University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)

Documentary Editing, Association for

2010

A New Approach to Thoreau's "Indian Books"

Jessie Bray
University of South Carolina

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit

Part of the Digital Humanities Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, Reading and Language Commons, and the Technical and Professional Writing Commons

Bray, Jessie, "A New Approach to Thoreau's "Indian Books"" (2010). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 33.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/33

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A New Approach to Thoreau's "Indian Books"

Jessie Bray

Indians were prismatic figures for Henry D. Thoreau which took on variously positive and negative aspects throughout his career. At least publicly, Thoreau never seemed completely settled on how to treat Indian history and culture effectively, although it is clear he applied himself assiduously to the task. Embodying the collision of science, culture, nature and aesthetics in the nineteenth century, Indian lives synthesized these factors into an ethnohistorical performance of increasing importance to Thoreau as his career developed. That such a performance would interest him should not come as surprise. As Lawrence Buell argued in *Literary Transcendentalism*, Transcendentalists strove to embody their moral convictions in aesthetic performances (speaking, acting, and art) that could be synthesized with the revealed theism of nature;[1] in the years since Buell first advanced this argument, Laura Dassow Walls, William Rossi, and Robert D. Richardson, Jr., have each contended that natural science formed the keystone of this relationship, meaning that science, if miscarried, aborted the development of an enlightened spiritual milieu.[2] Thus, for instance, when Thoreau speaks in "Natural History of Massachusetts" of a "more perfect Indian wisdom," he acknowledges how Indian cultures achieved a successful, if not entirely advanced, demonstration of the Transcendental ethos before their exposure to the "civil" world of white men.[3]

[1] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp. 55–59.

[2] Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 111–12; William Rossi, "Following Thoreau's Instincts," *More Day to Dawn: Thoreau's* Walden *for A New Century*, ed. Sandra Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), pp. 82–99; and Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 340–52.

[3] Henry D. Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts," *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), p. 41.

Thoreau's unpublished Indian Books depict a similar consideration of these cultural vectors that cuts across the chronology of his career, which places them at the forefront of his most serious and ambitious research. In order to track Thoreau's evolution as a writer and thinker, a re-evaluation of this text is necessary. In the 147 years since his death, comparatively little work has been done to bring the value of this remarkable text to light. Yet the advantages of our present digital age provide perhaps the most useful, but heretofore inaccessible, solution to the problem of discussing the Indian Books. In spite of the disorganized and unfinished nature of the manuscript, a new and innovative approach—comparable to the "database" concept employed by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price for their *Walt Whitman Archive*—would enable navigation of this vast, labyrinthine text without restricting its generative and multifarious potential.[4]

Materially, the Indian Books is comprised of eleven volumes currently housed at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City.[5] They amount to roughly two linear feet of manuscript material containing documentary research interspersed with sporadic observations by Thoreau. Despite the arbitrary boundary imposed by filling one of these literal notebooks, there is no internal or external evidence to suggest that Thoreau intended the Indian Books as free-standing volumes. However, the varying size of these notebooks—the first are smaller in terms of page size, while the later books graduate to larger pages—raises the possibility that Thoreau began the Indian Books as a portable endeavor for field work which he eventually confined to his desk. The progressive improvement of his documentation practices in each new volume supports this possibility; although, unlike his field notes or journals that he carried with him, it is unclear

[4] *Walt Whitman Archive*, www.whitmanarchive.org, 25 September 2009.

[5] For Thoreau's surviving eleven (out of an original twelve) Indian Books, see MA 596-MA 606, inclusive, at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Confusion over the total number of original Books and Thoreau's numbering of them on their spines has prevailed since they were turned over to Harrison Otis Blake for safekeeping after Sophia Thoreau, Henry Thoreau's sister, died in 1876. According to William Howarth in *The Literary Manuscripts of Henry David Thoreau* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), the Indian Books "suffer[ed] from considerable mishandling while Blake retained them"; Blake is also the person who incorrectly renumbered the Books from Thoreau's original number system (xxii). A third numbering system was applied to the Indian Books when Blake gave them to E. H. Russell in 1898, and this system appears on George Hellman's record of his purchase of them in 1904. Although Howarth later formalized this last numbering system, in *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), Robert Sayre proves from Thoreau's *Journal* (25 June 1853) and two excerpts from Indian Book 9 that Thoreau numbered the Books 1 through 12, and he argues that the first of the remaining Books is actually number 2 (217–20). As Sayre notes, the word "notebook" implies eventual publication, which is not true of the Indian Books. He also addresses another error common among Thoreau scholars: calling the manuscript the "Indian Notebooks" as opposed to the "Indian books" (218). Sayre is also the first to observe that on those occasions when Thoreau referred to these texts in his *Journal*, he called them his "Indian books."

what reason he would have had to make his notes on Indians more portable since he reserved his principal observations on Indians for his *Maine Woods* trilogy.

