in particular, in which apparently unselfish, liberal reflection may sustain cultural imperialism. Imagining himself the inheritor (or, better, inhabitant) of Indian mysteries long hidden from, even forbidden to, civilized eyes, Thoreau assumes for himself the shaman's mantle. Aiding him in this trick is the fact that, as the passage unfolds, Indian "folks," the original recipients of this wilderness revelation, recede, leaving only the nameless "spirits" with whom Thoreau holds converse, the tangible expression

of the "spirit of the wood" he has been tailing all along. The final sentence, to be sure, returns to the figure of the Indian as teacher—but now, subtly yet saliently, the Indian has become nothing *but* a figure, a token (or totem) of the Indianness the white man covets for his own. Thoreau is unlikely to have known that a favorite maneuver of the costumed White Indian of Maine's earlier days, in an uncanny (if unintentional) echo of the juggling tricks Thoreau dismisses, was to "place a wood chip in his mouth" in order to affect an "Indian" voice (and thereby assure his freedom to act without fear of legal repercussion).<sup>41</sup> But like these pioneer players, Thoreau siphons the power of Indian medicine from its original carriers, installing that power, in effect, in his own mouth as he celebrates his rebirth as the nation's "bran new" native son.



More Indian medicine, however, was performed in the Maine woods than Thoreau could or cared to record. He reports that Joe Polis, his guide on his final Maine trip, was by Polis's own account

a doctor, [who] could tell me some medicinal use for every plant I could show him. I immediately tried him. He said that the inner bark of the aspen . . . was good for sore eyes; and so with various other plants, proving himself as good as his word. According to his account, he had acquired such knowledge in his youth from a wise old Indian with whom he associated, and he lamented that the present generation of Indians "had lost a great deal." [P. 235]

Impressed though Thoreau seems to have been by Polis's "doctoring," there is no evidence that he thought any differently of the man than of botanical healers of his own race. According to interviews conducted by Fannie Hardy Eckstorm in the following century, however, Polis and his relative Governor John

<sup>41</sup>Taylor, *Liberty Men*, p. 189.

Neptune, whom Thoreau also met, were accounted *m'teoulinak* (*madeoli'nuwak*), or shamans, by the Penobscots.<sup>42</sup> In this capacity, Polis's activities in defending the Old Town school against the machinations of the Penobscots' priest, Father Vetromile, belies Thoreau's reading of Polis's plaint: though Polis may indeed have felt that the Penobscots had "lost a great deal" in their bargain with white civilization, it seems unlikely that to him this "loss" meant solely the withering of the abstract spirit-power Thoreau sought. Or to put this more precisely: it seems that for Polis, Indian medicine, however devastated by white trespass, retained the power to effect *his* people's cure, a cure that Polis laconically summed up as consisting in the ability to "keep 'em property" (p. 293). To Polis, that is, Indian medicine, far from being a free sample to be taken by passing whites, may have remained the surest barrier against the life-threatening flow of land, resources, and cultural integrity from the Penobscots' social body.

In "Chesuncook," recounting a visit to Governor John Neptune, Thoreau provides the background to Polis's acts of resistance: "the Governor's son-in-law, a very sensible Indian . . . said, that there were two political parties among [the Penobscots],—one in favor of schools, and the other opposed to them, or rather they did not wish to resist the priest, who was opposed to them. The first had just prevailed at the election and sent their man to the legislature. Neptune and Aitteon and he [the governor's son-in-law] himself were in favor of schools. He said, 'If Indians got learning, they would keep their money'"

<sup>42</sup>Eckstorm's revealing study of Penobscot shamanism is marred, unfortunately, by the assumptions embedded in the Indian cure, as when she approvingly cites a white colleague who contends that "the modern Indian wears store clothes and knows far less about his own people and their traditions than you and I do" (*Old John Neptune and Other Maine Indian Shamans* [Portland, Maine: Southworth-Anthoensen, 1945; reprinted, Orono: University of Maine at Orono, 1980], p. xii). For further information on the shamanistic powers attributed to Polis's associates, see Charles G. Leland, *Algonquian Legends* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884; reprinted, New York: Dover, 1992), p. 345; and Frank G. Speck, *Penobscot Shamanism*, *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, vol. 6 (Lancaster, Pa.: American Anthropological Association, 1919), pp. 252–53, 282–83.

