

### “The *Play*-element of Environmental Sustainability in Michael Johnathan's *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*”

By William Christopher Brown, University of Minnesota, Crookston

#### Part I: Background on *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*

Folksinger Michael Johnathan is perhaps best known for his public radio show *The WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour*, which is broadcast on various individual radio stations and through American Forces Radio and PBS. Yet his concerns about environmental sustainability are also evident in his play *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* (2009). Johnathan is so committed to sustainability that he has made his play open to the public as an educational tool and to increase awareness about Henry David Thoreau and environmentalism:

This two act, one set, four character play is designed for use by high schools, colleges, community theaters and home schools. The play script and all the production materials are provided free. *Walden* can be performed at any time, but we encourage you to consider it as an Earth Day ... event. ("Walden: Project Description," 2012, para. 2)

In the play, Johnathan imagines "the final two days [that] ... Thoreau spent in his cabin before leaving Walden Pond" (p. 1). He emphasizes that the play is a work of fiction, though "much of the dialogue between Thoreau and [his mentor Ralph Waldo] Emerson are actual quotes or composite quotes culled from the body of their literary work" (Johnathan, 2009, p. 1).

At heart, the play is polemical, with Thoreau arguing with Emerson about why he chose to live a simple life in the woods.<sup>i</sup> Johnathan, like Thoreau, believes that "[t]he life of simplicity and harmony with nature could be an example of how to move toward a more civilized society" (Schneider, 2008, p. 61). Ultimately, with this play, the goal is not to learn a series of objective facts about environmentalism but rather to create a mindset of sustainability towards the environment.<sup>ii</sup>

#### Part II: Johnathan's Play at the University of Minnesota, Crookston

I first became aware of Johnathan's play within the context of educational outreach efforts for Earth Day 2014 by Dr. W. Daniel Svedarsky of the Center for Sustainability at the University of Minnesota, Crookston (UMC). Earth Day 2014 centered on the theme of "Having Fun Caring for the Earth"; it targeted middle and high school students in the northwest region of Minnesota.<sup>iii</sup> The centerpiece of Earth Day 2014 was a performance of Johnathan's *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*. Additionally, we had poster contests on sustainability and a Sustainability Fair.

Our Earth Day celebration was surprising to me because of its interdisciplinary ability to bring together writing and people's interests in the environment. It was interdisciplinary in that it brought together scholars, staff, and students who shared a concern for environmental sustainability.<sup>iv</sup> The planning committee consisted of faculty (Svedarsky and me), staff (tutor Linnea Barton, postman Kenneth Mendez, College in the High School coordinator Dana Trickey, and counselor Laurie Wilson), and students (Tashi Gurung, Megan N. Luxford, and Jiwon Park).

From the beginning of my inclusion in the project, I was fascinated that interdisciplinarity in this context broadened beyond academic disciplines to lay and professional concerns. The ideal of interdisciplinarity, or of working across academic boundaries, influenced interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration. By "interdepartmental" I do not mean that different departments collaborated officially; rather, I mean that people from different departments brought to the production particular strengths based on their own interests and experiences.

The UMC campus postman Kenneth Mendez brought the play to Svedarsky's attention as a possible focus for Earth Day. Mendez (personal communication, June 22, 2015) was aware of Johnathan from his radio show *The WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour* and saw a performance of the play on PBS. Mendez's passion for the arts and environmental sustainability prompted the production.

The Earth Day Celebrations would not have been possible without the efforts of staff who possessed the gift for navigating organizational bureaucracy. In particular, counselor Laurie Wilson brought thirty years of experience working at UMC to the planning meetings. Wilson knew the institution thoroughly and consistently provided helpful advice to coordinator Tashi Gurung on effectively communicating with different departments within the university, as well as with different organizations in the community.

We had an audience for the performance because of Dana Trickey's connections as College in the High School Coordinator. It was her diligent and persistent communication with middle school and high school English teachers that generated the audience for the play.