Along with his written notes, Thoreau's Indian Books reproduce drawings of Indian implements and maps of tribal territories; additionally, they include newspaper clippings pertaining to Indians and occasional loose paper notes inserted between pages. Thought to have been begun in 1847 while he was working on *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the Indian Books continued as silent script behind Thoreau's other projects. Cutting across temporal and chronological epochs, the Indian Books were informed by Thoreau's research into other subjects, and they informed those writings he would eventually publish.[6] The Indian Books also grew exponentially after the publication of *Walden* in 1854, coinciding with Thoreau's increased interest in natural science.[7] In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Arthur Christy and a team of graduate students transcribed the manuscript of the Indian Books in a project that made it available to later scholars; however, this transcription has never been published and is itself difficult to access.[8] Without a widely available version of the Books, their scope and Thoreau's

[6] There have been disputes over the existence and identity of the first Indian Book as well as the chronology the text followed; as yet, the matter remains far from settled. For example, in *Thoreau and the American Indians*, Sayre makes a case for their beginning contemporaneously with the last draft of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* or the first draft of *Walden* in the late 1840s (110); however, in "'Tracking the moccasin print': A descriptive index to Henry David Thoreau's Indian notebooks and a study of the relationship of the Indian notebooks to mythmaking in 'Walden' " (University of Oklahoma: Ph.D. dissertation, 1994, pp.106–107), Susanna Dvorak Rose argues that the missing first Indian Book was begun sometime between 1841 and 1844 and Indian Book 2 as early as 1845.

[7] In the past, some scholars have regarded Thoreau's post-*Walden* studies as a declension from serious literary engagement. However, as Walls demonstrates in *Seeing New Worlds*, his interest in natural science illustrates a desire "to read a history of man and nature together, as and in one single, interconnected act" (4). Symptomatic of this desire is Thoreau's 1853 membership application for the Association for the Advancement of Science, where he claims "The Manners & Customs of the Indians of the Algonquin Group previous to contact with the civilized man" as his field of expertise. See *The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau,* ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: Washington Square, 1958), p. 310. As a subject and discipline, natural science stood for Thoreau at the cusp of human and natural civics.

[8] Arthur Christy, "Notes on Thoreau" Transcript. MS Coll Christy, Columbia University Library; a copy is also available in the Sayre Collection at the University of Iowa Library ("Thoreau Indian Books," Special Collections Department, MsC 795). Limited selections from the Indian Books are available in Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians*, and Richard Fleck, *The Indians of Thoreau* (Albuquerque: Hummingbird Press, 1974). A second transcription effort has been undertaken by cultural anthropologist Paul Maher, Jr., whose Books 1 (Sayre, Indian Book 2) and 2 (Sayre, Indian Book 3) are available online through Lulu Electronic Publishing at https://www.lulu.com. On the whole, Maher does an accurate job of transcribing Thoreau's handwriting and provides sources for non-cited material; however, in his transcription he silently omits at least one page from Indian Book 2 as well as a list of possible sources that Thoreau himself crossed out in the original manuscript. While the resulting clear text is accessible to and informative for the casual reader, the omissions are problematic for those scholars attempting to trace Thoreau's writing and research processes.

propensity to cite contradictory accounts drawn from natural history or ethnographic writings and other sources in them encourages a tendency among researchers to "cherry pick" only those passages that support a specific reading. Yet, it is the contradictory nature of the material Thoreau cited in them that permits a balanced survey of the ethnographic terrain that existed in his lifetime.

Rumors that the Indian Books were intended for publication circulated as early as 1855, when F. B. Sanborn reported in a letter to Theodore Parker that he had seen "Thoreau's Indian Books" and thought them "significant";[9] subsequently, when Sanborn wrote his biography of Thoreau, which appeared in 1882, he propagated the publication theory. A fragmentary draft essay in Indian Book 7 seems to support Sanborn's theory; in addition, a topical prospectus tucked in the back of Indian Book 2 in which Thoreau compares his objectives to the fifth volume of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (1851–57) suggests that there was a time when he considered publishing an essay based on his extensive research.[10] Yet, Sanborn's evidence is hardly conclusive when considering that Thoreau's close friend Ellery Channing notes how "little" he spoke on the subject of his Indian collections.[11] Perhaps the issue that most succinctly problematizes the publication argument is the material in the Books themselves. Aside from a few notable exceptions, the text lacks the kind of narrative frame and critical connective tissue necessary to become a published book. Furthermore, in spite of the aforementioned prospectus, the Indian Books disclose no substantive evidence that Thoreau actually utilized an outline of any kind in developing them, which may well indicate that he viewed them exclusively as a private text.

