Lost in the Maine Woods:

Henry David Thoreau, Joseph Nicolar and the Penobscot World

Not until we are lost, in other worlds, not until we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

- Thoreau, *Walden*

*K’-d-achowi nojibna kpiwi / We have to go into the woods.*

- Joseph Laurent, *New Familiar Abenaki and English Dialogues*

The last words Thoreau uttered on his deathbed – “Indian” and “moose” – testify to the role his Penobscot guides played in his growing understanding of the New England environment. While he was quickly canonized as the patron saint of the environmental movement, Thoreau’s long and complicated relationship with Native peoples has proven more troublesome. His earliest friends and biographers noted his deep interest in Indians, while readers in the last half century have in turn celebrated Thoreau for a rare sympathy for Indians, stemming from his radical naturist creed, and excoriated him for at best idealizing native peoples and at worst treating them with savagist scorn. The fullest account of the topic, Richard Sayre’s *Thoreau and the American Indian* (1977), captures this ambivalence. Sayre argues that Thoreau’s early immersion in savagist ideology gradually (though never completely) gave way to a more realistic and admiring perspective. Joshua Bellin’s more recent account, drawing largely on the vast Indian Notebooks Thoreau accumulated, suggests that Thoreau never escaped the era’s savagism. Thoreau may have admired Indians, Bellin argues, but he barely understood them, and what he published about them served primarily to advance the
arguments of racial succession and Indian vanishing. More tellingly, while Thoreau read widely about Indians and wrote about them continually, he did nothing on behalf of Indian communities themselves.

Thoreau’s attitude towards Indians is difficult to deduce from the Indian Notebooks – largely a series of commonplace books in which Thoreau copied passages from his comprehensive reading on the subject, they are a better guide to the assumptions and shortcomings of his sources than they are to Thoreau’s own evolving understanding of Native peoples. Any account of Thoreau’s relationship with Native Americans must therefore turn to his most sustained record of his encounters with Indians, the three essays collected after his death in *The Maine Woods*. In these essays, Thoreau charts his efforts to confront what he terms, in “Ktaadn,” “the red face of man,” and they reveal an attitude that is shifting, ambivalent and elusive, marked in turn by primitivist celebration, savagist scorn and transformative contact. Thoreau’s confrontations with the Penobscot world were, like most encounters across this cultural frontier, marked by moments of sudden insight and profound misunderstanding; they were, in a word, disorienting, and if they didn’t spark the kind of political advocacy that marked his anti-slavery writing, they did help to unsettle his notions of “the Indian” and America itself.

More importantly, a careful reading of *The Maine Woods* suggests that this encounter went both ways. Thoreau’s Indian guides were neither passive servants nor simple objects of study, but instead custodians of Penobscot culture who worked carefully to fit Thoreau into their own changing world. Annette Kolodny’s recent republication of *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, first published by the Penobscot elder Joseph Nicolar in 1893, provides a rich opportunity to place a comprehensive statement of the Penobscot world alongside Thoreau’s own work. Nicolar’s account of tribal tradition is derived from decades of listening to an earlier generation of storytellers and *meteoulin* (shamans) – a group that included Thoreau’s guides, Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis. Nicolar’s book offers unique insight into the world of these guides, and hence allows us to overlay a crucial map onto the cross-cultural journeys Thoreau took through the Maine Woods. It captures the long history of the Penobscot people in their homeland, an ongoing effort to adapt to a series of ecological and political challenges of which the arrival of
whites is only one in a long series. The book is a landmark in the tribe’s long effort to preserve their cultural and political sovereignty in the face of U. S. expansionism. Aitteen and Polis were key players in this effort, and their journeys with Thoreau need to be read with this struggle in mind. What is most striking from this Penobscot perspective is how often Thoreau gets lost in the Maine woods – at times literally disoriented in the physical landscape, but more frequently swamped in the labyrinth of an unfamiliar cross-cultural environment that took shape along this frontier between the United States and the Penobscot world. Thoreau and his Penobscot guides learn to navigate a landscape that is at once familiar and strange, serene and unexpectedly lethal, and together they learn an old truth – that one must first become lost to see the world anew.

The Clock and the Map

_The Maine Woods_ contains a certain chronology – its three essays span the last fifteen years of Thoreau’s life, from “Ktaadn,” based on his 1846 journey, to “Chesuncook,” based on the trip in 1853, to “The Allegash and East Branch,” an account of his trip in 1857; he drafted “Ktaadn” at the end of his stay at Walden Pond and was revising “The Allagash and East Branch” on his deathbed in 1862. As Richard Sayre and Linda Frost have noted, the three essays lend themselves to an evolutionary narrative. “Ktaadn,” the earliest essay, is the most infused with the ideology of American progress, a discourse that maps geographic movement towards an unfurling western frontier onto the steady development of civilization, with the primitive forest gradually yielding to the gun, the axe, the plow and the mill (or, as Thoreau puts it elsewhere, the canoe, the bateau and the steamer). “Chesuncook” and “The Allagash” gradually undermine this narrative, at moments attacking the assumption that civilization represents progress at all, at times countering the notion of chronology itself, until, by the end of “The Allagash,” Thoreau presents an understanding of time and space utterly at odds with a teleology that ends in American civilization. This narrative is useful, but it’s important to note from the start that it imposes an overly rigid progression on this series of essays. Rather than see _The Maine Woods_ as a steady evolution towards a radical rethinking of savagist ideology, a
better model might be to see the book as operating according to different clocks, alternative senses of time that are layered on top of each other and feed into different chronological frameworks.

One of those clocks runs on national time. At the end of “Ktaadn,” Thoreau remarks, “I am reminded by my journey how exceedingly new this country is. You have only to travel a few days into the interior and back parts even of the old States, to come to that very America which the Northmen, and Cabot, and Gosnold, and Smith, and Raleigh visited” (109). Geography here recapitulates chronology, with the city of Bangor representing the fulcrum of civilization. “The bear and deer are still found within its limits,” Thoreau writes. “Twelve miles in the rear, twelve miles of railroad, are Orono and Indian Island, the home of the Penobscot tribe, and then commence the bateau and the canoe; and sixty miles above, the country is virtually unmapped and unexplored, and there still waves the virgin forest of the New World” (111). The journey west is a journey back in time, with the summit of Katahdin a point of origin, for “the tops of mountains are among the unfinished parts of the globe” (86). Thoreau’s journey helps to fill in that map; he eagerly records the first signs of settlement within this virgin forest, imagining the landscape as it will look years hence, cleared and settled. The very mountain cranberries he gathers on the slopes of Mount Katahdin, he speculates, will one day be articles of commerce (88). The view from Katahdin is, he says, “the State of Maine, which we had seen on the map,” a huge expanse of wilderness “that was a large farm for somebody, when cleared” (89). In preparing for (and writing up) his journey, Thoreau carefully read Charles Jackson’s 1837 Report on the Geology of Maine, a text that eagerly adopts its official charge to advance the settlement and economic development of this new state, and while Thoreau doesn’t quite mimic the eager strains of Jackson’s boosterism, he often falls into his teleology. Jackson’s gestures towards a distant geological past frame a distinctly American future; describing the Aroostock Plateau, he asserts with calm confidence, “that region will become, as it is destined by Nature to be, the granary of the North” (48).

