

Thoreau's Cabin*

An Economy of Space, Sociality, and the Commons

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I

There were several questions posed to us as prompts for thinking about “Community Building as Resistance,” but here, by way of a preface, the question on which I want to concentrate is that of representation: “How does literature represent communities?”

I would argue that it is precisely *not* by thinking representationally that community building can indeed be conceived as resistance, and I might go so far as to contend that representational thinking only serves to shore up the apparatuses of power that oppose communities of resistance. This is not to say that radical communities *cannot* be represented, nor that there *are not* instances of representation of radical communities that we can point to in literature, but rather that the fusion of literature, community, and resistance is most fruitfully carried out in a different mode altogether: that of *poiesis*, *craft*, *study*.¹ To construct this a- or anti-representational opposition with a term drawn from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons*, we might in fact describe this mode or paradigm as *haptical*, that mode in which the aloofness of romantic imagination is rendered impossible, and what’s more, undesirable, by the radical intimacy of touch (97). The praxis of resistance is bolstered by a non-philosophical or deconstructive *haptics* as opposed to philosophical or metaphysical *optics*.²

The artist and critic Nicolas Bourriaud has neatly summarized this opposition in the dichotomy of the *factory* and *theatre*, which he receives from the debate in the psychoanalytic community over the metaphor used to describe the unconscious

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¹For “study,” see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, 2013, 62: “the student has a habit, a bad habit. She studies. She studies but she does not learn. If she learned they could measure her progress, establish her attributes, give her credit. But the student keeps studying, keeps planning to study, keeps running to study, keeps studying a plan, keeps elaborating a debt. The student does not intend to pay.”

²See Galloway’s commentary on Laruelle: “The Last Instance,” January 5, 2017, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/the-last-instance>.

(*The Exform*, 2015). The model of the theatre is representational, in that mind and world are configured as two separate globes requiring reciprocal segmentation and correlation.³ The model of the factory, on the other hand, emphasizes “chains of signification” mobilized across boundaries, linking and twining disparate entities in complex structures of relation. Where the theatre is a world unto itself, the factory exists *in* the world, and the world *in* the factory.

So, when we take up the metaphor of the factory, when we set our hands to labour, we come to recognize the singularity of the world of our existence, and more so, the singularity of the world of our belonging. The representational paradigm collapses in the opaque nearness of what Umberto Eco describes as the single “continuum” of signification (*Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 1986). The transcendental step, the *epoché*, is arrested, halted, discovery replaced with occlusion—something *precedes*, something is already *there*, ancestral to us.⁴ My mind does not somehow come into contact with the world but rather springs up from it, born out of the black in a fit of decompression, *surgisement*, eruption (Sartre; Bourriaud).

Signification, imagination, resistance: these all happen *here*, in the world. Literature cannot be banished to the realm of unreality. As Eco contends, the function of signification is not to represent the world from afar but to call the world into question from within (45). This is the role of fictionality, of poesis, of resistance, of study: to let be the churn of semiosis as an actual world-process, to recognize the radical productivity of the factory over against the sedate spectation of the theatre, in short, to be *touched* by our signs and stories. Such is the “critical literacy” I intend to discuss with you today, the “critical literacy” practiced by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*.

II

“Economy,” the opening chapter of Thoreau’s *Walden*, is a lengthy exploration of the conditions of existence of the New England settler. Before encountering his famous wish to “live deliberately” (83), readers of *Walden* are confronted with Thoreau’s sardonic treatment of the so-called “serfs” of Concord, Massachusetts, and immersed in his economic theorizing (7). For one whose thought has influenced the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Thoreau’s repudiation of his community might come across as aloof and asocial, a privileged detachment from the concerns of ‘common’ or ‘everyday’ life. I would like to argue today, however, that far from being a disavowal of sociality, Thoreau’s economic theory operates within a different field of the social, one with roots in the *oikonomia* or “household management” of Aristotle’s *Politics*, an economy intimately concerned with care and provision. While modern *political* economy is concerned with entitlement and contract—which is to say, with *property*—the

³For more on “correlation,” see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009).

⁴See again Meillassoux for “ancestrality.”

economy that Thoreau depicts in *Walden* is one of the home, a shared practice of material space.