In a session held before the performance of the play, Svedarsky and I each gave presentations to these young people; he focused on sustainability as a way of life, while I provided literary historical context for Thoreau. The goal was to promote sustainability, which the United Nations' Brundtland Report (1987) defines as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (para. 1).

Svedarsky paid special attention to the three pillars of sustainability: social, economic, and environmental (United States, n.d., para. 1).<sup>v</sup> He emphasized that thinking in terms of sustainability requires us "to consider how our actions affect the natural environment and other people, both now and in the future" ("Sustainability," 2013, para. 5). Sustainability helps us to "appreciate the indigenous resources in the region" on their own terms and not merely as "financial capital" ("Sustainability," 2013, para. 8). My presentation on Thoreau for Earth Day 2014 primarily provided biographical, historical, and literary context for *Walden*, Thoreau, Emerson, and Transcendentalism.<sup>vi</sup>

In my research on *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*, I have found no scholarly references to Johnathan's play. One of my goals in writing this essay is to provide a theoretical context to explain how Johnathan's play works as an educational tool. In particular, I am interested in how Johnathan's vision of the play as educational outreach for environmental awareness fits Johan Huizinga's theory of *play* as a precursor to culture. In what follows, I will show the importance of the *play*-element in *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* to environmental sustainability. (Throughout the article, I will highlight *play* in italics when I use the term to describe Johan Huizinga's theory of *play*. I do this to help the audience easily distinguish between play as text/performance and *play* as a cultural theory.)

### Part III: A Transcendental Argument about Sustainability

Johnathan's explicit purposes were twofold in creating this play: first, he wanted to introduce young people to his hero Henry David Thoreau; and second, he wanted to show the intellectual roots of the Green Movement ("Walden: Project Description," 2012, paras. 1-4). *Walden*, for Johnathan (2009), is nothing less than "a map for our return to nature" (p. 13). Consequently, he portrays Thoreau as a harbinger of the possible futures, either positive or negative, that await nature based on humanity's relationship with/to it. Humanity can relate positively to nature *interdependently* as a part of nature (Suzuki, 2015, p. 68); alternatively, humanity can continue to use nature *instrumentally* as little more than a commodity for profit (Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2015, p. 73).

Thoreau's sympathy to nature reflects a Transcendental ideal of living beyond the limits of materialism: "People ... have knowledge about themselves and the world around them that 'transcends' or goes beyond what they can see, hear, taste, touch or feel" ("26f," 2014, para. 1). As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau did not simply see nature "through the logic" of material well-being; instead, he used "intuition and imagination" to assert his "authority on what is right" ("26f," 2014, para. 2).<sup>vii</sup>

In the spirit of Transcendentalism, one of the play's greatest import is modeling the valuable practice of argumentation. *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* provides little in the way of quotable scientific facts, but it does illustrate a Transcendental ideal of argumentation in the form of *play* that tests and pushes its interlocutors. As Robert Sullivan (2009) notes in *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, the Transcendentalists argued with one another: "Emerson, especially, liked them to challenge one another, to criticize and to bolster. To be a Transcendentalist was to egg the others on to a more considered position, to transcend," as it were, one's original point and move to a greater understanding (p. 43). The focus on argumentation in the play, in particular, is a valuable lesson for impressionable minds.

Johnathan (2009) imagines Thoreau as prescient about the depletion of natural resources, and he visualizes this

## ESSAYS— CONTINUED

through a brief argument with Emerson about progress:

**HDT:** ... why do you put me to the test? There is no way you can convince me that the spread of cities does not matter.

**RWE:** Why object to progress as though it is a bad thing?

**HDT:** Progress without balance *IS* a bad thing [original emphasis].

**RWE:** But progress by its very nature causes imbalance. To deny imbalance denies progress.

**HDT:** And only man struggles with this imbalance. It is against nature. When a beaver builds a dam, it does not harm the stream. When a bird builds a nest, it causes no injury to the forest.