Jackson was guided by the Penobscot leader Louis Neptune, who also agreed to guide Thoreau’s party to the top of Katahdin. Neptune fails to show up at the appointed time, and when Thoreau meets Neptune on his return, his ire no doubt fuels his description of the tribal
elder as a “degraded savage” (105). Yet the description is also part of the logic of evolutionary
time used by Jackson himself and affirmed, as Bellin notes, but such early ethnologists as Henry
Rowe Schoolcraft and Samuel Morton. The proper place for the Indian is the distant past. This is
the only charity Thoreau can muster when describing Neptune’s departure: “for there turns up
now a still more primitive and ancient man . . . He is but dim and misty to me, obscured by the
aeons that lie between the bark canoe and the bateau” (106). Neptune and his companions have
no place in the present; Thoreau can only deal generously with Neptune when he sees him
(dimly) as a relic of a vanishing era. In this chronology, Thoreau was very much in keeping with
mainstream American writing – Sartain’s Union Magazine, where “Ktaadn” was published, was
enthusiastically nationalistic; edited by Caroline Kirkland, western settlement was a recurrent
theme and literary tourism a staple.

Yet in “Ktaadn” and in the other essays in The Maine Woods, Thoreau also frequently
disrupted this nationalist clock, sprinkling throughout his narratives sharp critiques of the
whole notion of progress. At the beginning of “Ktaadn,” when passing by the sawmills in
Oldtown, he bewails the fate of white pine from the shores of Chesuncook sold to the New
England Friction Match Company; in “The Allagash and East Branch,” he mulls wryly over
lumbermen whose highest praise for a tree is that a team of oxen can stand on its stump. “Is
their elevated position intended . . . as a symbol of the fact that the pastoral comes next to the
sylvan or hunter life?” (313). Such rhetoric, of course, is a romantic truism, a form of nostalgia
that, ultimately, may only have served to grease the wheels of industrial progress. Yet such
moments also show that other clocks were running the Maine woods, ones not set to the
chronology of American nationalism. On his second and third trips to Maine, he gradually
comes to realize that Indian time and space don’t fit within European parameters. Joe Polis
remarks at one point that he can walk from where they are to Oldtown in three days in the
winter, across a wilderness unfathomable to Thoreau. He realizes that within this nation are
“places where he might live and die and never hear of the United States, which makes such a
noise in the world” (323). The present tense is crucial here – while Neptune is consigned to a
dim, irretrievable past, Polis lives very much in the present, and by the end of the passage, the
pronoun “he” has expanded to include not just Polis himself but any traveler who can set his coordinates, and his clock, by this ageless expanse of nature.

This happens again in “Chesuncook” when Thoreau, listening to Joe Aitteon talking with a group of Indian hunters late into the night, finds himself transported far beyond the present: “These Abenakis gossiped, laughed and jested in the language in which Eliot’s Bible is written, the language which has been spoken in New England who shall say who long?” (185). This passage captures Wai Che Dimock’s notion of “deep time,” a frame of reference that looks beyond a narrow synchronic context to place literature in a global exchange that reaches across many centuries. This particular moment of cross-cultural encounter links Thoreau into the networks of the Wabenaki world, weaving his location in U.S. history into the vastly different time frames and reference points that shape this particular region. “Deep time,” as Dimock conceives of it, is an anti-nationalist concept, but it’s important to note that it can cut different ways. For while the *longue duree*, the span of centuries, better allows for study of deep structural changes that move across any one nation, such a perspective was also central to the work of most nineteenth century historians and anthropologists who were the architects of savagism. Deep time was, all too often, the handmaiden of Indian removal and other projects of U.S. imperialism. By the time Thoreau journeyed to Maine, the *longue duree* was firmly ensconced in American literature, with writers like Longfellow eagerly turning Native American history and story into what Paul Giles has called “medieval American literature.” America’s native past became the primitive ground against which the new nation defined itself. Thoreau’s work shares this medievalist sense of deep time. At the end of “The Allagash and East Branch,” when, camping at a well-established spot, he suddenly realizes that, “not long since, similar beds were laid upon the Connecticut, the Hudson and the Delaware; and longer still ago, by the Thames and the Seine, and they now help make the soil where private and public gardens, mansions and palaces are” (394). The passage constructs a past that undergirds a European American present, safely burying a primitive history under the successive strata of civilization. This is also the logic behind his call, at the end of “Chesuncook,” for national preserves where the wild forests might survive, where the landscape of the deep past might survive, neatly contained, to nourish the present. Such preserves, of course, are trophies of modernity, remnants of an earlier
time that survive to be admired (or gawked at) by civilized tourists who come ultimately to affirm their distance from a deep past. *The Maine Woods*, surely, is partly this.

Yet *The Maine Woods* also rejects this chronology, crafting an alternate view in which past and present are not separate points upon which to tether national identity but instead parts of an intertwined whole. Mythic time is a category that became increasingly important to Thoreau as his career developed. While not uncommon in Transcendentalist thought (particularly Emerson’s), it remained at odds with a more common progressive strain that meshed more closely with mainstream notions of American teleology. The essays in *The Maine Woods* are increasingly filled with moments that undercut this diachronic model of time as depth and instead place events from the distant past onto the synchronic axis of an eternal present. There are many. The climactic scene in “Ktaadn” puts Thoreau in the cloud-factory on top of the mountain, a scene of on-going creation that ultimately overcomes any attempt to subdue these elemental mythic forces with the discourse of geography and history. It is only on the way down from the mist-shrouded peak that the force of the experience strikes Thoreau. Walking through the burnt lands, he writes “I looked with awe at the ground I trod, to see what Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was the Earth of which we had heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandseled globe. . . . It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever” (94). The passage is saturated with awe, with a sense not just of the stately, ongoing creation unfolding over geologic time but of the manifestation of the world’s originary powers. At the beginning of the journey to Ktaadn, when Thoreau asked Louis Neptune to guide his party, he had made a patronizing crack about making an offering to Pomola, the thunder spirit Penobscot traditions associated with the mountain; by the time Thoreau has reached the mountaintop, his tone shifts, recognizing that such places “are sacred and mysterious tracts never visited by them. Pomola is always angry with those who climb to the summit of Ktaadn” (86). On his descent, he trembles with the full force of this sacred awe. “What is this Titan that has possession of me?” he asks. The answer is myth, for in dissolving the span of ages that separates him from creation, Thoreau feels the ecstatic force of Nature in its eternal present tense.
This moment is hardly singular – the very nature of such experiences of mythic, ceremonial, or sacred time, after all, is their circularity – and they tend to come hard on the heels of passages where Thoreau replicates the progressive ideology of the vanishing Indian. In “The Allagash and East Branch,” after mocking Joe Polis for the “dumb wonder” with which he tells a traditional legend about the origins of Mt. Kineo, Thoreau finds himself struck with wonder at seeing phosphorescent wood at their campsite. “The woods,” Thoreau realizes once again, “were not tenantless, but chokefull of honest spirits” (248). This personified landscape, I suggest, is part and parcel of Thoreau’s shift in tense from a distant past to a living presence. By having past and present feed into each other through the nexus of myth, he replaces time that is deep with time that is thick – layered with meaning and rich with associative connection. Such a perspective transforms his experience of the landscape through which he travels, which becomes not the leading edge of history and nation but instead a topos saturated with meanings and associations that head off into a myriad of directions where past and future offer no useful points of reference.