Indeed, it is in light of this alternative sense of economy that recent scholarship has begun to highlight the shortcomings of prior analyses of Thoreau's economics, recognizing the need to resituate Thoreau and his life at Walden Pond within a logic other than that of the modern market. As Christian Becker has shown, Thoreau's "economic philosophy" is an "extensive examination of the ideas of classical political economy," and specifically, a direct response to the influential works of Smith, Ricardo, and Say (212). Much has been written on the historical, metaphorical, and conceptual dimensions of Thoreau's economy,⁵ but as Becker makes clear, any such scholarship must recognize that Thoreau is not simply offering a new variation on classical economic norms; Thoreau is instead conducting an "experiment" on *life* (Thoreau 10), attempting to examine the fundamental conditions of "human existence" (Becker 220). By disassembling the "central economic concepts" of his day (Becker 213)—barter, markets, labor, property, etc.—Thoreau strives to "penetrate the surface of things," to approach the *true*, not that which only "*appears* to be" (Thoreau 88, original emphasis). Thoreau does not want to take anything as given. For Becker, Thoreau's fusion of "practical experience" with "natural philosophy" is the crucial move of *Walden*, a restoration of economic practice from the abstractions of the market to the particularity of the home, a restoration predicated on the necessity of "encounter" (Becker 228, 231). Thoreau's economics begins with life, not law, and it is the *encounter* with life, in all its forms, that is the generative force throughout *Walden*.

The problem, then, of Thoreau's politics begins to reveal itself in different garb. As Luke Philip Plotica argues, Thoreau is neither "apolitical" nor "antipolitical"—his "life and work articulates a robust and complex doctrine of intersubjective responsibility and political agency" (470). In Thoreau, politics is separated from what the historian and philosopher Michel de Certeau has described as the "grid of socio-economic constraints" (ix), but this does not make Thoreau a- or anti-political; rather, Thoreau's politics is a politics of encounter and responsibility, a politics of *life*. Through his experiment at Walden Pond, Thoreau practices a new "economy of living" which, as Richard Prud'homme argues, eschews the "invisible hand" and abstraction of the market economy, preferring instead the "*handsomeness*" and "contact" of mutual care and commitment (107). The laws of classical economics serve only to divide; a "life in conformity to higher principles," however, is a life of "one appetite," of union and cooperation with others—which is to say, of encounter (Thoreau 194, 198).

Furthermore, as much recent work has shown, Thoreau's separation from society is not, in fact, a separation, but a deliberate entrance into dialogue with several contemporary public discourses. Thoreau's concerns in *Walden* are distinctly social: the task of "beautiful housekeeping" and "beautiful living" is not a task

⁵Ibid., 211. See Becker's notes here for references to the broader corpus of scholarship on Thoreau's economic philosophy.

for him alone (Thoreau 36). William Gleason discusses Thoreau's writing on and practice of "physical culture" in response to the writings of cultural critics William Ellery Channing and Catharine Beecher, and to the anxieties surrounding the "sudden and overwhelming rush of impoverished Irish immigrants to the shores of America" (675, 688). Richard Grusin traces the discourse of the "economy of nature" through Linnaeus and Jefferson, to Thoreau's overturning of the popular logic of such (30). Michelle Neeley discusses Thoreau's "dietary economy" within the context of Sylvester Graham's "popular and culturally influential" vegetarianism (34). Leonard Neufeldt examines the "language of Revolutionary republicanism" in Thoreau, and his participation in the debate surrounding American republican values (359). Lance Newman situates Thoreau in conversation with Fourierism and specifically its American expression, Associationism, a "systematic cooperative response to the social crisis of the 1830s and 1840s" (517). Indeed, to characterize Thoreau's experiment at Walden as aloof, asocial, or isolated is to overlook the richness of the public dialogue of which Thoreau is a part. His claim that he has received no "valuable or even earnest advice from [his] seniors," that the knowledge of his "Mentors" is of little practical use to him, and that he could learn more from the "History, Poetry, [and] Mythology" of the ancients than from his peers, does not signify an ignorance of his contemporary context, but instead a deep desire to cut through the appearances, to "work and wedge [his] feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion" to the "hard bottom" of things that "we can call *reality*" (Thoreau 10-11, 89).