**RWE:** Because birds and beavers "exist," within the boundries [*sic*] created for them ... they do not cause progress ... only man has the intellect by nature to cause progress.

**HDT:** How can you possibly deny man's destructive role in nature ... his lack of love for this earth? To leave it unchecked will eventually lead to the destruction of man.

**RWE:** And how can you deny that destruction is an essential part of creation?

**HDT** (*slams table top*): Nonsense! ...

**RWE** (*calming*): Look at your own life, Henry.

**HDT:** Me? I destroy nothing. And do not even begin to imply the natural gleaning of the earth as destruction.

**RWE:** (Emerson picks up a notebook.) Did you, or did you not, come to these woods and this pond to study the value of nature and your place in it.

**HDT:** I did.

**RWE:** And did you not destroy a small plot of these very woods to build a cabin so you could have a place to reside while in nature?

**HDT:** It is not the same.

**RWE:** It is exactly the same.

**HDT:** My cabin is not comparable to the spread of a city.

**RWE:** It is merely the first building. There is no difference.

**HDT:** Read my work. I document the difference clearly.

**RWE:** Your father cuts down the trees to make the pencils that you use to write about how much you love the trees.

**HDT:** Again, my redundant friend, it's part of the natural gleaning of the earth.

**RWE:** That is called *progress* [original emphasis]. A few short years ago we wrote with charcoal and a quill pen ... and not a single oak would fall. Now we cut down trees to make pencils and employ your family ... *Progress* [original emphasis].

**HDT:** So I shall use the tools of progress to expose the sin of progress. ... (pp. 35-38)

Emerson is not wrong to suggest that Thoreau's destruction of a plot of the forest has the potential to escalate into the destruction of the forest as a whole.<sup>viii</sup> Though he exasperates Thoreau, Emerson's teasing line of questioning brings development and industrialization into the conversation when he alludes to the pencils produced by Thoreau and Company, the pencil company owned by Thoreau's family. Emerson plays the devil's advocate as a way to test Thoreau's convictions. In particular, Emerson tests Thoreau's commitment to sustainable living, or the extent to which humanity can be a part of the environment through "the natural gleanings of the earth" rather than a destroyer of nature for material gain.<sup>ix</sup>

## Part IV: Cultures of Play

*Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*, like the text that inspired it, aspires to encourage a *culture* that takes the long view of *nature's* value to humans. I like the paradox here of using *culture* to nurture a positive attitude to *nature*, since the two are often considered to be diametrically opposed. Culture, in this context, conveys a dual sense of the arts and the customs or shared attitudes of a group of people. This notion of culture as both art and custom broadens the understanding of play as an art form to *play* as a theoretical construct, as articulated by Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1949), which translates to "Man the Player."

For readers unfamiliar with Huizinga and his theory of *play*, I will provide a brief explanation. Huizinga is most famous for his book *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), but *Homo Ludens* is also widely regarded. The title *Homo Ludens* is a play on the Latin term *homo faber*, meaning "man the worker." The thesis of *Homo Ludens* is that *play* precedes culture and is part of what fundamentally constitutes it (Huizinga, 1949, pp. 46-47). Specifically, Huizinga (1949) defines *play* in terms of its difference from official activities:

[*play* is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life [that is] "not serious," but at the same time [an activity that] absorb[s] the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (p. 13)

To put it another way, in *play*, rules arise through its continuous practice, and the pleasure derived from this repetition evolves and influences culture.

## Part V: *Playing* with Argumentation

Within the context of producing Johnathan's *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*, Transcendentalism and Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* dovetail well together. Transcendentalism explains the intellectual contest in the play, but Huizinga's theory of *play* suggests the long term educational resonance that the play *qua* *play* can produce in the young people producing it.

