

# BIOPOLITICS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE ERA: IDEAS OF NATURE IN HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S *WALDEN*

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Wood* (1854) as an interpretative key to rethink contemporary relations between humans and nonhumans in ecological systems. While Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* came to be seen as his main political work *sensu stricto*, *Walden's* socio-environmental criticisms has commonly been regarded as outside the scope of his political commitment. As this essay demonstrates, Thoreau's social critique focused not solely on human life, but it widely encompassed the relevance of nonhuman beings, such as plants and animals or the pond's ecosystem as a whole. Yet, how can such a critical discussion be adopted in order to reflect on the relations between humans and nonhumans in the current Anthropocene era? Informed by the critical tools of the environmental humanities and ecocriticism, we seek to expand Foucault's concept of biopower to nonhuman beings through a critical reading of Thoreau's *Walden*, what we consider as a cutting-edge attempt to present a less anthropocentric idea of ecological systems.

**Keywords:** Thoreau; Walden; Biopolitics; Biopower; Anthropocene.

## INTRODUCTION

**I**n this article we analyze how the concepts of biopower and biopolitics can be applied to the theoretical infrastructure of the environmental humanities in order to construct a less anthropocentric idea of social relations.<sup>1</sup> Using Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* as litmus test, we suggest a notion of biopower/politics more consistent with the current Anthropocene era.<sup>2</sup> *Walden* was

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete debate about recent uses of categories as biopower and biopolitics, see Srinivasan 2017, and Nimmo 2019.

<sup>2</sup> According to Arias-Maldonado, Anthropocene "designates the massive anthropogenic disruption of natural systems at a planetary level—a disruption so pervasive that some geologists advocate the end of the Holocene and the official recognition of a new geological epoch" (2020, 2-3). Assuming this position, the Anthropocene Era refers

written during and after Thoreau's life experience at the eponymous pond between 1845 and 1847, in the city of Concord, Massachusetts. In his text, originally published in 1854, the author provides a deep consideration of human and nonhuman relations. Reflecting on the dichotomous relationship between human society and nature, Thoreau raises several critical points about American society at the time, touching upon themes such as slavery, the Mexican-American war and the national rhetoric of alleged "progress." Although the text was produced in the mid-19th century, the author already presents a less dichotomous worldview concerning the Cartesian division between humans and nature present in Western social thought. Thoreau compared the ways of life of native Americans and European/American settlers, focusing on the relationship between human groups and nature. In his observations, he denounced the anthropogenic impact on the local landscape, analyzing indigenous culture and traditions as a counterpoint. This article proposes a reading of Thoreau's social criticism as an interpretative key to rethinking contemporary relations between humans and nonhumans in ecological systems.

While Thoreau's book *Resistance to civil government*—today known as *Civil Disobedience*<sup>3</sup>—came to be seen as Thoreau's political work *sensu stricto*, Walden's socio-environmental criticisms commonly have been regarded as outside the scope of his political commitment. However, Thoreau's social critique focused not solely on human life, but it widely considered the relevance of nonhuman beings, such as plants,

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to the current relationship between humankind and the natural systems, the increase predatory anthropic to alarming levels, climate change, and large other global environmental problems. For a more complete debate see Ellis 2018, Lynch and Veland 2018; Nicholson and Jinnah 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Thoreau was arrested in July of 1846 for nonpayment of poll tax. He believed that tax payment supported the Mexican-American War and the slave trade. So, he had stopped paying the tax since 1842. In 1849, after his brief arrest, Thoreau wrote the essay "Resistance to Civil Government," approaching the complex issues between the sovereignty of the State and the sovereignty of the individual. Concord's philosopher defended the right to disobedience, especially in cases of injustice committed by the government—in this case, his strongest opposition was in relation to the slave regime and the Mexican-American war. He stated: "I heartily accept the motto,—That government is best which governs least; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—That government is best which governs not at all." His reflections are on the genealogy of many political terms still in use currently as "non-violent resistance," "civil disobedience," and "non-violent revolution," among others. The book "Resistance to Civil Government" was, since its publication, important reading for social revolutionaries such as Liev Tolstoi (1828-1910), Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), and Martin Luther King (1929-1968). For a more complete picture of the influence of "Civil Disobedience," see López-Martínez 2016; Miller 2017; Jahanbegloo 2018; Arendt 1972; Losurdo 2015.

animals, or the pond itself. In *Walden*, the relationship between human and nonhuman forms of life appears as a recurring theme. What were the specific patterns of power relations described by Thoreau? How can these be useful to reflect on the relations between humans and nonhumans in the current Anthropocene era?