The economy that Thoreau practices at Walden is, therefore, an economy of deliberate existence, historical consciousness, and social engagement. The emphasis Thoreau places on responsibility and encounter is relevant still today, providing us with insight into the "grid[s] of socio-economic constraints" that we ourselves inhabit (De Certeau ix). In Thoreau's response to the various public discourses just noted, readers of *Walden* are given an example of a new form of economy as sociality and relation, detached from the nexus of state and market. The very physicality of Thoreau's cabin—its cobbled together construction, its openness to the environment and to observers, and its contingency as a squatter's "seat" (75)—is a practical elaboration of the domestic economy and natural philosophy with which Thoreau is experimenting, and a material critique of the abstract economics that he challenges. If, now, we situate Thoreau in conversation with three significant historical economic works—Aristotle's *Politics*, John Locke's "Of Property" in the *Second Treatise on Government*, and Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*—the interconnectedness of the personal, the political, and the economic in Thoreau's practice of life becomes obvious, an interconnectedness which finds its expression in his material conditions, and which finds in these conditions the impetus for a distinct sacrality of belonging. In *Walden*, we are not presented with a vision of human existence lived in isolation, but an existence bared to life held in common.

III

As asserted minutes ago, Thoreau's "Economy" is not explicable by the logic of market economics, but rather that of household economics, the *oikonomia* or "household management" of Aristotle's *Politics*. This is not to merely map Aristotle onto Thoreau, but rather to put Thoreau into dialogue with a tradition preceding European and American capitalism.

Aristotle argues that "man is by nature a political animal," which is to say that the human creature is consistently inclined to association with others of its kind to whom it is not immediately related (1253a2). The household is, for him, the most basic form of human organization, a step above and natural consequence of biological reproduction. But the growth of the *polis* or city out of the organization of several households is not so natural a consequence, and for Aristotle to conduct an analysis of the *polis*—his task in the *Politics*—it is necessary that he analyze the fundamental units of which the *polis* is constituted. The household, then, is a structure of necessary relations ordered by the function of *household management*, which is "the art of acquiring property" or the "necessary conditions" for life (1253b1). Aristotle is always concerned to "live well," and unless the household is provided with the necessities of life, living well will be superseded by the struggle to *merely* live, which leads to injustice, which, in turn, damages the soul (1253b23). The key here is that property is always subordinate to the good life; it is, in fact, "an instrument for the purpose of life" (1253b23). Aristotle's *oikonomia* is, therefore, the practice of care and provision for the household, and the property acquired to this end is "true wealth" because it makes the good life possible (1256b26).

It is with the introduction of *exchange*, however, that economy begins to go awry. Any "article of property [has] two possible uses"—it can be used for living, or for trade (1257a5). Though Aristotle sees some trade as necessary—i.e., barter for necessities—with the development of "money currency" trade becomes entirely divorced from the real conditions of living (1257a19). The management of property, where before a matter of care, is deformed into the pursuit of the "greatest profit" (1257a41). Provision becomes "accumulation" (1257b35), which seeks not the good life but "enjoyment," and the "superfluity" necessary for it—that is, *wealth* (1257b35). The one who desires wealth no longer desires only the necessities; he desires more than he needs, more than his neighbour, more than nature gives.

This distortion of household economics is at stake in John Locke's "Of Property," chapter five of his *Second Treatise of Government*. Having established the "Natural Liberty" of the human being in the preceding chapter (§23), Locke sets about determining the most basic consequent right entailed by human liberty. This, he claims, is the right to "Preservation" or "Subsistence" (§25). It is by the will and word of God, Locke argues, that the "World" has been given "in common" to humankind, to "make use of it to the best advantage of Life, and convenience" (§26). Herein Locke begins to diverge from Aristotle. His

specification of the “common” as the world in its natural state makes necessary “a means *to appropriate*” the common to a “particular Man” (§26). Property for Aristotle is simply goods or materials; property for Locke is an *entitlement*: one’s subsistence must be made “a part of” oneself, expropriated from the common, so that “another can no longer have any right to it” (§26). Locke continues to argue that it is by the “*Labour* of [one’s] Body, and the *Work* of [one’s] Hands that property is made one’s own (§27). By grounding the right to property in the right of the human to the “*Property* in his own *Person*,” Locke authorizes the subsuming of the natural realm into the realm of human will. Through labour, the free human “annexe[s]” nature to himself, so “remov[ing]” it “from the common state Nature placed it in.” Labour is “added” to nature, so becoming the “private right” of the labourer (§27-28). Through this construction, Locke lays the groundwork for an economic system that will more successfully plunder the land and accumulate its goods, converting the *common* into *wealth*, than any preceding system (§37).