Although Johnathan's inspiration was the Emerson-led Transcendentalists, the focus on argumentation above also resonates with Huizinga's articulation of the *play*-element of culture. One of Huizinga's (1949) surprising insights suggests that law as we currently understand it had its origins in *play*:

That an affinity may exist between law and *play* becomes obvious to us as soon as we realize how much the actual practice of the law, in other words a lawsuit, properly resembles a contest whatever the ideal foundations of the law may be. (p. 76; my emphasis)

For instance, "in [ancient] Greece, litigation was considered as a [struggle], [that is,] a contest bound by fixed rules and sacred in form, where the two contending parties invoked the decision of an arbiter" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 76). For Huizinga (1949), "contest means play" (p. 76), which is what Emerson and Thoreau perform in the scene above. Emerson's rapid fire questioning puts Thoreau on the defensive and mimics a legal contest in court.

*Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* fits Huizinga's (1949) stipulations for whether an act can be considered *play* or not: "The need for [*play*] is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need. ... It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during 'free time'" (p. 8). Johnathan has made the play

available free to the public, so it is not mired in the problems of paying royalties. As an imaginative work, the performance is *play* in the sense that "[i]t is ... a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 8). Though pleasurable, it can also be serious (Huizinga, 1949, p. 8). The production we did at the University of Minnesota, Crookston was entirely "voluntary" for the faculty, staff, and students who participated in it.

Huizinga's (1949) explanation of *play* suggests that it is not simply transitory; instead, *play* remains in the memory and has the ability to be "transmitted" in the form of "tradition" (pp. 9-10). As Huizinga (1949) observes, "With the end of the *play* its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community" (p. 14; my emphasis). *Play's* influence on culture derives from the way that "[i]t promotes the formation of social groupings" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 13). These social groupings include the budding young environmentalists that Johnathan and the University of Minnesota Crookston's Center for Sustainability are trying to reach through activities like *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau*.

A play like Johnathan's has the potential to have a salutary effect on the young people performing and watching it. Johnathan's play models argumentation because of the controversial nature of environmental sustainability. Arguments for sustainability invariably involve asking people to change, which is generally hotly resisted. Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis L. Meadows (2004) argue that being able to communicate effectively about sustainability with "the clearest words we can find" (p. 75) is key to successfully persuading people to lead more sustainable lives. In other words, the soft skills of communication and persuasion are vital to change peoples' minds.

Johnathan's play is valuable because it models two people, Emerson and Thoreau, with opposing points of view who argue passionately about ideas they care about, yet they retain respect for one another. This emphasis on respectful disagreement is a lesson that our current partisan politicians and media pundits could learn from.

### Part VI: The Urgency of Time

Johnathan uses Emerson's apparent praise of progress to call attention to the urgency of time. Arguments for sustainability and environmentalism regularly invoke time as a trope to create a sense of urgency that action needs to be taken "now" to stop the destruction of the environment as we know it. The playwright emphasizes that time is running out to create a sustainable set of practices that will protect the earth.

In setting his play at the end of Thoreau's sojourn in Walden Woods, Johnathan emphasizes that the audience, like the actors, are at a pivotal moment of retrospection and prognostication. Thoreau looks back on his time in the woods and his historical context; he also looks presciently to the future experienced by the playwright.

Johnathan uses the historical figure of Thoreau to project his concern about the possible future that the audience will experience: we will either deplete our resources through over-consumption or learn how to care for the environment and treat it as a resource that needs attentive management to sustain it. The prescient use of time in the play strengthens the sense of urgency that the audience should feel about making sure that the earth remains a sustainable environment with the ability to continuously replenish as it is consumed. The play *qua play* may help to instill in young people a sense of urgency in reproducing a culture of sustainable living.

### Conclusion: Sustainability and Interdisciplinarity

Producing the play within the interdisciplinary context of sustainability adds further value for the young people involved in its performance. Rather than teach facts or reproduce experiments, which are, of course, valuable, the play illustrates a mind-set of environmental awareness necessary to sustainability. Organizing and performing the play adds interdisciplinary value that perhaps Johnathan did not anticipate. It has the potential to bring together people with a variety of interests and experiences.