In *Walden*, Thoreau described the distinctive relations between dissimilar humans groups and nonhuman beings with a *longue durée* approach. Although he produced the text in the middle of the nineteenth century, in his narrative the author references the history of New England until his current time, with particular emphasis on the experience of the first British who settled in the region—which would become the city of Concord. In addition, Thoreau repeatedly developed comparisons between his “civilized” contemporaries and the remaining indigenous population who still inhabited the constantly changing environment. In a sense, *Walden* not only narrates the successive and concomitant experiences of colonial populations but also observes how these settlers interacted with the those previously occupying the same space—and the impact of the industrial revolution with the violent expansion to the American West. Thoreau’s book tells a story of dramatic transformations in the relationship between human and nonhuman, comparing the way of life of Native American indigenous societies with that of European colonizers. As argued by Mary Louise Pratt (2007), the eyes of the conqueror—or the settlers in this case—can display a certain empathy during his task of conquering. In a similar fashion, Thoreau draws a significant picture of power-relations in the United States during the nineteenth century, as a white, Anglo-Saxon, and protestant man, belonging to the country’s intellectual elite. On the other hand, by temporarily abandoning the nascent industrial civilization in favor of primitivism, Thoreau indirectly fosters the emergence of several movements alternative to industrial and capitalist society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A large number of activists and social theorists were influenced by Thoreau’s work. However, his experiences and texts were read more often under the anarchist and environmentalist lens. For anarchists, especially adherents of non-violence, the notion of “civil disobedience” has been widely used. Environmental movements, on the other hand, consider Thoreau, sometimes along with Emerson and Muir, the founder of ecological thinking. Also, during the 1960s in the United States, the hippie movement was inspired by Thoreau’s life and work. In addition, several

Although Thoreau was descendent of European settlers, his text moves beyond the idea of Europeans/Americans as colonizers, attempting to understand nonhuman agency and human/nonhuman interactions in that specific habitat. Adopting a neomaterialist perspective, one could agree with Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2012b, 79; 2012a, 454) that the nonhuman narrative “focuses on the way matter’s (or nature’s) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual),” as well as on the “power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human into a field of co-emerging interactions.” Drawing from a neomaterialist perspective, this article proposes a expansion of Foucault’s notion of biopower (1998; 2003; 2007; 2008), adopting Thoreau’s *Walden* as a narrative landmark. We maintain that his autobiographical experience can be considered as an example of what philosopher Jane Bennett (2010, xiv) defines as the concept of “affect” as the central point of political and ethical debates, looking at the “the agency of the things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies.” In the current Anthropocene era, characterized by severe anthropogenic environmental catastrophes, a neomaterialist notion of biopower can inspire ecological narratives of care, hope, and resilience.

#### BIOPOWER AND BIOPOLITICS: A DEBATE

Foucault’s idea of biopolitics stems from an anthropocentric tradition that hardly considers the possibility of nonhuman power. As argued by American historian Robert Darnton (1986, 250), while early modern philosophers “dared” to modify the ancient order of knowledge in early modern era, this new order of knowledge was extremely influential for modernity, outlining new hierarchies and placing philosophy as the main trunk the “tree of knowledge.” Towards the end of the twentieth century, post-structuralist and postmodernist thinkers radically pruned the Enlightenment’s tree of

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anti-colonialist and anti-racist movements were also influenced by the writings of the Concord philosopher. (Altran 2017; Rocha 2018).

knowledge.<sup>5</sup> While this group of social thinkers challenged both the ideas of reason and science, they continued to be intrinsically anthropocentric, regarding nature as a projection of human subjectivity, as did Foucault (1970). In other words, philosophical notions strongly grounded on human-centered approaches are still predominant over less anthropocentric paradigms. Regarding the notions of biopower and biopolitics Foucault (1998, 139; 1999, 138; 2003, 241-247; 2007, 16) maintained that the emergence of biopower technology was a phenomenon related to “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.” In other words, biological aspects were absorbed by the political field and supported the rationality of government practices, considering only humans as the subjects of socio-political life.