While the deep time of the longue duree is useful in expanding the narrow chronology fixated on modern nationhood, it’s important to recognize that the process of stretching the diachronic axis of historical development can replicate an ideology of cultural evolution, misrepresenting particularly cultures that are not organized around teleology. “Thickness,” I suggest, better focuses attention on the complex interplay of cultures and criss-crossing chronologies that shape America at key junctures like the nineteenth-century Maine frontier. Such a focus is far more open to the competing cultural frameworks that shaped this landscape, and reading of The Maine Woods with this concept in mind suggests that Thoreau learned more from his Indian guides than even he himself could acknowledge. He certainly couldn’t sustain this perspective – every moment where thick time shapes his narrative is followed by another where the discourse of maps, surveys and other elements of national ideology secured by a particular notion of deep time reassert themselves. Yet they never fully contain such moments into their rigid chronology. They stand, instead, as separate clocks keeping time in the Maine woods.
Nature and Personhood

European American notions of time were not the only things Thoreau lost in the Maine Woods. The killing of a cow moose stands as the deeply ambivalent center of “Chesuncook,” and following Thoreau’s rapidly shifting ideological frameworks in writing about the episode is disorienting indeed. Thoreau traveled with his cousin George Thatcher, a Bangor lumber merchant, and Joe Aitteon partly to visit an environment relatively untouched by white settlement and partly to learn about Indian culture first hand. Hunting moose was part of his cousin’s plan, not his, and Thoreau describes the initial sighting of the moose and her calf and the shooting of “our Nimrod” with a veteran travel writer’s ironic detachment. This is quickly supplanted by his ethnographer’s interest as Aitteon tracks the wounded animal, and then later by his naturalist’s compulsion to minutely measure the carcass, for “I did not wish to be obliged to say merely that the moose was very large” (153). He describes in gothic detail the butchering of the animal: “the rent udder, and the ghastly naked red carcass appearing from within its seemly robe” (156). An aesthetic revulsion slowly grows – “The afternoon’s tragedy, and my share in it, affected my innocence and destroyed the pleasure of my adventure” (160) – until he finally settles on a reformist plea. He could imagine living in the woods and hunting just enough to survive. “But this hunting of the moose merely for the satisfaction of killing him . . . is too much like going out by night to some wood-side pasture and shooting your neighbor’s horses. These are God’s own horses, poor timid creatures” (161). It is from this stance that he condemns his Indian guide: “What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of nature!” (162). Yet these shifting and entirely recognizable frames never quite contain the oddity of the first sighting of the moose. Thoreau describes them as “half-frightened rabbits, with their long ears and half-inquisitive, half-frightened looks; the true denizens of the forest (I saw at once), filling a vacuum which now I first discovered had not been filled for me, - moose-men, wood-eaters, the word is said to mean, clad in a sort of Vermont gray, or homespun” (148). Later, after measuring the carcass, Thoreau writes, “This was the kind of man that was at home there; for, near as I can learn, that has never been the residence, but the hunting-ground of the
Indian” (155). In a few short pages, Thoreau’s view of the moose has moved from tourist trophy to full personhood.

Other moments in “Chesuncook” similarly place Thoreau outside the bounds of contemporary discourse about the environment. Most famous is his description of the pine tree, the heart of the Maine lumber industry, best known, he argues, not to the sawyer or lumberman, but to the poet. “It is not their bones or hide or tallow that I love most. It is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, and with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts. It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower over me still” (165). The passage was jarring enough that James Russell Lowell, who had solicited “Chesuncook” for The Atlantic Monthly, deleted it as far too pantheistic for his readers, over Thoreau’s strong objections. Speaking of plants as “people” was something of a Romantic commonplace, appearing in the work of James Thompson a generation before Thoreau’s birth and in John Muir’s a generation after his death; Thoreau’s formulation, however, went far beyond playful anthropomorphism to a more fundamental assault on Judeo-Christian cosmology.

In “The Allegash and East Branch,” descriptions of a living landscape grow more uncanny still. Paddling along Moosehead Lake, Thoreau describes the danger of the open water in supernatural terms: “before you think of it, a wave will gently creep up the side of your canoe and fill your lap, like a monster deliberately covering you with slime before it swallows you” (233). Later, looking into the surrounding wilderness, Thoreau describes an ominously animate landscape: “Only solemn bear-haunted mountains, with their great slopes, were visible; where, as man is not, we suppose other powers to be. My imagination personified the slopes themselves, as if by their very length they would waylay you, and compel them to camp again on them before night. Some invisible glutton would seem to drop from the trees and gnaw at the heart of the solitary hunter who threaded those woods; and yet I was tempted to walk there” (251). Such moments are as far in spirit from the beneficent spirit of nature that Thoreau learns to see in his Concord environs as Walden Pond is from Moosehead Lake.

This note of difference that creeps into The Maine Woods, I suggest, reflects more than the natural evolution of Thoreau’s thinking, fueled by both his deep immersion in natural history
writing and his careful observation of his environment. These moments, even more than his revisions of the European American clock and map, reflect his contact with the Penobscot world. Thoreau’s Maine essays don’t reproduce Penobscot traditions, but they do mark his growing awareness of an alternative cosmology that structures this particular environment. After seeing phosphorescent wood for the first time when camped on the shore of Moosehead Lake, Thoreau has a sudden realization of this expansive world: “Nature must have made a thousand revelations to them which are still secrets to us” (247). Thoreau never learns most of these secrets; he does, however, gain a sharpened sense of what he does not know. He indicates this most directly in the letter he wrote to H. G. O. Blake after his trip with Polis: “The Indian, who can find his way so wonderfully in the woods, possesses so much intelligence which the white man does not,—and it increases my own capacity, as well as faith, to observe it. I rejoice to find that intelligence flows in other channels than I knew. It redeems for me portions of what seemed brutish before” (491). This awareness opens up his experience of the Maine woods, allowing him to encounter this environment in a manner quite different than that of white travelers who came knowing what to expect. It also, I suggest, allowed for the Penobscot themselves to teach this outsider something about their world without trading away their cultural sovereignty.

