

album *Songs from Thoreau's Journal* features sophisticated vocals, acoustic accompaniment (piano and strings), and sounds from nature. The artist's website explains:

"The music ranges from romantic 'salon music' and impressionistic sounds to open improvised soundscapes with field recordings from the forest and from the controversial wind farm at Storheia in Fosen [on the Norwegian coast], with Thoreau's texts as inspiration and framework." The lyrics are entirely from Thoreau's Journal, in English. In track four, "A Murderer's Experience," Skjerve sings: "I have just been through the process of killing the cistudo / For the sake of science / But I cannot excuse myself for this murder / . . . I pray that I may walk more innocently and serenely through nature." Skjerve writes that the original inspiration for the album came when she happened upon the book *All Nature Is My Bride* (ed. William M.

White), with passages from Thoreau's Journal, in an antique book store when visiting New York City in 2005. "I have grown up near the woods in a small town called Rennebu in Norway. And what struck me as I was standing in the big city, reading Thoreau's descriptions of the landscapes, was how it reminded me of the landscape back home." She adds: "In Norway the wind industry has, for the last couple of years, been making great damage to swamps, mountains, and woods, and all creatures living there, and also ruining the areas where the indigenous Sami people's reindeer herds used to be grazing. I think Thoreau would not be quiet about this . . . so inspired by his courage, I needed to 'say something' about this topic, even though I actually wasn't thinking of this music as a political project." The album is freely available on YouTube and Spotify. The liner notes, including full lyrics, with Journal dates, are available on the composer's website.]

Waeckerlé, Emmanuelle. *A direction out there – readwalking (with) Thoreau*, double CD set, approx. 112 minutes (Haan, Germany: Edition Wandelweiser Records, 2021), available at: [www.wandelweiser.de](http://www.wandelweiser.de); EUR 20. And: Waeckerlé, Emmanuelle. *a direction out there – readwalking (with) Thoreau*, booklet with prepared text, score, essays by Vicky Smith & Michael Hampton, and commentary (London: MA BIBLIOTHÈQUE, 2021), 92 pp. Softcover (ISBN: 978-1-910055-85-4), EUR 15. [The Swiss Wandelweiser group of radical composers, to which Waeckerlé belongs, was formed in 1992, not coincidentally the year of John Cage's death. While not as scornful as Cage against consonant intervals and chords, current Wandelweiser members, a loose international movement of some thirty-odd artists, tend to draw out their music to slowly interacting fragments, sometimes with significant gaps and pauses. This in turn allows for ambient landscape sounds to discreetly—for one must listen carefully—join into their performances. As Alex Ross points out in a 2016 profile of the Wandelweiser group, theirs is not a music for everyone:

SONGS FROM THOREAU'S JOURNAL  
This Is What I Go Out to See.



"Wandelweiser's ghost tonality never achieves stability; it will frustrate those who expect one chord to lead logically to another. The composers enact a kind of double rebellion, both against a mainstream audience that pines for tonality and against an institutionalized avant-garde that spurns it" (quoted from Ross's "Silent Song" in *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2016). Emmanuelle Waeckerlé, a French

member of the group long based in London, has for her present work mined Thoreau's 1851 essay "Walking" for select phrases, words, and syllables. Her booklet shows precisely which sonorous selections were made, as Thoreau's full, unabridged essay is printed in faded type, while the chosen vocalized portions are rendered in stark black. Waeckerlé then proceeds, very measuredly and deliberately in comparison to normal delivery, to read the snippets in a "readwalking" fashion—meaning either that she has placed herself outdoors in a semi-natural setting, or that she has received assistance from other readers and performers (a handful of colleagues contribute on her recording, either with voice or occasional string and/or electronic instrument). The effect is by turns arresting and fleeting, clarifying and meandering. Listening eventually becomes an activity more of inhabiting and exploring a kind of daydreaming space, one vaguely familiar yet persistently strange and unfolding, than merely receiving a prepackaged message. Thoreau would surely have approved, baffled though he may have been at the artistic form. While Waeckerlé's performance does not include overt prompts, something subtly grows on her attentive listener: the calm voice anchoring her recording gives feminized, long-suffering, and often subdued Nature a presence, a space of its own at last. Thoreau's "I wish to speak a word for Nature," from the very beginning of "Walking," is gradually pruned by Waeckerlé as follows: "I wish to speak . . . a word"; "I wish . . . to speak"; then "I . . . wish"; at last leaving only "I . . ." Surrounding Waeckerlé's gentle but insistent "readwalking" in this fashion, peripheral sounds are given the chance to make themselves known: the faraway

chirping of finches, the faint cawing of crows, the beauty of a blackbird's song, the din of distant traffic. In this way two important aspects of the Wandelweiser aesthetic and philosophy are accommodated in Waeckerlé's work: namely, a tenacious environmental ethos and a sweeping critique of modern capitalism and its pervasive social ramifications. Waeckerlé's uncompromising and challenging work, at first encounter seemingly far removed from Thoreau's own, thus carves out a knowing space for itself.

