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Resource Management: Reassessing the American Environmental Tradition's Cornerstone Figures: Editors' Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the critical turn in environmental thought has highlighted important insights that are still being grappled with today. William Cronon's work is perhaps the best-known example. In his essay 'The Trouble with Wilderness', Cronon critically demonstrated the many ways in which 'wilderness' is not pure or unadulterated or really even that 'wild' in the first place (1995). Instead, it is a term whose conceptual valence only makes sense in a larger ideological framework, one articulated primarily by white, male elites seeking alternatives to industrialism and its perceived threats to spiritual stability, social cohesion, and a narrowly-defined masculinity. Apart from this ideological framework, Cronon demonstrated, wilderness fails to fully cohere. Since Cronon's essay first appeared in 1995, the concept of wilderness has been debated and teased apart without end. Whose wilderness are we even talking about at this point? And is it worth returning to the work of the concept's major architects, whose understanding of wilderness is something not just Cronon, but now also Timothy Morton (2007), Dorceta Taylor (2016), Jedediah Purdy (2015), and so many others have cautioned us about?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir are three such architects. Take Muir as an example. Politically speaking, Muir was instrumental in building broad political coalitions to win so-called 'wilderness' areas in the United States federal protection. If the National Parks are America's 'greatest idea', as Wallace Stegner famously said, then Muir should be counted among America's greatest 'ideators'. Muir spoke a powerful word for wilderness, regarding its protection as tantamount to protecting places of worship. As a result, Muir is hailed by many as a modern saint: the Episcopal Church includes him in its list of 'holy men and holy women', Muir's writings get published in series with names like *Modern Spiritual Masters* (2013), and his likeness even adorns the walls of some churches like Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, where

Muir is depicted dancing alongside actual saints like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila, and Pope John Paul XXIII. He is also on the back of the California state quarter, a curious blending of 'God and mammon', and maybe the clearest evidence, in U.S. cultural terms, of his canonical status.

But should we read him anymore? As editors of this, the second volume of the special issue we have entitled 'Ambiguous Legacies, Contested Futures', we think an adequate answer to this question depends on how we understand the normative status of cultural traditions. Muir plays a crucial role in what we will call the American environmental tradition (AET). The same could be said of Emerson and Thoreau, the other two major figures examined in the essays that comprise this volume.

It is naïve to believe that we can somehow think apart from the effects and influences of the traditions that have preceded us. Just what is a 'tradition'? Jeffrey Stout provides the readiest definition: traditions, he says, are shared discursive practices that inculcate 'certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain actions, events, or persons with admiration, pity, and horror' (2004: 3). Traditions not only regulate our affect and the character of our intellectual and behavioral responses to experience, but they also make our feelings and responses intelligible to others. Tradition is woven into our very language; it informs our initial prejudgments and presuppositions about the nature of reality and the quality of our experience. None of us learn to think and feel and act secure from tradition's influence. Conversely, it is also naïve to believe in a perfect heteronomy of tradition, that we somehow might stand inside a tradition and be faithful to its dictates without also bringing our and our communities' *sui generis* historical concerns to bear on a given tradition's continuation and maintenance.

We are of a mind that interpreters of tradition today—that is, all of us—*must* operate in a manner more faithful to the conditions of our finitude and historicity. We can no more stand outside the traditions that have shaped our thinking than we can stand inside them as if they were vacuum-sealed. The critic, self-consciously presuming to stand apart from the traditions that they criticize, risks privatizing experience, thereby reducing their critical enterprise to a capricious will to power. The risk, specifically, is that the critic's personal biases will fill in the conceptual gaps that, in a tradition, their conversations with other interlocutors would fill by making traditional reasoning explicit. Yet surely the answer is also not to submit to some illusory idea of returning to primitive forms of tradition, wherein we dismiss the demands

of our historicity by sheltering inside tradition like we would in a port during a storm.

The AET still does so much today to inform Americans' thinking on their relationship to nature, but still has so much about it that is offensive to our contemporary moral sensibilities. To properly engage with this tradition, then, we must continue to enter into a disciplined and responsive conversation with it, including with its core texts, symbols, events, and figures.

This means, first and foremost, taking a tradition's good with its bad. When it comes to something like the AET, there is *lots* of bad, some with roots in the thought and manner of even its most crucial exemplars—figures like John Muir. Consider Muir's early-career racism, an awareness of which only recently became widespread. In his 1867 journal, Muir denigrated Indigenous peoples as 'dirty' (1997: 186) and Black Americans as 'Sambos' (1916: 51). He also maintained politically useful friendships with culturally prominent champions of eugenics. Muir's contemporary admirers are quick to say that his thinking on racial difference evolved, an idea we do not wish to dispute. That Muir's racism moderated and attenuated as he aged does not change, however, that we are left with stark and troubling concepts of racial difference in those writings of Muir's that have become central to the AET, a tradition Muir did so much to popularize. As such a central figure in that tradition, Muir's words and actions have contributed to the racist failures of American environmentalism writ large, namely in the form of the movement's historical inability to confront and root out structural racism in its ranks. This is as much a legacy of the AET as its influential concept of nature's sacred, nonutilitarian value.