That Thoreau most likely developed the Indian Books for himself is their primary difficulty for today's researchers; they lack almost all the clues that scholars have come to rely on when determining an author's intention for a work. In fact, as with the apocryphal story of Thoreau's favorite dish at dinner being "the one nearest," one might say that his guiding organizational principle in the Indian Books was their convenience to him as a source material for other projects. Additionally, comparing his list of potential reading material to those books he actually annotated in the Indian Books, there is a sense that Thoreau read much

[9] F. B. Sanborn to Theodore Parker, 15 December 1855, Vault A35, Sanborn Unit 1, folder 43, Concord Free Public Library; quoted here by permission of the Concord Free Public Library Special Collections. F. B. Sanborn, *Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882).

[10] Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, pp. 114–15.

[11] William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau: The Poet Naturalist* (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1873), p. 47.

more material on Indians than he had the time or ability to record.[12] However, the lack of organization in and the incompleteness of Thoreau's project are not insurmountable obstacles for the interested researcher; indeed, it is this aspect of their current state that presents rare intellectual opportunities for us. As the editors of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* attest, the unfinished nature of a manuscript does not make the ecology of the text or the author's motives inscrutable; instead, they note that "proliferating individual passages" "communicate amongst themselves, often in a rather subterranean manner."[13] Like Thoreau, Benjamin did not structure his working text for publication, but he did group the several thousand pages of the *Arcades* into clusters or "convolutes" according to a host of topics. The word *konvolut* in German literally means a "bundle" or "sheaf"—a textual image full of organic suggestion, as with a bundle of flowers, or a sheaf of wheat, or, as in Whitman's case, "leaves of grass." As a noun in English, "convolute" suggests a similar organic etymology with an evolutionary bent. It is an object that spirals into deeper development as it grows, but its evolution is always in reference to its nascent construction.[14] Thus, as the tightly folded petals of a rose bud form a convolute in their contrivance, the bud acts as a convolute when it blossoms. Viewing text as a convolute of progressive intelligence, there is a sense that

[12] For example, Thoreau mentions in Indian Book 7 that he has a copy of George Copway, *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* (1850); one need only leaf through the pages of Thoreau's copy of Copway's text to observe that it is peppered with his marginalia, including his list on the back flyleaf of pages he wished to quote from. See Robert Sattemeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with a Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 138.

[13] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Howard Eiland; trans. Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p. x. The idea of Thoreau's Indian Books as intellectual ecosystems is a useful one, if only because it means each "organism" functionally interacts with other "organisms" in order to achieve balance. Yet, remove a passage from its web of associations and its usefulness can be extinguished, causing the other components to suffer as well. Thus, a passage from the Indian Books removed from its context can be interpreted in precisely the opposite fashion from its original intention.

[14] Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA*, 112 (1997): 1060–71. The most obvious objection to this argument is that, as Thoreau prefigures Benjamin, there is not reason to apply the work of the latter to the former. However, as Dimock notes "'historicism' as it is now practiced rests largely on semantic anachronism: the meaning of a text is assumed to be the property of the historical period in which it originated; coexistive with that period it remains untouched" (1061). Against this, she argues

> This synchronic model hardly acknowledges the hermeneutical horizon of a text might extend beyond the moment of composition.... Nor does it recognize that the passage of time, deadening some words and quickening others, can give a past text a semantic life that is an effect of the present. (1061)

Thus, to view Thoreau with a twenty-first century perspective is not a miscarriage of literary criticism and, in fact, reproduces Thoreau's own openness to the futurity of evolution of nature and of intelligence.

a body of written language is something not necessarily static but organic, expanding and evolving through the life of the author and even after.

Although Thoreau never used the word "convolute" to describe his own note taking, on 2 February 1859, following an essay on Indians in his *Journal*, he suggests a method of textual organization that prefigures Benjamin's use of the term:

> Most of his [the writer's] sentences may at first lie dead in his essay, but when these are arranged, some life and color will be reflected on them from mature and successful lines; they will appear to pulsate with fresh life . . . and make them worthy of their neighborhood. . . . Most that is first written on any subject is a mere groping after it, mere rubble-stone foundation. It is only when many observations on different periods have been brought together that he begins to grasp his subject and can make one pertinent and just observation.[15]

Thus for Thoreau, like Benjamin, there is faith in the ability of a text to be arranged through an organic interplay between mind and matter, bearing fruit, in this case, in the broad scope of the text as a documentary fact collection. That both men repeatedly contradict themselves throughout the span of their respective projects signifies their trust that the only evil is ignorance and "fact" will always "flower into truth."