If the concepts of biopower and biopolitics proposed by Foucault are based on anthropocentric premises—where power emanates from the institution for the individual—his concept has inspired several disciplines. As argued by Srinivasan (2017), several studies have followed Foucault’s concept of biopower, seeking theoretical-methodological conjunctions, in which concepts such as discipline, subjectivity, and mechanisms of power are adopted in order to explain socio-environmental problems. However, all this research is still fundamentally anthropocentric.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The first use of the concept of postmodernity was in François Lyotard’s “La Condition postmoderne” in 1979. According to the author, the postmodern condition was linked to “the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts.” (Lyotard 1984, XXIII) In this sense, the changes perceived by Lyotard denoted the weakening of the great discourses that legitimized progress.

<sup>6</sup> In his article, Nimmo is aware regarding the anthropocentric approach provided by the original biopolitics: “For all its acuity in other respects, Michel Foucault’s vision rarely if ever extended beyond human beings, the relations between human beings, and the things created by humans.” In order to find a solution for this gap, Nimmo offers an explanation about the emergence of the earliest mechanical devices for the milking of cows through combining Foucauldian biopolitics and actor-network theory (ANT): “These are not inevitable features of this sort of approach, but risks that can be avoided, particularly—I want to argue—by drawing upon theoretical sensibilities from actor-network theory (ANT) and bringing these into productive dialogue with Foucauldian biopolitics. Theoretical syntheses can often be deceptive in their appeal, tending to gloss over subtle yet vital differences between traditions. But synthesis is not what I propose here, but rather a reading of biopolitics through certain currents from ANT” (Nimmo, 2019, 121). Bringing these two approaches together for a dialogue, we consider as very conjectural in epistemological terms, since those theories are not complementary. For this reason, we argue that the “original” biopolitics has problems in explaining nonhuman—or even human—phenomena, as we will argue in the following pages.

In contrast, recently the sociologist Nimmo (2019, 119) has demonstrated how human-animal studies have recognized the role of nonhuman animals in historical constructions. Following Foucault's idea of subjectivity as the product of the ongoing political processes of subjectivation, Nimmo argues that in the same way other "subjects and subjectivity are perpetually shaped by techniques and devices of historical change in power, knowledge, and discipline." In this light, the relationship between nonhumans, humans, and technology can be interpreted as a potential modifier of subjectivity. As argued by Holloway and Bear, "bovine and human agency and subjectivity are entrained and reconfigured in relation to emerging milking technologies so that what it is to be a cow or human becomes different as technologies change" (2017, 234). Through technological development, the relations between humans and the material world are modified. This transformation is the result of a "mediation" realized by technology, modifying human agency and discourse, as well as the relations with nonhuman beings. Thus, if objective reality has an agency over subjective human constructions, it is possible to affirm that technological changes produce a modification in the material world and in the construction of subjectivity. Such a non-anthropocentric perspective would pose a solution to an anthropocentric philosophical approach, proposing a more-than-human critical paradigm.<sup>7</sup>

Naturally, applying a less anthropocentric perspective to Foucault's notion of biopower presents several theoretical-methodological challenges. However, recent studies from the environmental humanities can be related to concepts of biopower and biopolitics thanks to current reinterpretations. As an example, a short article published by Etienne Benson (2014, 88) demonstrates how the rise of national states, and the

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<sup>7</sup> This short quotation about the relationship between technology, humans, and cattle leads us to two premises that criticise post-anthropocentric assumptions, at least the post-structuralist line: first, in this narrative, if we observe well, is there no objectification of subjectivity? It seems to us that subjectivity and its changes are mediated objectively by technological changes and, also objectively, measured in their modifications. Second, the example discussed is intended to be a response to what he considers, in Marxism and Feminist approaches, to be an "essentialist" notion of the nonhuman. However, situating the relationship between technology-human-bovine in time and space does not guarantee a satisfactory answer. More than that, it insists on an essentialization; or rather, on the theoretical construction of an "ideal type," of a supposed interposition of this type of relationship in an industrial society—also essentialized. There are extremely powerful variables in time, in space, in other actors and, above all, in economic relations that can lead to countless results.