So, what do we do with a figure like Muir? First, we believe we must not chart a path of liberation from the negative and unpalatable realities of the AET simply by declaring our autonomy from it. In claiming the crucial importance of tradition that we do, we also are claiming that rationality is always grounded in the complex discursive practices of communities where normativity, responsibility, and authority all find expression in social habits of reasoning. Those practices are inflected with the ways and means of thought that our traditions have conditioned in us over generations. There is, in this sense, no place 'outside' tradition where we can stand. Our traditions shape the very style and substance of the critiques we deliver. Practically speaking, what this means is: there is no stepping around Muir, just as there is no side-stepping other cornerstone figures in the AET such as Emerson and Thoreau. As a foundational figure in the AET, Muir's writing and thinking, his flaws and biases, his struggles and successes, continue to shape our thought today by virtue of their place in a longstanding and

influential tradition. Hastily casting Muir aside, we also cast off something that is foundationally responsible for who Americans are and how we think and feel about our relationship to the nonhuman world.

As editors, we want to suggest that, in reading figures like Muir, Emerson, or Thoreau today, we engage in a practice that also has a long history of conceptual currency in the AET: resource management. This practice animates the interests of the three essays included here. Whereas resource management customarily connotes the conservationist's process of planning, allocating, and managing nature's resources for its most effective use (which may include any number of anthropocentric or utilitarian biases), we wish to conceive of the concept of resource management as the practice of effectively mediating and translating the core features of an intellectual tradition's relevance for us today.[1] Both tradition and interpreter are never static, separate entities. They instead are constantly in process insofar as they demand interaction in the present horizon. Because our traditions locate us in history, we must remain in conversation with those traditions that have shaped us. They bring into our consciousness the reality of historical experience as it is embodied in our language and the forms of life that language discloses.

Hence to throw off Muir or Emerson or Thoreau and their influence in light of their unpalatable biases is not only an impossibility, but also a negation of the tradition responsible for structuring some of Americans' most foundational concepts of human-nature relationality. Our goal rather should be to provide an interpretation of the resources endemic to a tradition like the AET through retrievals that are ever suspicious of a traditional text, symbol, event, or figure's consequence for our own historical moment. This is precisely the aim of this volume's constitutive three essays.

First, Emily Dumler-Winckler, in her essay 'Ralph Waldo Emerson's Anthropology: From Foil to Fertile Soil for Eco-Justice', confronts Emerson's biases and blind spots when it comes to feminism and social justice to observe how Emerson tends to be used as a foil by justice-oriented environmental ethicists. Her essay 'talks back' to these tendencies, demonstrating how Emerson's theory of self-cultivation transcends the common distinctions between anthropocentrism and

1. We borrow the term 'resource management' from conservationism cautiously, aware of the moral problem of reducing nonhuman nature to a resource—that is, a commodity—for human use, as well as the sometimes problematic practice of reducing concepts to resources—*intellectual* commodities—for doing environmental ethics. Gerald James Larson (1989) notes the colonialist dimension of this practice in relation to Western environmental ethicists' habit of appropriating Asian traditions for their critical projects.

eco-centrism that define so much environmental discourse today. In the second essay, 'Reading Thoreau in the 21st Century: Whither and Why', Rebecca Kneale Gould undertakes to read Thoreau in a way that both honors his radical politics and cultural positionality while also attending to his racial blind spots (which, of course, are all the clearer to us today). Although Thoreau's life and writing militated against race-based oppression, Gould shows, he has left an ambivalent legacy on matters concerning racial justice, an idea that comes into focus when Gould puts Thoreau into conversation with more contemporary Black essayists and poets and their contestations of deracialized concepts of nature. Finally, in the third essay, 'Rejecting Racism, Restoring Intuition: John Muir, Sacred Value, and Romanticism', Russell C. Powell examines Muir's reliance on the epistemological assumptions of the Romantic intuition to clarify the best and worst of John Muir's moral legacy: his influential concept of the sacred in nature and his participation in the maintenance of nineteenth-century white supremacy. Powell demonstrates that Muir's inclination to elevate his intuitive insights over the epistemological imperatives of public justifiability are the root cause of the racist biases in his writing.

Each of these essays signify the hope of new applications of the AET's self-understanding on the current horizon. Engaging in such an interpretive enterprise, acknowledging not just the political, moral, and religious triumphs of such central historical figures but also their failures, holds the promise of rendering a tradition like the AET intelligible for our needs in light of the things we presently think, feel, and experience. This work also holds the promise of overcoming the AET's historical failures so as to promote and instill in it a far more robust concept of justice to guide environmental thinking both today and in the future.

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