By the point of Thomas Jefferson’s writing of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, it is clear how problematic Locke’s system has become. In the section “Manufactures,” Jefferson criticizes the “political oeconomists of Europe [who] established it as a principle that every state should endeavour to manufacture for itself” (676). Jefferson is resistant to this view, considering manufacture and industry a corrupting force, a necessary evil in a country where “the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator.” Locke’s common finds itself inevitably, entirely, enclosed—“Manufacture must therefore be resorted to of necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people.” Jefferson’s ideal is the “industry of the husbandman,” the “labour in the earth” that is the work of the “chosen people of God.” The husbandman is intimately involved in his own “subsistence,” committing his “own soil and industry” to “heaven” (676). And yet, Jefferson fails to see that his nostalgia is predicated on the very logic that Locke details in the *Second Treatise*, and that the society advocated for in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* will, inevitably, lead to the same kind of society produced by Locke’s philosophy. If property is treated as a good in itself, rather than an “instrument” for the pursuit of the good, as Aristotle understands it (1253b23), and if the human creature considers it his right and his God-given duty to annex the land to his private person, being good in itself to possess and enjoy, then there is little standing in the way of total enclosure, total possession, and the ultimate consolidation of this *wealth* into the hands of the few. By Thoreau’s day, as presented in *Walden*, we see how misled Jefferson was in his idyllic vision. The care and provision of household management has been abandoned; the household merely serves the interests of accumulation and exchange, to the end of the generation and preservation of wealth. This is the framework against which Thoreau revolts.

IV

With this historical background established, we can now direct our attention to *Walden* in earnest. Though there are several strains of argument that we could pursue in the chapter “Economy” alone, for our purposes here it will serve to concentrate on Thoreau’s critique of property therein. Observing his fellows, he remarks that it is their “*misfortune* ... to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools” (Thoreau 7, my emphasis). Inheritance is an “encumbrance[]”; it is “more easily acquired than got rid of.” It is by “a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, [that] they are employed ... laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal” (7). The Concord farmers, Jefferson’s chosen of God, are slaves to their instruments, “tools of their tools”—they have “no time to be any thing but [] machine[s]” (35, 8). And in all of this, Thoreau claims, they “are made to exaggerate the importance of what work [they] do” (12). They are trapped in an illusion, in the appearance of things, alienated from the reality of their existence. This is the effect of private property on the “mass of men” (9). The instruments of the good life become the ends of mere living; accumulation and wealth are made supreme.

Thoreau does not exempt himself from this illusion: “What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?” he exclaims. He, too, has acquiesced to mere living; *Walden* is the record of his attempt to do otherwise. His goal is to “learn what are the gross necessities of life,” the necessary conditions or true wealth of which Aristotle writes, “and what methods have been taken to obtain them” (12). He concludes that food and shelter are the only necessities of human existence, and that the purpose of these is the “grand necessity”—“to keep warm” (13-14). Anything more, all luxuries, the “so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances [*sic*] to the elevation of mankind” (15). Property, the “accumulated dross” of humanity, is nought but “golden or silver fetters” (16-17). Thoreau’s declaration in chapter two, which became an epigraph for the text, captures the spirit of his project: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbours up” (78). Thoreau’s experiment is not an experiment in individualism; it is his attempt to wake his neighbours, to bring them out of illusion and into life.