Johnathan's play lent itself well to an interdisciplinary effort. It illustrated one of Svedarsky's beliefs that sustainability is the most interdisciplinary of studies because the health of the environment affects everyone (personal communications,

June 19, 2015). Interdisciplinarity is associated with academic disciplines, but, broadly defined, it "means 'combining subjects together in new ways'" ("More," 2015, para. 1).

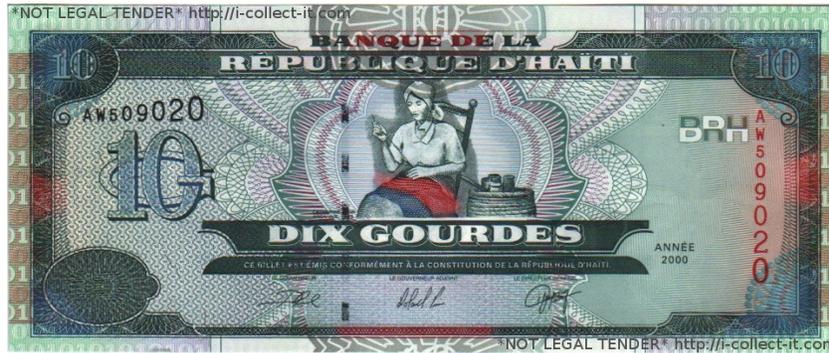
Though people often position science and the arts as opposed to one another, at UMC a scientific discipline sponsored a play about an American literary figure's concern with sustainability. We avoided the trap of falling back on disciplinary allegiances, which Sharachchandra Lélé and Richard B. Norgaard caution against. Interdisciplinarity work is threatened when participants incline towards "[m]aintaining allegiance to one's school of thought" rather "than openly exploring which explanation seems to work better in a particular context" (Lélé & Norgaard, 2005, p. 968). My colleagues and I all came to the project with a sense that there was no one right disciplinary way to approach it. Consequently, no one approached the project wanting to dominate; instead, we approached this as an opportunity to work together and to learn one from another.

As the play illustrates the urgency of time, so does the production of it. For all of the participants in the Earth Day 2014, the celebration was a labor of commitment that was accomplished in addition to everyday responsibilities—i.e. *play* within the context of work. Because we produced Earth Day 2014 within a short time frame, we highlighted the value of interdisciplinarity: each person's strengths became vital to the success of the project. It was the trust and recognition of these interdisciplinary strengths that carried the celebration to its fruition.

- i. Frank N. Egerton and Laura Dassow Walls (1997) report that "Thoreau's own ecological perspective came from four sources ...: (1) his love of nature ...; (2) his readings, which were influenced by this love of nature; (3) his experiences in nature ...; and (4) his transcendentalism" (p. 6).
- ii. For a good overview of Thoreau's reception by and influence on environmentalists, see Chaloupka, 2009.
- iii. Steffanie Berg, at the University of Minnesota Crookston's *Insight Radio*, did an interview with Tashi Gurung, who coordinated the Earth Day 2014 efforts. In this interview, Gurung explains the purpose and activities planned for the celebration (Berg, 2014).
- iv. The director of the *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* was Linnea Barton from the Academic Success Center. The actors in the play were two faculty members (Dr. Christopher M. Sthultz and Dr. Ian MacRae) and two students (Megan N. Luxford and Michael Laurich) from the University of Minnesota Crookston. Additional staff and students supported the performance of the play. Staff included Kenneth Mendez (production and narration), Mike Altepetter (set construction), Tom Sondreal (technical support), Andrew Svec (publicity), Elizabeth Tollefson (publicity), and George French (production assistance). Students included Ryan Bart (music); Andrew Buell, Kevin Bunde, and Adam Roerish (technical support); Cassie Hagg and Katelyn Rieland (stage crew). See Svec, 2014 for a news release about the performance.
- v. The Center for Sustainability at the University of Minnesota, Crookston visualizes the three pillars of sustainability as overlapping concentric circles ("About Sustainability at UMC," 2014).
- vi. I have since done my best to bring my own dissemination skills from English to our Earth Day efforts by sharing our work through a conference presentation and now this publication. I developed my 2014 Earth Day presentation on *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* for the 2015 Great Plains Writers' Conference (GPWC) on Sustainability held at South Dakota State University. Steven Wingate, one of the coordinators of the GPWC offered helpful suggestions on improving the abstract, which subsequently led me to write this article.
- vii. Richard J. Schneider (2008) notes that "[m]uch of Thoreau's reputation lies in his Transcendentalist use of nature as a symbol of spiritual and moral growth in human individuals" (p. 7).
- viii. Walden Woods was nearly consumed by developers in 1989. Don Henley of the rock group The Eagles founded the Walden Woods Project to protect Walden Woods from development ("About Us: FAQs," n.d., para. 1). Johnathan (2009) cleverly alludes to this in *Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau* when he has Thoreau describe a dream in which "the song of a great eagle" saves Walden Woods from destruction (p. 19).
- ix. Admirers of Thoreau will recognize an irony in Emerson and Thoreau's argument about destroying the forest because Thoreau once accidentally caused a fire that burned over 100 acres (Schofield, 1991, p. 1). Schofield (1991) analyzes various pieces of contemporary evidence about the fire to conclude that the fire was actually good for the forest because it "activated the regenerative process known as ecological succession" (p. 1).