Penobscot Encounters

Thoreau went to Maine in large part to study Indians; his journal and his essays record just about every scrap of information he learned in talking with his Penobscot guides. What’s clear from the large body of Penobscot traditions now available is how little they told him. Their reticence is not surprising – by the 1840s, when Thoreau first travelled to the Maine woods, the region’s Wabanaki tribes had been vastly reduced by warfare and disease. The Passamaquoddy and Maliseet lived in several villages on the Canadian border, while the Penobscot gathered in one village of several hundred people in Oldtown, a few miles from the burgeoning lumber town of Bangor. The State of Maine treated the tribe with indifference when it wasn’t systematically shrinking their hunting grounds on the upper Penobscot, supposedly guaranteed
by treaty. Almost every white person who dealt with the Penobscot assumed they were soon to vanish and acted accordingly; the tribe itself wrestled with how best to cope with the changes ripping through their society and their environment. Most had accepted some measure of Christianity, Catholic or Protestant, but most still held firm to their own traditions. John Neptune, the last of traditional metoulin, or shamans, remained a powerful figure, and most still hunted and carried on traditional crafts even as they experimented with farming, lumbering, marketing goods to whites and guiding the increasing stream of white hunters and tourists. Tribal members argued about whether to embrace Protestantism, whether to send their children to white schools, and how best to work with the state government; many sought to forge tactical alliances with sympathetic whites.\(^7\)

They didn’t, however, share much of their culture – few whites cared to ask, and the few that did often treated Penobscot traditions with ridicule. It wasn’t until 1884 that Charles Leland published the first collection of Penobscot literature; Fannie Eckstrom, a Penobscot ethnographer whose family were close to John Neptune, notes that her father refused to believe that Leland’s collection was authentic, since he had never heard of any of these tales in all his years of visiting and hunting with his Penobscot friends. According to Eckstrom, “It was their secret, which enabled them to be a race despised and yet to walk with dignity among their condemners because they knew something white people did not know. They had fought with spirits; they had vanquished demons; they held the power of life and death over enemies; nothing was impossible to those among them who had acquired ‘spiritual power’” (29). During the period of Thoreau’s travels, two things are clear – the traditional knowledge of the Penobscot was very much intact, and the Penobscots were careful to keep it from whites. They had lost much of their political sovereignty over their tribal territory; indeed, surveying parties guided by the Penobscots themselves redrew traditional boundaries and apportioned land for lumbermen and settlers who cut trees, cleared farms and built dams and mills that altered the riverine ecosystem. Yet they held onto their cultural sovereignty, a cosmology that shaped a uniquely Penobscot relationship to the environment, shaped both by story and by the rhythms of a life that reached far beyond white contact. It is this Penobscot world that shadows Thoreau’s own encounter with the Maine woods.
Nicolar and Cultural Sovereignty

The recent republication of Joseph Nicolar’s remarkable compilation of Penobscot traditions offers a useful opportunity to read the dynamics of the cultural exchange that took place in the Maine woods. Dimock’s formulation of “deep time” is useful here because Nicolar was particularly interested in contesting European American notions of history. He opens his books by declaring, “In offering this work which will give the public the full account of all the pure traditions which have been handed down from the beginning of the red man’s world to the present time, I deem it proper to state that there have been no historical works of the white man, nor any other written history from any source quoted” (96). The Indian world, for Nicolar, is not only distinct but, for whites, impenetrable: “Because when his ways and habits are learned it will be found that they are so peculiar it has spread a veil over the eyes and minds of the learned of these modern dates, and have caused many to enquire, ‘Where did the red man come from?’ This is the question we intend to answer!” (96). Nicolar’s account of the Indian world begins by asserting the inability of European norms to account for its time and structure. Like other Indian histories by, for example, David Cusick (Tuscarora) and Sara Winnemucca (Paiute), Nicolar represents the pre-contact Indian world not so much as different from European culture but as wholly other, operating outside of European constructions of time and history.

Such claims were not merely of anthropological interest – the ambitious tone of Nicolar’s preface makes it clear that his project is meant not to preserve a record of a vanishing culture but to guarantee that Penobscot history and geography continue to shape Penobscot territory. Anticipating by a century the call of the contemporary Penobscot anthropologist Darren Ranco for a Native anthropology, Nicolar “theorizes from within,” framing his account according to Penobscot needs. “I have been crowned with success,” he boasts, in having done his part to ensure that the Penobscot culture hero, Klose-kur-beh, remains the defining presence in a changing Maine landscape. “The works of Klose-kur-beh were wonderful,” Nicolar writes, and by preserving his story, he preserves the continuance of his efforts to make this earth “a happy
land for the people” (96). The Penobscots had long relied on warfare and diplomacy to protect their homeland; by the nineteenth century, their efforts focused on other means. Politics was one arena, and Nicolar, as a longstanding Penobscot representative to the Maine legislature, was instrumental in securing for his people standing in civil society. Culture was another, and Nicolar’s retelling of Penobscot traditions needs to be understood as part of the long struggle for Penobscot sovereignty.

Nicolar’s account of Penobscot traditions is aimed squarely at keeping this tribal past very much alive in a world increasingly defined by the modern world. Penobscot politics in the nineteenth century were complex, with members divided over religion (Protestant, Catholic or traditional), education (public schooling, Christian schooling or traditional upbringing) and tribal governance (hereditary or elected chiefs). As part of the “Old Party,” largely Protestant, in favor of public schooling and supporting hereditary leadership, Nicolar, like most Penobscots, sought a balance between traditional and modern culture (Kolodny 20). (Aitteon and Polis were also associated with the Old Party.) Life and Traditions of the Red Man was part of this effort – while addressed in part to sympathetic white readers, it was primarily addressed to his own community. Part of that message was intensely traditional. In gathering and preserving such an extensive body of Penobscot lore, Nicolar made sure that, despite the passing of tribal elders and a decline in Penobscot speakers, the Penobscot world would survive. The mythic presence at the root of these stories is a crucial element of that culture – Evan Pritchard’s title of his recent Algonquian ethnology, No Word for Time, neatly captures its centrality. Nicolar’s account also describes a world in which Europeans barely register. Most of his book centers on events before the arrival of whites, and even after contact, the narrative centers on conflicts among Indian groups. Nicolar’s world is apart in both time and place from contemporary American society, with a long cycle of change, struggle and survival that offers a potent context for the tribe’s status at the end of the nineteenth century, a longue durée that offers a powerful rebuke to any indication of imminent vanishing.