growing control of land within national borders, would have influenced the interpretation of ornithologists on the role of territoriality over the life of birds. In other words, the emergence and consolidation of national states between the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century would also leave its mark on the sciences, as ornithologists began to interpret fauna from exacerbated human notions. Birds like warblers, as well as humans, were therefore regarded as organized life forms, acting within a strong territorial perspective, because scientific studies on these animals happened in a much-territorialized landscape. The idea of an increasingly anthropogenic formation of landscapes in recent centuries, imposing novel territorial or epistemological boundaries, adds a more complex notion to the top-down approach to biopower and biopolitics. In his text, Benson demonstrates that humans, especially scientists, continually reinterpreted elements of fauna because of changing historical and ecological contexts.

According to this theoretical framework, one could maintain that biopower and biopolitics do not only address human governance over other humans and nonhumans, but that different forms of life also exercise power over humans and other nonhumans in constant contact, conflict, and interaction. In this light, can birds, trees, swamps, mountains or rivers just be “objects” of observation and research? Are historical and social factors solely shaping the interpretation of animal behavior, or do nonhumans exercise some form of power—or may we say biopower?—over humans? In the next lines, we regard the vibrant environmental circumstances captured by Thoreau's view as a transforming agent, actively influencing the philosopher's notions of society, environment, and subjectivity. Analyzing the symbiotic socio-environmental relations present in *Walden*, we maintain that this text should be regarded as Thoreau's real political manifesto in the age of the Anthropocene.

#### WALDEN: FROM INDIGENOUS TO COLONIAL

The landscape that Thoreau experienced in the nineteenth century was neither pristine nor wild: it was the result of human occupation long before the emergence of the American nation and European colonization. In the mid-nineteenth century, Thoreau

gave a description of Walden Pond that evaded the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains or the Appalachians.<sup>8</sup> In fact, he considered Walden an important place for the purity of the water and its depth, while his landscape, in general, was not characterized by any exotic beauty: “the scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description” (Thoreau 1995, 89). Thoreau’s portrait of Walden and of the woods that surrounded it reveals a certain ambiguity in his thinking. If in certain moments Thoreau romantically magnifies the plurality of pristine life in the vicinity of Walden, on the other hand, he does not attribute anything extraordinary to the place, neither in economic nor in ecological terms. The triviality of the landscape denotes that its value does not lie in human appreciation, but in its “intrinsic” existence.

Thoreau was aware of the transformations that had taken place after two centuries of European occupation. He estimated that, approximately ten centuries before, the native people of North America—especially in the region that would be called New England after colonization—had developed agriculture and settled in the regions where they would later meet the British and other European colonizers. Before that, they already had seasonal camps in different locations in the region (Blancke and Robinson 1985). Therefore, he did not consider the territory as a demographic vacuum, or as “free lands” in the period before colonization, as suggested by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) in relation to the American West. In this sense, he questioned the pristine status of the territory after millennia of cohabitation between humans and nonhumans. The relationship between human settlers and nonhumans suffered great

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<sup>8</sup> During the 19th century, the US government promoted a mass migration to the Western “free lands” beyond the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians. The process that became known as “Marching to the West” led to a great territorial expansion, through treaties, wars, and purchases of territories and subsequent re-population of these regions, eventually uprooting local indigenous populations. In 1830, the “Indian Removal Act” was approved, a legislative instrument for the removal of indigenous populations; and in 1862, the “Homestead Act,” a law that facilitated the migration of American citizens to the West. One of the factors that legitimized this migration was the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, a belief that Americans were chosen by God to civilize “American territory.” This migratory process can be considered as a remarkable event in American history; as maintained by historian Frederick Jackson Turner during the late nineteenth century, the history of the U.S.A is the history of the colonization of the West (Turner 2008; Avila 2005).



modifications with the American occupation. As William Cronon (1983, 03-05) reminds us, in his diary Thoreau observed these changes, especially after reading *New England's Prospect* by William Wood, a traveler who visited the region in the middle of the seventeenth century. In addition to the written records produced by travelers and colonists who arrived during the first migratory waves, Thoreau drew from oral traditions from Native Americans who still inhabited the region during the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most prolific message regarded the origin of Walden Pond. As reminded by Thoreau,