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### “Catherine Flon’s Thread of Hair,”

By Lydje Lahens

*Lydje Lahens is a student at Boston University’s Metropolitan College. Last summer he completed “The Irish in Boston,” a course co-taught by four CGS professors. The following was written for the course.*

I migrated to the United States from the Republic of Haiti when I was very young, and I have lived in the Boston area for the majority of my life. As early as I can remember, I had the gift of words and sounds. I constantly hear melodies in my head, and I have spent considerable time late at night writing lyrics or composing music; mostly I write urban American music. In 2005 I bought a house in Dorchester, Massachusetts. I knew very little about the area, except for what I had heard from various news broadcasts, or that there was a lot of crime and violence in this area of Boston. But now that I live there, I must say Dorchester is alright. One of the things that stands out to me about Dorchester is the strong presence of Irish immigrants. Before I lived in Dorchester, I had always thought of it as a black neighborhood, as most people do.

Living in Dorchester, I became curious about Irish history; I knew very little about how the Irish came to Massachusetts or why they were such a strong community in Boston. When I took the course “The Irish in Boston” at Boston University, I gained a profound insight into a group of individuals that have been very influential in Boston. I also learned a lot about their history, art, politics, and religion. When I learned about the people who migrated from Ireland to Boston, what they brought with them, and their journey and experience, I started to think about my own journey, history, family, and the sacrifices I have made for myself and others such as my mother, brothers, and father. I hadn’t thought about these things in a long time.

As most Haitians are, I have always been proud of my Haitian history. “The Irish in Boston” course allowed me to think about my own history, and I noticed there were a lot of aspects of Irish history that I could identify with as a Haitian person. I identified with the Irish love and respect for history, art, spirituality and politics; I identified with their struggle during famine; and with the fact that they had to leave the home that they love so dearly in search of a better life. Those are all things that my people and I have experienced and that we understand very well. Haitian people are known for their music and art and because they document their history with their art; Irish people do the same thing.

I was so inspired by what I learned and the connections between Haitian and Irish people that I felt like the best way to express that was through a poem. In a similar fashion as the Irish did, I wanted to show my Haitian Pride by writing a narrative poem to commemorate Catherine Flon for her role in Haitian history. “The Battle of Vertières” was a major occurrence during the Second War of Haitian Independence and was fought between Haitian rebels and French expeditionary forces on 18 November 1803 at Vertières, north of Haiti. The battle is largely seen as the beginning of the end of slavery in Haiti, and after this battle Catherine Flon was asked to create the first flag of independent Haiti.