Yet in countering Eurocentric notions of history that consign Indians to a “medieval” past, Nicolar also refashions Penobscot chronology. Frank Speck, who lived among the Penobscot in the 1910s, notes that a number of elders were critical of Nicolar’s reworking of
traditional stories, in part by his introduction of Christian elements (“Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs” 3). More radical, perhaps, was his shift in medium. Penobscot stories were traditionally transmitted orally, often in ritualized contexts to specific audiences at certain times of the year; they were invariably adapted to unique circumstances of the setting, with various episodes woven together to meet the needs of the situation. Penobscot traditions were less history than language, with elements woven together according to a coherent grammar but taking shape only in the act of utterance. They always took shape in the present, governed not by an immutable chronology but the complex demands of the present. Their time-frame was, thus, thick rather than deep. By weaving these stories into a fixed narrative, Nicolar organized them along a diachronic axis that emphasized depth. Such a chronology, reaching back to a separate creation and carrying at every point the cultural knowledge that shaped the Penobscot world, served to rework the foundations of the Penobscot nation. Kolodny notes that most white scholars have largely ignored Nicolar, “frustrated by the difficulty of aligning his narrative with any corresponding Euroamerican chronology” (75). This is because Nicolar fashions his chronology, I would argue, as a counterpoint to the construction of deep time that helped to buttress the American nation. In Nicolar’s telling, the Penobscots, too, had a history that authorized their nation, their culture and their claim to exist as a separate people with sovereign ties to their own territory. His formulation of deep time establishes a discrete past that serves, in the Penobscot national imaginary, as a place apart, a span of time that exists without reference to the politics of contact, colonization and cultural hegemony. Deep time, for Nicolar, becomes a focal point for Penobscot national identity. This reframing the Penobscot past was also a key strategy for securing tribal status among whites, making it recognizable while asserting its difference. Nicolar sought to make their traditions available to, in his own words, a wide “public,” sharing Penobscot culture with whites on his own terms.

Penobscots who guided white explorers, surveyors, hunters and tourists had long been the conduits of such cultural transmission, and their varying approaches suggest the deep ambivalence in their community about the terms and contexts through by which their knowledge of the Penobscot world was conveyed. Joseph Treat, traveling with the Penobscot chief John Neptune during his 1820 survey of Penobscot territory for the new state of Maine,
notes that an earlier surveying expedition found its maps defaced and its efforts to demarcate the land as U. S. territory consistently thwarted (Pawling, 59, 131). On the other hand, Treat’s journal shows Neptune detailing Penobscot names and traditions for every lake, mountain and waterfall, ensuring that this state survey was saturated with Penobscot culture. Kolodny describes how deeply rooted the Penobscot cosmology is within the Maine landscape; their ethic of mutual obligation to a land full of spirits, animal-people and daunting power is fundamentally geographic, every place name helping to orient a traveler in relation to both physical space and spiritual power (4-5). Thoreau himself glimpsed this – “So much geography is there in their names,” he notes in “The Allegash and East Branch,” in finding that Penobscot place names invariably indicated key descriptive features that help members of the tribe find their way through the landscape. He is less attuned to the way the Penobscot key their tribal traditions to features in the landscape, recalling stories associated with a specific place and recasting them to meet the needs of the moment – a nexus of geography and culture Keith Basso has termed a “place-world.” Penobscot guides throughout the nineteenth century clearly saw themselves as diplomats; it is, perhaps, no accident that the three Penobscots Thoreau stumbled across as guides were among the most important tribal leaders of the era. Louis Neptune, who guided the state geologist Charles Jackson in the 1830s, provided a thick Penobscot discourse to this official report. His refusal to guide Thoreau during his first trip to Maine might well be attributed his ambivalence about leading outsiders to the most sacred parts of the Penobscot landscape. Thoreau fares better in his second trip – the long interview with tribal chief (and Treat’s guide) John Neptune at the end of the trip is a mark of the confidence Thoreau earned from Joe Aitteen. Nicolar himself, having long sought out those elders most deeply versed in traditional learning, was certainly familiar with the principles of Penobscot cultural diplomacy. Teaching whites to understand and respect the Penobscot world – its geography, its spirituality, its sense of time – was a key feature of the long struggle to preserve Penobscot sovereignty.

Penobscot Story-Maps
Nicolar begins with the sense of mythic time that only gradually appears in Thoreau’s essays. Klose-kur-beh’s creation at the hands of the “Great Being” establishes him as the intermediary between the creator and the people who will soon appear; his first journey, to the top of a cloud-shrouded mountain shaken by wind and lightening striking evocative of Mount Katahdin, establishes a mythic frame of reference for the Penobscot world. The Great Being’s first teaching affirms that the world is living presence: “there was a living spirit in all things, and the spirit of all things has power over all . . . the Great Spirit was in the sun – moon – stars – clouds of heaven – mountains, and even in the trees of the earth” (102). This conception of an animate, personified Nature is one of the key features of Penobscot culture; it is woven into song and ceremony as well as embedded in traditional story-telling and the very structure of the language. Kolodny notes that “the precontact Eastern Algonquian-speaking tribes of the Canadian Maritimes and Maine experienced their world as everywhere alive with spiritual powers and kin-beings. The very grammar of their dialects rendered certain kinds of stones or even a snowball as animate and potentially endowed with personhood” (4). Thus the very act of guiding whites through this territory and marking its features with Penobscot names preserves this sensibility of an animate presence in the land.

Outsiders were not always quick to pick up on such ideas. The story retold by Polis about the great hunter, brusquely dismissed by Thoreau as marked “by a long drawling tone, long-windedness, and dumb wonder, which he hopes will be contagious” (235), is a central passage in Nicolar. At first, it clearly isn’t contagious – when Thoreau later meets Polis climbing Mount Kineo, he attributes his fatigue in part to “superstition. Perhaps he believed he was climbing over the back of a tremendous moose” (242). Nicolar’s book suggests that Polis believed exactly that. Stories of Klose-kur-beh were not assigned to a distant past, but were very much at the heart of the Penobscot world, informing every leg of their journeys through the woods. Thoreau remarks on his guides’ habit of falling silent when travelling rather than engage in idle chatter, and it may well be that some of their thoughts were of the stories that shaped the land, and whether or how to convey them to their clients. Thoreau’s response to Polis’s first story was clearly unpromising, and what might have been the first in a stream of stories quickly ended. In their highly circumspect way of telling Penobscot stories, Aitteon and
Polis cast a respectful veil over their tribe’s most sacred traditions while still conveying key aspects of its culture. Polis, for example, doesn’t tell Thoreau one of the central stories in *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*, the arrival of winter. Pa-poon, the frost spirit, arrives in a Penobscot village in the form of a small boy; ignored, he eventually kills seven children, eating their tongues and surviving every attempt to kill him. “I have been obliged to awaken you by striking a blow where it will be most felt” (146), he tells the people, and then gives instructions on how to survive the coming winter. It is a troubling and difficult story, and it bears directly on a central event in Polis’s life — when hunting as a boy of eleven, he was caught many miles from home by the sudden onset of winter; he and his companions barely survived their return. The Pa-poon story conveys the merciless quality of the Maine winters and the cultural resourcefulness needed to survive it; Polis’s own story shows that it was an integral part of the Penobscot world, not assigned to a primitive past but very much alive in the present. Polis certainly knew the story but chose not to tell it, seeing, perhaps, that at this point, Thoreau was not prepared to hear it. Polis allows the story of how own formative encounter with winter’s fury stands alone. Reading Nicolar gives us a sense of the weight of untold stories, of the rich traditions Polis and Aitteon chose not to share with their client, and how little of the rich Penobscot world Thoreau was allowed to glimpse.