My townsmen have all heard the tradition—the oldest people tell me that they heard it in their youth—that anciently the Indians were holding a pow-wow upon a hill here, which rose as high into the heavens as the pond now sinks deep into the earth, and they used much profanity, as the story goes, though this vice is one of which the Indians were never guilty, and while they were thus engaged the hill shook and suddenly sank, and only one old squaw, named Walden, escaped, and from her the pond was named. It has been conjectured that when the hill shook these stones rolled down its side and became the present shore. (Thoreau 1995, 92)

This narrative reports an indigenous worldview of the origin of the place. Although his narrative is linked to colonizers' tales, Thoreau attributes the birth of Walden to an indigenous elder woman. As demonstrated by archeological sources, during the centuries before European colonization, Native Americans lived in demographically dense societies, moderately transforming the environment through the use of fire. This led them to develop enhanced ecological notions addressing the interdependence of human and nonhuman (Blancke and Robinson 1985). This “environmental awareness” was attributed to nonhumans' important roles in society: just like water, trees, and soil, all forms of plant and animal life acquired a metaphorical “human” agent status in society—biopolitics in our approach. It is also worth noting that large groups of Native Americans organized themselves socially and politically in a relatively more egalitarian way than European colonizers, demonstrating a less hierarchical worldview, also in relation to nonhuman actors (Blancke and Robinson 1985; Bruchac, 2004). Following indigenous traditions, Thoreau's narrative approaches Walden Pond as a native entity, not subjected to the Cartesian notions of hierarchy, value, and utility characterizing

Western thought. Looking at the simplicity of the native way of life, Thoreau proposes a reconsideration of the behavior of society in regard to nature, technology, and human society itself. This worldview also calls into question the power of nature—or nonhumans—and how these other beings can affect human life beyond the powerful grip of human biopolitics. In attempting to answer questions about nature and the changing world in which he was living, Thoreau used empirical observation while living in the woods. As he admits in his texts, he

. . . wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (Thoreau 1995, 48)

As noticed in these lines, for Thoreau the value of empirical observation lies in exploring the possibility of a more harmonic life between humans and nonhumans. After all, Thoreau's major "disobedience" was his denial to uncritically embrace the values of industrial civilization. In this sense, *Walden* constitutes a reaffirmation of his social, political, and ecological disobedience. As he affirms in the text, he was mainly interested in obeying other laws:

A saner man would have found himself often enough "in formal opposition" to what are deemed "the most sacred laws of society," through obedience to yet more sacred laws, and so have tested his resolution without going out of his way. It is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he finds himself through obedience to the laws of his being, which will never be one of opposition to a just government, if he should chance to meet with such. (Thoreau 1995, 158)

Although one cannot know for sure what Thoreau meant by "more sacred laws," considering his deep meditations on the relationship between society, nature, and technology, he was clearly referring to the different epistemologies of nature among indigenous people, especially in relation to nineteenth-century American settlers. As maintained by Thoreau, the Americans could learn something from "the customs of some savage nation" while remembering the "feast of first fruits" (1995, 37), a custom of

the Mucclasse Indians who when receiving new clothes, pots and household utensils burn out all their despicable things. Thoreau's admiration for Mucclasse tradition can be comprehended in another sentence: "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone" (Thoreau 1995, 44). In opposition to the rising industrial revolution in the United States during the nineteenth century, Thoreau sought in Native experiences an alternative to reflect on the society that was being constructed in America. While the philosopher watched the acceleration of environmental transformations and the hegemonization of nature as a "resource," he considered alternative paths of "progress" that would allow repositioning humans into nature and understanding the intrinsic value of nonhumans. This understanding became progressively more incompatible with a society that increasingly accelerated the transformation of the environment in which it lived, based on social hierarchy, private property, and exploitation, both human and nonhuman.