It negates—at least to this reviewer's ear—Thoreau's exalted search in the "Reading" chapter of *Walden* for a "father tongue," supposedly of a higher realm, of an abstraction beyond the ken of what he there unfairly calls instinctual, brutish nature—to instead impress the persevering qualities of a grounded, experiential "mother tongue" (in fairness to Thoreau, he does reverse his opinion to favor the "mother tongue" in a late Journal entry of January 2, 1859). Insofar as



compelling artistic reinterpretation hinges on a strong sense of the appropriated work, as well as one's own intentions in reviving it, neither bowing to perceived authority nor rejecting it outright, Waeckerlé's *a direction out there* squarely fits the bill. In the booklet she appends—and bends—a Thoreau quote from "Life Without Principle" accordingly, as a final reflection on the work: "Wherever a (wo)man separates from the multitude, and goes her own way in this mood, there indeed is a fork in the road" (65).]

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## President's Column: On Dead Stars and Resilience

by Rochelle L. Johnson



I am deeply excited about next year's Annual Gathering (AG) theme, "Thoreau and Resilience." Part of my eagerness for our July 2024 conversations in Concord stems from the AG Committee's sense that this theme will encourage considerations of Thoreau's knack for joy. "Surely joy," he wrote, "is the condition of life." Resilience is nothing if not the capacity to imagine joy even amid hard times.

Thoreau seems to have believed in an undercurrent of goodness and strength. This perception of universal resiliency took on the force of life, propelling him from day to day, walk to walk, and year to year—despite whatever social and political obstacles might have prevented his utter contentment. He seems to have found it everywhere: whether in nature's propensity toward hardiness or society's pursuit of improvement, whether in two years spent by a pond or one night spent in jail, whether in the human spirit or the healing capacity of his own lungs (until he couldn't—and even then he seems to have found strength in living one world at a time).

But my excitement is more complex than an anticipation of uplifting presentations on Thoreauvian resiliency. It has to do with the fact that Thoreau hardly had our jeopardized moment in mind as he penned those words about joy in "A Natural History of Massachusetts." In fact, his words—*Surely joy is the condition of life*—taken at face value, would seem to make for an awfully weak life philosophy at present. In these days, "joy" all too often evokes a desperate and futile groping for happiness, a failure to face up to the harsh reality of turbulent politics, species extinction, and a warming climate. Heck, even "resilience" seems trite and overused, heard all too often when speaking of the ailing planet and our anxious hopes for its—and our—sustenance.

My complex anticipation of the 2024 AG actually has something to do with what happened at this past year's AG, when the theme was "Thoreau and the Politics of Extinction."

That theme portended dark subjects like escalating rates of extinction, political stagnation in the face of climate collapse, fading hopes that humanity can avert the largest crisis of our time, and Thoreau's experience of the dawn of our climate-broken era. Indeed, some of the presentations we heard at the 2023 AG *did* take us to these dark places. But the presentations we heard in July also took us far beyond despair—to tangible solutions and action plans, to the beneficial role of individual agency in local and global communities, and to Thoreau's meaningful messages and their relevance to our own predicament. What we heard in July 2023 told me that with Thoreau as our would-be guide, even a conference on extinction might result in discussions of the good that individuals and communities can do to make things better—and in meaningful, lasting, genuine ways.

Some may accuse me of living in the silver linings of clouds. And maybe I do, but only because I believe the words of 2022 Thoreau Society Medal-winner Rebecca Solnit, who, in an essay called "We Can't Afford to be Climate Doomers," writes that we have ample reason to believe in the possibility of positive change in the face of climate crisis. She claims that although "the physical condition of the planet—as this summer's unprecedented extreme heat and flooding and Canada's and Greece's colossal fires demonstrate—has continued to get worse[,] the solutions have continued to get better." As examples, she offers: "the public is far more engaged; the climate movement has grown, though of course it needs to grow far more; and there have been some significant victories as well as the incremental change of a shifting energy landscape."<sup>1</sup> She points out that we hear more news coverage of climate crisis each day, which means the topic is reaching many people worldwide, even those who may wish to "deny" climate change.

Climate action grows daily around the globe. Resilience. Silver linings, indeed.



As a teacher of environmental studies at a small college, I struggle daily to not let my despair overshadow my hopeful pursuit of resilience. As I planned the first-year seminars I would teach to freshmen this fall, I knew we would focus entirely on climate change and injustice, and I knew I wanted to help my students believe in themselves as possible agents of inspiration and change.

I decided to start small. I would begin the first few class periods by reading a poem and asking my students to write for just a few minutes about whatever thoughts the poem inspired in them. I wanted them to learn to trust their thoughts and ideas. I would choose poems that were about nature but also about some form of struggle. I chose poems by Mary Oliver, Ross Gay, Camille Dungy, Sharon Olds, and even one by William Ellery Channing. Whatever the poem, I hoped the students would listen intently and then respond with their own thoughts, discovering their own connection to the poets' expressions of joy amid difficulty.

The semester started, and my plans immediately met with a serious obstacle. Each day, I found I had to remind the students that they should actually *write* during the post-poem reflection time. Even if they felt they had nothing to say, I said, they should *keep the pen moving*. But day after day, I'd read the poem and then watch their still pens, held paralyzed above their notebooks.

They were first-year students and clearly not used to writing reflectively. They were *very* good at looking around at people passing in the quadrangle (we always hold class outside, no