Yet Thoreau clearly was a potentially receptive student of Penobscot culture. His experience on Mount Katahdin bears striking parallels with Nicolar’s description of the mythic mountain at the opening of *Life and Traditions of the Red Man*. Many Penobscot stories, indeed, are eerily close to episodes in Thoreau’s essays. In crossing Moosehead Lake, Thoreau echoes Klose-kur-beh’s epic battle with the sea serpent who has fouled the ocean. He describes the waves that “will gently creep up the side of the canoe and fill your lap, like a monster deliberately covering you with its slime before it swallows you” (233). This description echoes as well one of the central stories about John Neptune. Speck reports that his animal helper was a giant eel, which he called to him one day on the shore of a lake in front of a number of witnesses (“Shamanism” 252). Alger and Eckstrom record different versions of the story, in which Neptune fought a rival shaman who took the form of a *wiwil’mecq’,* a snake-like water monster that Alger writes “smeared him with slime from head to foot” before he vanquished it (82).
They report that Neptune’s helper was a salamander. Thoreau knew none of this when he met with Neptune, though he eagerly recorded the brief traditions Neptune did tell. Their interview is a highly charged episode, with Neptune welcoming his visitor, who has clearly earned the trust of Aitteon, but warily, sounding him out as an ally, trying him with some brief stories and watching him closely. Not many people had come to the Penobscots with a genuine interest in their culture, and one gets a sense of Neptune and other tribal leaders testing the boundaries of a new diplomatic frontier that Nicolar would fully explore a generation later.

This trust was not necessarily misplaced. Thoreau at times genuinely learns from Indian culture, never more self-consciously than in “Chesuncook” where he talks of “moose-men” in terms that take an Indian understanding of animal personhood not as a primitive mark of difference but as a powerful means of countering European-American notions of nature as commodity. This understanding of animals as kin is a key feature of Penobscot cosmology. Nicolar’s history contains a long list of Klus-kur-beh’s animal helpers, and Alger retells a powerful story about a Penobscot who, on a long winter hunt, marries a moose-woman and eventually turns into a moose himself (101-5). Penobscot literature is full of transformation stories, and Frank Speck notes many families trace their lineage to an ancestor who had transformed from animal to human, a belief that underscores the close relationship between humans and animals, with equal powers and equivalent social organization. Animals, like humans, have villages and shamans, and they are discussed in equivalent terms – wolf-folk, bear-folk, moose-folk and human-folk are all part of an extensive community. Hunting is not harvesting a resource but “ordained killing,” an acknowledgement on the animal’s part that their spirit has been overcome by the hunter’s superior power (“Penobscot Tales” 22-3).

Thoreau didn’t hear these stories from his Penobscot guides, but his extensive reading included many such transformation stories; however mediated, they resonated with his own evolving understanding of animals. He returned from his trip with Polis firmly convinced that science had a great deal to learn from Indian knowledge of animals.
Trees, rocks and geographic features, too, are possessed of spirit and have standing in the Penobscot world. Joseph Nicolar writes of a crucial encounter between Klose-kur-beh and a group of trees early in his wanderings:

When night came this same lonely feeling was upon him, he prepared a place for his night’s rest. After the darkness had come and before laying down to sleep, to cheer himself, Klose-kur-beh did sing. When this was done, the seven trees that stood nearest bent their tops and listened to the singing of Klose-kur-beh, and when the singing was over, the largest of the seven straightened its body up and said, “How grateful the heart of man ought to be when he can bring cheer to himself by singing when lonely. When my kind and I sing, we sing in distress; when the fury of the winds shake our limbs we sing in wailing, - our roots are many and strong and cannot move to avoid the fury of the heavens. Because you can move at your pleasure do not linger here, but on the morrow when the sun rises take your canoe, and with your companion go forth toward the sun and keep the same course seven days and seven nights. . . . When you find land it will be like this land and the trees the same as we. Your work will then be complete because you will have found that there is spirit in all things, and where there is spirit there is power, and as there is knowledge in us, we, the seven trees, will show you the power that is in us and will smooth the way for the whole time of your journey.” (123-4)

The key insight of this story – that there is spirit in all things, and that power comes from understanding and respecting this – occurs again and again in Nicolar’s book; it is the lynchpin of the Penobscot connection to their environment, the key to their cultural sovereignty. This sensibility is entirely at odds with the extractive economy most evident in the saw mills around Old Town – an economy that employed a large number of the Penobscot tribe. Nicolar’s story, then, is an important cultural counterweight to an emergent capitalism, one that had far deeper roots in Penobscot traditions than Thoreau’s plea for the “living spirit” of the pine, and one directed at the wide “public” cited in his introduction. Klus-kur-beh’s message was crucial both for the whites who came in increasing numbers to the Maine Woods and for the Penobscots themselves.
Thus we have the paradox of Thoreau’s relationship to the Penobscots. While he went to Maine for the express purpose of studying Indians, he was, at worst, openly dismissive of their culture, their society and their beliefs; more frequently, his sympathy was bound up in an ideology of savagism that took as a certainty the inevitable vanishing of “the red face of man” and valued only those aspects of their culture that were firmly tied to a supposedly irrecoverable past. Such a view might allow Thoreau to use his image of Indians to critique an emerging American capitalism, but it hardly allowed him meaningful insight into lives of Indians. He certainly learned from Polis and Aitteon, but only was allowed the barest glimpse of the traditions and practices that made up the Penobscot world, and even then he was often unable to see what was before him. And yet the essays in The Maine Woods are nevertheless full of a sensibility, imagery and language entirely consonant with the Penobscot relationship to the environment – a sense of on-going creation that counters Western conceptions of teleology; a conception of a natural world that is alive, full of spiritual power and endowed with personhood; and a firm sense of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment that later European American writers would term a “land ethic.” How did Thoreau appear to learn so much from a people he only saw through a thick layer of prejudice? The answers, I suggest, are best understood from a more nuanced reading of the cross-cultural dynamics that shaped these encounters in the Maine woods.