This historical fact allows one to observe the biopower of the environment present in Walden. Unlike Native people, European colonizers relied on a different worldview—quoting Bruchac, "most European traditions consider nature to be inanimate" (2004). Not only did they bring with them other systems of values and beliefs, but also new plants and animals that intensified the complexity of the local environments. The impact of migrations with regard to power-relations between humans and nonhumans was notable in distinct aspects. It caused a great transformation, what Carolyn Merchant has divided in two main transformations: a "colonial ecological revolution" from 1600 and 1800, and a "capitalist ecological revolution" (2010) from the American Revolution to the middle of the nineteenth century. Both these revolutions revealed by Merchant were deeply marked by human and nonhuman migrants. The colonial revolution brought a "European ecological complex of animals, plants, pathogens, and people," and it collapsed the native societies, impacting power relations between humans and nonhumans. Thoreau wrote concurrent with the emergence of the "capitalist ecological revolution," although he knew that the relationship between humans and nonhumans had been significantly altered since the European migration. Thoreau recognized the changes brought by

colonization, and while he described the nature of Walden, he also noticed the sound of trains, and those of the axes cutting trees. Although Thoreau has been recognized as one of the greatest American philosophers, his unorthodox view of society was successful among his peers. However, his ideas of human-nature relations can still be relevant in order to understand the “ecological revolution” in our times, as well as the direction of contemporaneous societies with regard to the relation between humans and nonhumans.

#### WALDEN: A (BIO)POLITICAL MANIFESTO “BY NATURE”

Reading through the pages of *Walden*, one would notice no conventional separation between nature and culture, or human and nonhuman, but an interconnected world, where every form of life is equally valuable. As Thoreau maintained, “I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself” (1995, 67). By empirically observing the interaction between nonhumans and humans, Thoreau provided an integrated idea of the world, in which human and nonhuman forms lived in an interactive way. This led him to conclude that “nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength” (Thoreau 1995, 9). Here, Thoreau’s idea of “nature” seems to encounter what Isabelle Stengers (2015, 40) and Bruno Latour (2017) call “Gaia”—a living being possessing the power of agency and able to resist the attacks of human forces. Assuming this position, *Walden’s* narrative reflects on the biopower of “nature.” In his diary, Thoreau maintained that “nature has left nothing to the mercy of man,”<sup>9</sup> interpreting it as a being endowed with genius, an active force that exercises power in relation to the “material world.”<sup>10</sup> By maintaining that “there is nothing inorganic,” Thoreau maintains that nature is constituted by a multiplicity of human and nonhuman agents engaged in

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<sup>9</sup> This citation is omitted in some of the consulted publications. However, the sentence appears in the manuscript transcripts made available online by the project “The Writing of Henry D. Thoreau” in the Thoreau Library. The originals can be consulted in “manuscript 33” of Thoreau’s diaries, the 22nd and March of 1861. Available for consultation at: [http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings\\_journals33.html](http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals33.html).

<sup>10</sup> “Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity” (Thoreau 2009, 384).

constant relation and motion, whether cooperating or disputing (Thoreau 1995, 67). As maintained by the author,

when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man. (Thoreau 2001, 21)

Through these observations, Thoreau corroborates the same ideas that he reported in his diary years before his stay at Walden: “every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is the making room for another” (Thoreau 1906a, 03). Thoreau noticed that when untouched by humans, plant life maintained its own pace, expanding and occupying the spaces that it required to survive. By living “in nature without fences,” he could observe from his simple residence “a young forest growing up under your meadows, and wild sumachs and blackberry vines breaking through into your cellar; sturdy pitch pines rubbing and creaking against the shingles for want of room, their roots reaching quiet under the house” (Thoreau 1995, 66). Sharing spaces with nonhuman beings does not seem to have been a problem for Thoreau. On the contrary, his stay at the pond allowed him to consider that it could be “some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them” (Thoreau 1995, 10). Certainly, one of Thoreau’s main goals in moving to Walden’s woods was to learn from nonhuman forms of life, “communicating with the villas and hills and forests on either hand, by the glances we feel them, or the echoes we awakened” (Thoreau 1906a, 442). The “communication” desired by Thoreau can be interpreted as an attempt to understand his changing world. However, this concern was not easily found among his contemporaries. “Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her... She flourishes most alone, far from the towns where they reside. Talk of heaven! Ye disgrace earth” (Thoreau 1995, 101). Perhaps part of the discomfort that Thoreau felt about the direction of “progress” in America was due to his perception that humanity was neglecting its connection with other forms of life. Just as Leo Marx evoked with the

image of Sleepy Hollow—the machine in the garden—trains and railroads also symbolized the widening gap between humans and nonhumans.