It is this sense of life on display that draws the materiality of Thoreau’s cabin to the fore. As Branka Arsić has commented, Thoreau’s cabin “radically subverts the very idea of privacy ... [his] domestic interiority is designed as a space open to witnessing by others” (163). His cabin undermines the economic principle of the private person, and with it the entailment of private property. In “Solitude,” Thoreau writes of the “strange liberty” of being alone in Nature, and yet, when he tells us, unperturbed, of the visitors who freely enter his cabin while he is away, we see that his solitude is nowhere close to complete, and neither does he desire it to be so. He is “related to society” by the “link” of the railroad, down which he walks to get into town, and reports that he is “frequently notified of the passage of a traveller along the highway sixty rods off by the scent of

his pipe" (105, 119). Indeed, Thoreau is the first to say that he is "naturally no hermit" (127). In "Visitors" we read that he keeps "three chairs ... one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (127). His cabin is a single room without division; furthermore, his "best" room, his "withdrawing room," is "the pine wood behind [his] house" where he is proud to say he could "entertain ... a thousand as well as twenty" (128, 129). His home spills out into the surrounding area; or perhaps it is the area that spills into his home. There "is commonly sufficient space about us," he writes (119). There is no need to lay claim, to delineate boundaries, to appropriate from what is common and protect it against others. All he has, including his home, remains in common, immediately available to others. Thoreau's does not seek to escape from people, to preserve his privacy, his goods, his rights, but rather to practice an alternative way of being, a more open form of life. He does not lock his door, nor cover his windows with curtains. As Arsić argues, Thoreau simply does not recognize a "distinction between artificial and natural," nor "between private and public" (162). Another scholar, Ashton Nichols, describes Thoreau's life at Walden Pond as a practice of "*urbanature*," where "our nonhuman, natural house," and "our fully human, cultural home" blend together (354). Nature is made homely, a place of meeting and care, and his home is made part of the common.

For Thoreau, home is not about possession. "Wherever I sat, there I might live," Thoreau writes, "and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?" (76). There is no entitlement here, no annexation of the land to himself. Thoreau does not need to mark out territory to call his own; his home is wherever he sits. Home is not a possession, in *Walden*, but an action, an *activity*, a lived practice of space. In the Aristotelian framework, property is an instrument of *praxis*, of doing; its good is not in its possession or storing up as wealth, but in *action with*. Similarly, Arsić argues that Thoreau's household praxis is a "material culture ... immersed within animated processes" (158). Thoreau is embedded in a diverse and complex field of relations that operates according to a logic entirely different from that of the market and the state. Thoreau does away with exchange and wealth, with the privileges of being a private subject. His is a logic of deliberate action and existence, intended to help us learn to "reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn" (Thoreau 83). Thoreau refuses to be "deceived by shows," to fall into the "daily life of routine and habit ... which still is built on purely illusory foundations" (88). Thoreau wants to confront life, to dwell in the encounter, to throw his door open to all of those who would enter.

In closing, I would like to draw a final image from *Walden*, that of the cut-bank in the chapter "Spring." In the "architectural foliage" of thawing clay we see a natural counterpart to Thoreau's housekeeping. The clay "burst[s] out" and "overflow[s]," it "overlap[s]" and "interlace[s]," it weaves a "hybrid product" (272). For Thoreau, the thaw reveals the "bowels" of Nature, which "there again is mother of humanity" (275). Thoreau is drawn into and birthed from this sacral, fecund emanation, on and on, woven into the fabric of growth and becoming. The material world of his cabin is an outpouring and an inflowing of this natural

exuberance, a mingling and melding of goods, a welcoming into communion and life. It is significant that the cut-bank passage comes so late in the text, after Thoreau has detailed so much of his physical circumstances. Readers of *Walden* have learned about the construction of his home, his expenses, the flora and fauna of the land, the measurements of the pond, the sounds of the train and the birds, the conversations and visitors, the beans and the arrowheads and the wars of ants—readers have learned all of this. So it is appropriate that when Thoreau turns to this sacred vision, it is thawing clay, the matter of the world, that produces his rapturous feelings. He is rooted in the world, in the *matter* of things, but it is not in the things themselves that his experiment terminates. He allows his limits to be transgressed, to have his private person revealed, his home made into a place of gathering rather than a place of retreat, to let himself be shaped by all he touches and all that touches him. For those who would seek to carry out their own experiments on life, Thoreau presents a politics beyond politics, a sociality that welcomes all—rich and poor, human and animal, tree and stone—into the space of encounter, a sociality that seeks a practice which allows relation—sacred, myriad, and common—to flourish.

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