One response is suggested by Dimock’s call for a far wider context for American Studies, one that reaches not only across the globe but deep into the past. Such a frame of reference complicates the cultural exchange at work in Thoreau’s writing, weaving into the problematic dyad of Thoreau and Indian the rich web of cultural borrowing that made up Thoreau’s reading, from ancient Greece, India and China to medieval Islam to the vast corpus of travel writing Thoreau eagerly devoured. Many of the perspectives and beliefs central to the Penobscot world are far closer in spirit to, say, Greek myth or Hindu philosophy than they are to nineteenth-century European culture, and when Thoreau pens his own pantheist ode to the spirit of the pine tree, he may be drawing more on Hesiod than on Joe Aitteon. In his rapture on
top of Mount Katahdin, certainly, Thoreau finds himself reaching beyond Milton to the mythic landscape of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, where Chaos, Night and the Titans give expression to his experience of raw nature. Yet the Penobscot spirit Pomola shoulders his way into this Greek pantheon, suggesting that for Thoreau, at least, the path to understanding his Penobscot neighbors lay through ancient Greece, a cross-cultural triangulation that open up an entirely new perspective on the environment.

A second response is to focus more carefully on the people who guided Thoreau through this environment. Native people have long played passive roles in studies of American writers, and this is true especially for Thoreau. Native critics themselves have argued that we need to fully acknowledge how carefully Indians shaped their world, including their relationship with whites. This holds particularly true for the Penobscots in the 19th century, who were engaged in a long struggle to preserve their cultural identity and their unique relationship to their environment in an era where overt resistance to white colonization was no longer tenable. In Nicolar’s *Life and Traditions*, Klose-kur-beh’s central teaching is clear: “the land the Great Spirit gave them they must never leave” (102), and it’s important to understand Thoreau’s guides in light of this imperative. Attieon and Polis, after all, were not simply guides but tribal leaders, and their trips with Thoreau are better understood not as wilderness tourism but cultural diplomacy, in which they carefully sized up this naturalist and writer and determined how best he might advance the goals of preserving Penobscot cultural sovereignty. Part of this strategy involved simply keeping key aspects of their culture private, but part involved a careful initiation into the Penobscot relationship with the land, from the web of language that reached into every corner of the environment to the myriad patterns of subsistence that had evolved over the centuries to the subtle ways the Penobscot oriented themselves in time and place.

*The Maine Woods* is, among many other things, a powerful record of Penobscot pedagogy. Attieon and Polis revealed some of their traditions and rituals, waiting, as Indian teachers typically did, for the right circumstances to summon an appropriate story and then carefully gauging its effect. Even when Thoreau clearly wasn’t ready, as when Polis told of Klus-kur-beh’s killing of the moose that became Mt. Kineo, the story may have taken effect –
what follows that evening is Thoreau’s revelation about phosphorescent wood and his newfound respect for the depths of Indian knowledge. Later, after reaching one of Polis’s hunting camps and observing his blazon of a bear in a canoe, Thoreau realizes that “this was one of his homes” (273). It is also clear from reading Nicolar that Aitteon and Polis carefully instruct Thoreau in how to read the Penobscot world. They tell of the same battles between the Mohawks and the Wabanaki that occupy the last chapter Nicolar’s book, they sing traditional songs lying beside the campfire, they explain their language and the accumulated lore that shapes their world. When Thoreau demonstrates that he would not be receptive to stories of Klus-kur-beh and Pomola, Polis and Aitteon prove eager to pass on the knowledge they learned through the medium of the Penobscot culture hero indirectly. If Thoreau won’t listen to the story of Klus-ker-beh’s hunting, he will watch and listen as Aitteon and Polis hunt themselves; while these guides grew up learning everything from the uses of plants to the techniques of making a birchbark canoe by listening to the same Klus-kur-beh stories retold by Nicolar, Thoreau is content to learn some of this lore from the guides themselves. Significantly, both Polis and Aitteon initiate Thoreau into contemporary Penobscot politics only at the end of their journeys, after establishing a relationship and, more importantly, after carefully guiding him through the extensive territory that the Penobscot still consider their own. The long interview with John Neptune at the end of “Chesuncook” and the detailed account of the struggle between the Old and New Parties at the end of “The Allegash and East Branch” are not merely anecdotes appended to a wilderness sojourn; instead, they show Thoreau how deeply interwoven the Maine Woods are to the Penobscot village at Old Town, with story, language, history and politics fully embedded within a specific environment to make up the Penobscot world. In both journeys, Thoreau leaves on a primitivist excursion to the deep woods and returns to an Indian Island that is at once fully rooted in Penobscot tradition and very much a part of modern America.

One final way of reading the cross-cultural dynamics of the The Maine Woods is to place the environment itself at the center of these competing ideologies. By carefully attending to the landscape, by focusing on the flora, fauna and geology that met his gaze, Thoreau managed (if only temporarily and partially) to escape the narrow ideological perspective of 19th century
American expansionism and open himself to alternative ways of understanding this environment. Thoreau was most open to the Penobscot world when he was most open to the Maine environment. Thus the passages in *The Maine Woods* that most closely echo a Penobscot sensibility – invoking Pomola on top of Khatadin, summoning the spirit of a pine tree or marveling at phosphorescent wood – all occur at moments when the environment surprises him, refusing to be bound by the narrow categories of European American ideology – when Thoreau, in short, gets lost. This is most evident when reading Thoreau’s essays alongside accounts by his contemporaries. Charles Jackson’s 1838 geological survey of Maine, John Springer’s 1851 *Forest Life and Forest Trees* and James Russell Lowell’s *Moosehead Journal* are far more tame books, framing the landscape in terms of natural resources ripe for development, or of the rugged progress of industry, or of genteel tourism. Thoreau, in being open to seeing an environment that regularly exceeds readymade categories of knowledge, is open as these other observers are not, to Penobscot ways of seeing this world.

In “The Allagash and East Branch,” Thoreau relates a story told by Polis about one of his visits to Boston. He had listened to Daniel Webster’s Bunker Hill oration, one of the classic efforts to mythologize American history, and went to pay his respects; after being repulsed, Polis concluded he “was not worth talk about a musquash” (347). Polis and Webster never had the opportunity to compare notes on time and history. Nicolar’s book might be read as a Penobscot reply to an oration that begins with Christopher Columbus and portrays a battle in Charlestown as a decisive point in history. “But we are Americans,” Webster wrote. “We live in what may be called the early age of this great continent; and we know that our posterity, through all time, are here to enjoy and suffer the allotments of humanity” (59). Elsewhere, however, Polis remarked that Americans were “very strong, but too fast” (246) – too fast to either properly read the landscape or to appreciate the depths of time that preceded European settlement.