However, while highlighting the contradictions of industrial society, Thoreau sought in multiple ways to learn what nonhumans could teach him, nurturing an admiration for natural phenomena, while also attempting to understand them in relation to human agency. In one passage of his text, Thoreau declared that in the late afternoon he sometimes confused the “natural music” of the cows with the singing of young people from the village. In explaining this statement, Thoreau admitted: “I do not mean to be satirical, but to express my appreciation of those youths’ singing, when I state that I perceived clearly that it was akin to the music of the cow, and they were at length one articulation of Nature” (1995, 64; italics added). Such a melodic articulation was what the Concord naturalist longed for in observing the relations between humans and the natural world. As he admitted,

it is important to consider Nature from the point of view of science remembering nomenclature and system of men, and so, if possible, go a step further in that direction . . . so it is equally important often to ignore or forget all that men presume they know and take an original and unprejudiced view of Nature. (Thoreau 1906b, 168-169)

In fact, in Thoreau’s view, an adequate social project should preserve a certain symbiosis between human and nonhuman beings. A human society willing to explore a similar scenario would need to learn from its environment and the nonhuman beings that cohabit that territory, establishing a symmetrical relationship with these subjects. In this sense, reading *Walden* as a manifesto addressing the relationship between humans and nonhumans could potentially allow one to reconsider the notion of biopolitics as a relevant critical tool for the environmental humanities, looking at the active power of nonhuman subjects, an increasingly essential epistemological and political tool in the age of the Anthropocene. As argued by Thoreau, humans should consider themselves “as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (1862).

This article has attempted to provide an “ecologically oriented” notion of biopower, beyond a dichotomous idea of humans and nonhumans. Such an idea of

biopower implies “a dialogic interaction of texts and contexts” and a dialogic construction of human/nature interactions conjoining literary and scientific discourses (Oppermann 2006, 118). It is precisely this dialogical interaction between *Walden* as a text and as a pond that becomes visible in Thoreau’s idea of nature: an ecological agent that is not only at the mercy of human power, but a dynamic actor. In fact, looking at nonhuman subjects carries an ideological rupture, as “this means widening the scope of the objects of moral responsibility from a singular ‘center’ (humankind) to a multiplicity of ‘peripheral,’ ethically as well as ontologically marginalized subjects [nonhuman beings]” (Iovino 2010, 35). It is the widening of this scope that fundamentally modifies ecological ethics whether in science or politics. As Thoreau noticed by observing the plurality of existence in *Walden*, “nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions” (Thoreau 1995, 09). Thoreau’s political, social, and ecological criticism finds its foundation precisely in the opposition between the forms of life that he observed in his text and the modern lifestyle that was gaining momentum in the city of Concord. Life in the midst of nascent industrial society distanced humans from the notion of “inhabitants,” maintaining a symmetrical relationship with other nonhuman forms of life, as a “part of nature,” and leading them to the notion of “members of society.” Realizing this problematic issue, Thoreau concluded that the “members of society” were disconnected from nature and could not learn from it. In contrast to human society, in nature a “different kind of right prevails” (Thoreau 1906c, 445). Thus, a “natural [hu]man” should build his ‘institutions’ and his ‘right’ by aligning them according to natural life but always compromising with the plurality of humans and nonhuman beings.

In this sense, Thoreau’s experience at *Walden*, with its texts and lessons from natural life, can provide us with interpretative tools in order to reflect on our current relationship with nonhuman forms of life, enhancing our understanding of the importance of being an “inhabitant” of the earth’s ecological system, just as much as we consider relevant being members of civil society. As argued by Serenella Iovino (2010), literature, like any art form, can provide us with subsidies for the creation of values based on local reflections that can help reflection on universally shared principles.

Following this argument, Thoreau's *Walden* can provide useful critical insights for the formulation of less anthropocentric values, and for the moralization of nonhuman beings which have often been neglected in many analyses. As current environmental issues are forcing human societies to construct interpretative concepts useful for enhancing our environmental awareness, Thoreau's non-anthropocentric perspective expressed in *Walden* can contribute to shaping notions of biopower that take into account the ecological significance of nonhuman agents for the construction of extended social values.

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