(pp. 148–49). To hear Thoreau tell it, Polis's role in this struggle was considerably more dynamic, not to mention dramatic:

The priest was going for a sign to cut down the liberty-pole [erected by the pro-school party]. So Polis and his party had a secret meeting about it; he got ready fifteen or twenty stout young men, "stript 'em naked, and painted 'em like old times," and told them that when the priest and his party went to cut down the liberty-pole, they were to rush up, take hold of it and prevent them, and he assured them that there would be no war, only a noise, "no war where priest is." He kept his men concealed in a house near by, and when the priest's party were about to cut down the liberty-pole, the fall of which would have been a death-blow to the school party, he gave a signal, and his young men rushed out and seized the pole. There was a great uproar, and they were about coming to blows, but the priest interfered, saying, "No war, no war," and so the pole stands, and the school goes on still. [Pp. 293–94]

Though Thoreau's record of this square-off cannot be accepted without scruple, his précis is nonetheless suggestive. In this account of Indian medicine performance, it is striking to find Polis deploying stereotypical images of painted savages—the very images that Thoreau, disdaining Indian "politics," laments the absence of—to achieve his political goals. At the same time, it is noteworthy that in this clash of Indian and white "medicine," this struggle over the "sign" of power standing in the schoolyard, the Indians seem to have found ways to cast their opponent in the role whites had traditionally assigned to the Indian shaman: they accuse Vetromile of "preventing progress, enlightenment, and education" among those entrusted to his temporal and spiritual care.<sup>43</sup> But what is perhaps most curious in Thoreau's retelling of this episode is the way in which Polis's performance re-creates for the purposes of indigenous self-determination one of the most powerful signs of Euro-American independence, indeed the very sign that had given Maine's Revolutionary-era White Indians their original

<sup>43</sup>Unnamed source, quoted in Eckstorm, *Old John Neptune*, p. 162.

name of Liberty Men: the liberty pole.<sup>44</sup> In Thoreau's account of Joe Polis's performance, Indian medicine and white liberty, no longer reduced by the tradition of the Indian cure to a zero-sum game, with the former forfeited by the Indians to secure for whites the latter, work jointly toward the reconstitution of Maine's constitutionally racist body politic. Polis's refashioning of the symbol of white liberation, the symbol that had become the standard of the Indians' persecution, into a symbol of lasting shamanistic potential spotlights Philip Deloria's thoughts on Indians playing Indian: "Throughout a long history of Indian play, native people have been present at the margins, insinuating their way into Euro-American discourse, often attempting to nudge notions of Indianness in directions they found useful. As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unfolded, increasing numbers of Indians participated in white people's Indian play, assisting, confirming, co-opting, challenging, and legitimating the performative tradition of aboriginal American identity."<sup>45</sup> For Thoreau, this "performative tradition" remains only grossly visible, a showman's pageant or confidence game. Ironically, he is so caught up in the Indian cure, so single-minded in his pursuit of the fantasized spirit of the woods, that he misses both its real-life practitioners and its broader cultural promise: "It suggested to me that there was something to be seen if one had eyes."

In this respect, the most significant aspect of Polis's acts is that they suggest a re-visioning of antebellum culture and literature not simply as sites *for* Indian medicine performance but

<sup>44</sup>Polis's demonstration is thus perhaps best viewed as a local, limited sortie within the series of nineteenth-century "wars" (or, better, revivals) that would culminate in the Ghost Dance movement; in all of these engagements, Indian peoples appropriated the symbols and ideals of white political, spiritual, and racial identity as a means of forging a tribal or pan-Indian identity. For analyses of such syncretic revivalist movements, see Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Identity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); John Webster Grant, "Missionaries and Messiahs in the Northwest," *Studies in Religion* 9 (1980): 125–36; and Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

<sup>45</sup>Deloria, *Playing Indian*, p. 8.



as products of Indian medicine performance. As ethnohistorians and literary critics have argued for the past two decades, the acts of cultural contact, appropriation, and interchange that have shaped America from the start render futile any quest—such as that which fueled the Indian cure—for an “original” or “natural” cultural identity: as Scott Michaelsen puts it, diverse peoples and traditions within America are “interlinked in such a way that there are no separate, secured ‘cultures’ to which one might have recourse or to which one might nostalgically return.” Rather, as James Clifford writes, “intervening in an interconnected world, one is always, to varying degrees, ‘inauthentic’: caught between cultures, implicated in others.”<sup>46</sup> What Polis’s presence and performance indicate, then, is that if the Indian cure’s many forms—including those contained within Thoreau’s volumes—deviated from whatever “authentic” Indian medicine they claimed to fathom, “authentic” Indian medicine in the antebellum period was itself a deviation and a derivation, what Clifford calls “a political, cultural invention, a local tactic.”<sup>47</sup> Henry Tufts’s and Henry Thoreau’s claims to Indian medicine were performances, perhaps shameless ones at that; but as Joe Polis’s recorded acts show, deep into the contact period Native Americans’ claims to Indian medicine were themselves performances, fabrications and fabulations, however different in form and aim theirs may have been from those of Thoreau and Tufts.