Thoreau, however bound up in the chronology of American nationalism, at least began to see this Indian world through a different lens of time. By the end of “Chesuncook,” he is able to see the Penobscot community of Indian Island as at once rooted in the past and very much living in the present; he listens respectfully to John Neptune’s stories of current politics and
traditional lore and sees no dissonance at discovering, in the yard of a modern frame house, a Penobscot making a birch bark canoe. In “The Allagash and East Branch,” he is even able to offer something from his own knowledge of the past. Long-possessed of a talent for finding arrowheads in Concord, which he delighted in as a record of the region’s vanished past, he is delighted to find the same hornstone used to make those arrows on the slopes of Mt. Kineo. At a campsite some days later, he is able to point out to Polis that a similar stone was likely carried there a century or more ago to make arrows. Thoreau is thus able to weave his knowledge of an environment marked by an Indian past into living present. We don’t know Polis’s reaction to this insight; he likely had heard the Penobscot story that Klose-ker-beh was even then in his distant abode to the north, manufacturing arrowheads for the day when he would help his people drive the whites back across the sea (Leland 130-3). We do know, however, that Polis honored Thoreau with a Penobscot name meaning “great paddler” (404). The essay ends with Polis and Thoreau together shooting the rapids above Old Town, weaving their way deftly down a river that defined the Penobscot world, before trading in a birch bark canoe for a railroad and steamer.

This sustained encounter with the Maine woods and the Penobscot world, I argue, had a lasting effect on Thoreau’s work beyond these Maine essays. They contributed, for one, to a mythic sense of the environment that developed in the writing of Walden and continued as Thoreau began to frame a more systematic study of the environment around Concord. As Thoreau delved ever more deeply into science, he continued to resist calling himself a “scientist” – he insisted that his studies of animals, plants and the natural features of the landscape were not merely scientific but spiritual and philosophical as well. Such a stance certainly affirmed his allegiance to transcendentalism, but it also underscored his consonance with a Penobscot view of nature, what he termed early in his career “a more perfect Indian wisdom” (“Natural History” 29). Ecology for Thoreau, and for us, is not a merely material study. The Maine Woods also underscores the highly charged politics that frame any encounter with the environment. As the Indians who guided the long series of surveyors, lumbermen, hunters, tourists and writers through their traditional territory well understood, building a relationship with an environment is part of asserting control over it. In Maine, Thoreau was
forced to confront in a way he wasn’t in Concord that his journeys through a landscape were journeys through a highly politicized environment as well. Thoreau began to learn in Maine that Indians were more than mere figures useful to critique the materialist excesses of an emergent capitalism; they were people with their own history, interests and voices. Any truly thorough account of American history and literature needs to listen carefully to these voices.

Notes

1. Richard Sayre’s account remains the most comprehensive study of Thoreau’s relationship with Indians. Richard Fleck has built on his very sympathetic work in *Thoreau and John Muir Among the Indians* (1985) by making a substantial selection of the Indian Notebooks available online. Suzanne Rose has done more recent work on the Indian Notebooks’ influence on *Walden*. Bellin’s article is by far the most comprehensive effort to see Thoreau’s work in the context of contemporary ethnography. Thoreau’s early biographers, beginning with Emerson, celebrated his interest in Indians; modern ones have been split. Walter Harding saw Polis as one of Thoreau’s few unambiguous heroes, while Richard Bridgeman argues that Thoreau was disappointed in Polis and quickly lost interest in Indians after his final trip to Maine. Richardson and Lebeaux see a more ambivalent relationship. Among more recent studies of *The Maine Woods*, Joseph Moldenhauer suggests Thoreau was disappointed in Neptune and Aitteen but found Polis a kindred spirit in navigating between the woods and the village. Tom Lynch and Linda Frost place more emphasis on the Penobscots themselves; the former points to the guides’ immersion in traditional spirituality and the latter foregrounds Penobscot political struggles over the tribe’s land base and education. Jessie Bray’s recent work has examined Thoreau’s transcultural exchanges, while Lisa Brooks, in her study of the Native Northeast, notes that Thoreau’s “romantic reveries” are interrupted by his guides’ very contemporary concerns.

2. Joseph Nicolar may well have been on Indian Island when Thoreau visited – born in 1827, he was nineteen during the Katahdin trip and thirty during the trip with Polis. The “very
intelligent Indian” Thoreau mentions as a source for several Penobscot definitions is identified only as the Governor’s son-in-law, likely Tomer Nicolar, Joseph’s father, though Jeffrey Cramer offers several other possibilities among the Nicolar family (301). Given the person’s level of education and willingness to teach tribal tradition, it’s possible (though impossible to prove) that this was Joseph Nicolar himself.


4. Tom Lynch situates Thoreau’s *Maine Woods* essays in the context of an emerging American discourse of wilderness. For an account of the removal of native peoples from newly formed national parks, see Mark Spence.

5. The literature on myth in Thoreau and Transcendentalism more broadly is extensive. Mircea Eliade’s work on sacred, or mythic, time remains foundational; for a cogent account of myth in Thoreau’s work, see Robert Richardson’s biography (230-33). Philip Gura offers a good discussion of the competing strains of progressive and mythic time in *American Transcendentalism*.

6. The term “wood-eater” is from Ebeneezer Emmons *Report on the Quadrapeds of Massachusetts*, which Thoreau reviewed in “A Natural History of Massachusetts;” other sources Thoreau would have read offer variants and cite both Narragansett and Abenaki languages. I am indebted to Jeffrey Cramer of the Thoreau Institute for this citation. I have been unable to locate the source of “moose-men.”

7. Annette Kolodny’s introduction to Nicolar’s *Life and Traditions of the Red Man* offers a cogent history of the Penobscot nation in the nineteenth century. For a fuller account, see Pauleena MacDougall’s *The Penobscot Dance of Resistance* (2004).
8. There are many accounts of Native American storytelling and oral literature; Donald Murray’s *Forked Tongues* remains a thorough introduction. For a wide range of Algonquian oral literatures carefully situated in their tribal contexts, see *Algonquian Spirit*, edited by Brian Swann.

9. Lisa Brooks, in *The Common Pot*, details the efforts of different native groups in what is now New England to reclaim tribal space during the colonial and early national eras. She cites the Abenaki dictionary compiled by the Odanak/St. Francis chief Joseph Laurent in 1884 as a compelling example of how naming the land establishes it as native space. (250-3).

10. Walter Harding cites a conversation between Thoreau and Harvard librarian making this point (310).

11. The scholarship on early Native literature from the Northeast has been growing steadily. Most have focused on how Christian Indians used writing to advocate for Indian communities, from Bernd Peyer’s pioneering work to books by Hillary Wyss, Kristina Bross, Robert Warrior and Drew Lopenzina. Some more recent work has recovered Native texts outside the Christian reformist tradition, including Bross and Wyss’s *Early Native Literacies* and Lisa Brooks’s recent book. Betty Booth Donahue’s *Bradford’s Indian Book* recovers a Wampanoag perspective embedded within Bradford’s history of Plymouth.

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