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome demonstrates the proliferation and growth potential of these intellectual convolutes, an image translated into a useful literary form through Ed Folsom's concept of "database."[16] As a genre that exceeds its boundaries by design and represents the world as "an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records," a navigable electronic database shares the often inscrutable associative capacities of the mind in how shared resonances between intellectual subjects act as conduits (i.e. "hyperlinks"), shuttling thoughts seamlessly between related elements.[17] It can be argued that such theoretical subtlety as what a database provides was beyond the scope of a nineteenth-century author; however, arguing for

[15] *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau,* ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (1906; reprint, Dayton: Peregrine, 1984), 11: 438–39.

[16] For the fullest exposition of their theory, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987).

[17] Ed Folsom's project, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, is fertile ground for such a project, for, as he notes, Whitman's work is "rhizomorphous" in its original conception and made more appreciably so through its conversion to an electronic database; see Ed Folsom, "Database as Genre: The Epic Transformation of Archives," *PMLA* 122 (2007), p. 1573. Here, Folsom further argues that, because Whitman embraced "incessant revision," digitizing the archives has enabled a fuller fruition of the project in as much as it does not require "single book objects."

the complexity of Thoreau's unpublished writings is not unprecedented. Sharon Cameron also observes that what appears as randomness in Thoreau's *Journal* "not only seems a product of journal discourse; it also seems cultivated."[18] By this reckoning, resisting an outline for the Indian Books as expansive and ever-growing fact books, makes it entirely possible that Thoreau made a *deliberate* attempt to let the meaning of the text create itself in unlimited and unanticipated ways.

Significant to understanding this interconnectivity is "the refrain," another facet of Deleuze and Guattari's hypothesis of "rhizomatics." Organization functions as a bias and insists information be arranged in a particular fashion to be understood. Patterns result from this organization and can create archetypal resonances (symbols, etc.) that disable unanticipated intersections between intellectual vectors because the mind ceases to look for connections outside those patterns. Thus, too much organization curtails ingenuity. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari argue that knowledge can proliferate in a series of refrains that appear at chance collisions between ideas and concepts but also refuse the overcoding that would reify it into patterns. Mark Bonta and John Protevi describe this evasion with the example of a bird establishing home territory by flying in a circuit, sounding its song at key perimeter points.[19] Such territorialization is not concrete because a bird can, with sufficient provocation or threat, re-establish a different set of perimeter points, even moving to a new site. Converted to intellectual territorialization, such fluid deterritorialization and reterritorialization that is in no way predictable or paradigmatic overturns static paradigms of the Western tradition.[20]

Recognizing Thoreau's Indian Books as an exercise in rhizomatics makes his published works the reification of concurrent and overlapping refrains that emerge in his vast research database. Because they are not published, however, his Indian Books are a manifestation of his esoteric inner dialogue—a dialogue revealed only by the contextualization of the Indian Books within the rest of his literary corpus. While it is possible that, in the same fashion that Thoreau dictated publishable works from his sickbed, he could have composed an essay on the Indian before his death, his silence acts as resistance to arbitrary historical boundaries that could brutalize a still-living people. Because, generally, recording a history was not perceived as an interpretive exercise, any oversight or prejudice on

[18] Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 5.

[19] Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 133–34.

[20] For further discussion of how Deleuze and Guattari's approach may be applied to the Indian Books, see my essay, " 'A so-called savage tribe': Reading Thoreau's Indian Books," forthcoming in *Thoreauvian Modernities*, ed. François Specq (University of Georgia Press).

the part of the historian could be transmitted as fact. Of this, Thoreau observes, "It frequently happens that the historian, though he professes more humanity than the trapper, mountain man, or gold-digger, who shoots one as a wild beast, really exhibits and practices a similar inhumanity to him, wielding a pen instead of a rifle."[21] Yet, on the other hand, the absence of a true end and the lack of a concrete position does not negate the value of the text. As Michael Wood has argued, some manuscripts are by nature "unfinished, unfinishable text" that "can't end," for "what happens in it has already happened and is still going on" and thus makes the end of the text the death of the point.[22]

If we participate in this view, then the Indian Books remain as vibrant with life and potential as when Thoreau kept them. They represent an uncharted terrain of ethnographic thought that deeply influenced his published writings, while also suggesting their own latent germination as a still-growing compendium stilled only by their author's death. Through the creation of an accessible archive and the extensive use of databases scholars can remain true to Thoreau's intellectual vision by making this essential and overlooked text available for serious research.

[21] February 3,1859; *Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, 11: 437.

[22] Michael Wood, "The Last Night of All," *PMLA* 122 (2007), p.1397.