As Paul Gilmore notes, antebellum Indian performance “did not simply detach Native Americans and their objects from some original cultural context—thus fragmenting and embalming such cultures”; it “simultaneously *constructed* such cultures as authentic, so that both whites *and* Native Americans could re-appropriate Indianness for different political and aesthetic

<sup>46</sup>Scott Michaelsen, *The Limits of Multiculturalism: Interrogating the Origins of American Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xvii; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 11.

<sup>47</sup>Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, p. 12.

ends.”<sup>48</sup> In this light, I find promising Joseph Roach’s notes toward a performance-based understanding of Indian-white interaction, one that would “re-interpret American culture as a series of political boundaries both marked and contested by performances,” that would “emphasize the truly astonishing multiplicity of cultural encounters in North America,” and that would elucidate “the adaptive creativity produced by the interactions of many people.” To recognize the variety of such performances would be to recognize that during the nineteenth century, as today, whites and Native Americans were engaged in a fierce, though unequal, struggle for the definition and control of Indian medicine—a struggle in which, as Rosemarie Bank writes, Indian and white “performances, in their diversity and often in conflict with each other,” did not simply coexist within but “constitute[d],” and continue to reconstitute, American culture, identity, and nation.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup>Paul Gilmore, “The Indian in the Museum: Henry David Thoreau, Okah Tubbee, and Authentic Manhood,” *Arizona Quarterly* 54.2 (Summer 1998): 27. The danger of too-narrow definitions of Indian authenticity is suggested by the fact that Thoreau’s disparaging characterization of a “fake” Indian healer, “Doctor Mung-somebody,” occurs in the same journal entry in which he lauds the “true” Indian healer, Polis: “It was a new light when my guide gave me Indian names for things for which I had only scientific ones before. In proportion as I understood the language, I saw them from a new point of view” (*Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 10:291, 295 [5 March 1858]). I hold no brief for either Polis or the Doctor; I simply point out that for Thoreau the “new point of view” is not—and for his followers it has seldom been—broad enough to accommodate both figures. There is a substantial critical literature on the inadequacy of static or monolithic conceptions of Indian identity. See, e.g., Wolfgang Hochbruck, “Cultural Authenticity and the Construction of Pan-Indian Metanarrative,” in *Cultural Difference and the Literary Text: Pluralism and the Limits of Authenticity in North American Literatures*, ed. Winfried Siemerling and Katrin Schwenk (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), pp. 18–28; Jana Sequoya-Magdaleno, “Telling the Différance: Representations of Identity in the Discourse of Indianness,” in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 88–116; and Hilary N. Weaver, “Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who Really Has It?” *American Indian Quarterly* 25 (2001): 240–55.

<sup>49</sup>Joseph Roach, “Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of American Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 44 (1992): 462, 466; Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 9. For readings of the ways in which William Apess, an antebellum Indian more notorious than Polis in his own time and in ours, engaged in Indian play, see Maureen Konkle, *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827–1863* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 134; and Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage, 1998), p. 220.

Let me suggest, then, at the end, what such a recognition might entail for the three antebellum Indian performers with whom this paper has been concerned: Henry Tufts, Henry Thoreau, and Joe Polis. Obviously one would need to acknowledge the differences among their performances: differences in power, in purpose, in playfulness. But at the same time, one would need to note the likenesses. Henry Tufts and Henry Thoreau laid hands on Indian customs and cures. Joe Polis laid hands on the liberty pole. All three took part in the laying on of hands in hopes of healing what ailed their people. Perhaps the power that inspired Joe Polis and his folk in Thoreau's time, the power to resist their colonization, was the same that Henry Tufts had taken back to the colonies in his; perhaps the power that had inspired Henry Tufts's people to throw off the colonial yoke in the years before Thoreau's birth was the same that resurfaced in the struggle between priest and *m'teoulin* in the Maine woods. We cannot know with absolute certainty; the branches and beams of power are too densely layered to be penetrated. But one might say, with apologies to Thoreau, that the very obscurity of the thicket is more revealing than any clearing could be. All of these actors were engaged in a common drama, trading in cultures, trying identities, wresting their being from each other's most potent sites and signs. All were taking the Indian cure. All were becoming Indians. All were becoming Americans.

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