Thoreau in an Age of Crisis

Uses and Abuses of an American Icon

Edited by

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Abstract

Mark Gallagher's "Live Deliberately, Stay Woke: Thoreau's Influence on William Melvin Kelley" discusses the work of a twentieth-century Black writer who is only now gaining the recognition he deserves. Gallagher conveys how Kelley's novel *A Different Drummer* (1962) engages Thoreauvian themes. While a graduate student at Harvard, Kelley became conversant with the overwhelmingly white American literary canon, including the critical discourses enveloping it, while fully aware of their limitations and blinkers when it came to the experiences and perspectives of people of color. In *A Different Drummer*, the eponymous Thoreau quotation is printed on a frontispiece page, but so also—above this—is the one from *Walden* clarifying that the better part of what Thoreau's neighbors call good, he believes to be bad. Gallagher proposes that Kelley reappropriates Thoreau as he is found in R.W.B. Lewis's classic of the myth-and-symbol school of criticism, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955), in devising his at-once reticent and proud protagonist. Kelley's identification with Thoreau in *A Different Drummer* betokens an ironic and iconoclastic refashioning of the myth of American individualism in the African-American literary imagination.

In 2017, the *Oxford English Dictionary* added an entry for the word "woke," which has come to mean someone who is "alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice."[1] The definition for this adjectival "woke" cites "the lyrics of the 2008 song 'Master Teacher' by African-American singer-songwriter Erykah Badu." The refrain of that song, which was written and performed by another singer-songwriter, Georgia Anne Muldrow, has become a slogan for the Black Lives Matter movement and other progressive movements of the past several years.[2] To "stay woke" in America means to stay socially conscious in an

1 "woke, adj.2." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/58068747. Accessed 29 April 2019.

2 For a recent history of "woke" in African-American culture, see the second part of Elijah C. Watson's two-part series on "The Origin of Woke": Watson, Elijah C. "The Origin of Woke: How Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrow Sparked The 'Stay Woke' Era." Okayplayer.com, 27 February 2018, https://www.okayplayer.com/originals/georgia-muldrow-erykah

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era when racists have become emboldened in a divisive political climate, stoking racial resentment and prejudice in the United States as well as in far-right nationalist movements across the globe. To be "woke" also means realizing that systemic racism and sexism have been in place for a long time. It is quite telling, then, that one of the other words added to the *OED* in 2017 is "post-truth," a term which signifies a retreat from the values of rational discourse and toward that which is antithetical to twenty-first-century wokeness.[3]

It turns out that "woke" has a history that goes back at least to the 1960s, when it meant something like *well informed* and *up-to-date*. The person who was credited with introducing this meaning of the word, the so-called "godfather of woke," is novelist William Melvin Kelley.[4] The word appeared in the title of Kelly's 1962 *New York Times* article, "If You're Woke You Dig It,"[5] in which Kelley discusses the appropriation of Black vernacular by white "beatniks." Right below his article is an announcement which reads, "William Melvin Kelley, 24, is the author of a novel titled *A Different Drummer*,[6] which is scheduled to be published next month." It would seem that this young Black author was not only hip to the language of his native Harlem but also to the writings of another young writer, the one who said, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."[7] That same writer said, "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep" and "We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake" (*Walden* 90).

William Melvin Kelley is, in fact, alluding to Thoreau in the title of his 1962 debut novel, one which responds to Thoreau's call for a principled, uncompromising life. The quotation about "a different drummer" appears in full as the epigraph to Kelley's novel alongside another, more radical moral sentiment from *Walden*: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my

-badu-stay-woke-master-teacher.html, Accessed 29 April 2019. For a discussion of woke and cultural appropriation, see: Hess, Amanda. "Earning the 'Woke' Badge." *New York Times*, 23 April 2016, p. 13.

3 "post-truth, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/58609044. Accessed 29 April 2019.

4 Elijah C. Watson traces "woke" back to its Harlem roots and the writings of William Melvin Kelley in the first of his two-part series. Watson, Elijah C. "The Origin of 'Woke': William Melvin Kelley Is The 'Woke' Godfather We Never Acknowledged." Okayplayer.com, 27 February 2018, https://www.okayplayer.com/culture/woke-william-melvin-kelley.html.

5 Kelley, William Melvin. "If you're woke, you dig it." *New York Times*, 20 May 1962.

6 Kelley, William Melvin. *A Different Drummer*. Doubleday, 1962. (Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Drummer*.)

7 Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley, Princeton UP, 1971, p. 326.

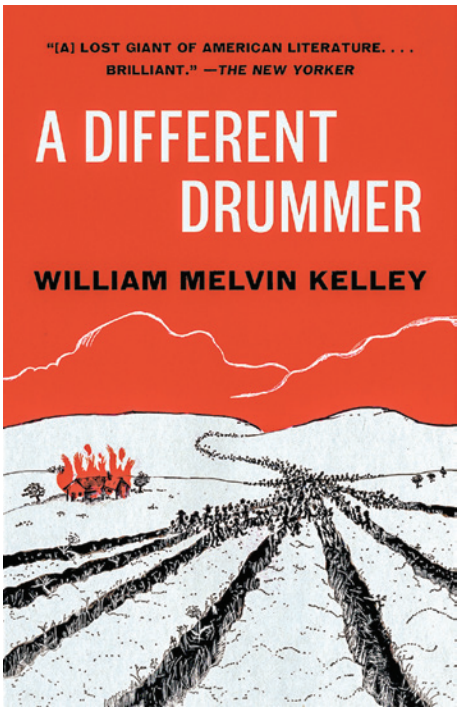

Figure 10.1
Cover of the Third Edition, Anchor Books 2019, featuring new artwork by Kelley's daughter, Jesi Kelley.

soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" (*Walden* 10). These two quotations set the tone for a novel in which an anti-hero rejects an oppressive Southern society and strikes out on his own to find a better life through a purifying act of material abandonment and a civilly disobedient removal from a racist society. The novel's protagonist, Tucker Caliban, inspires the mass exodus of the entire Black population from a fictional state while the remaining white population must carry on without them.

It is through a reinterpretation of *Walden*, I argue, that *A Different Drummer* challenges the American myth of individualism from the perspective of the African-American self. According to David S. Reynolds, "the view of the major writers as alienated rebels" or "high literature as an isolated act of rebellion or subversion against a dominant culture" was "deeply ingrained" in the popular view of American literature at the time Kelley wrote his first novel.[8] So far as the works of those canonical authors of the American Renaissance that Kelley studied as an English major at Harvard were expressions of a rebellious

8 Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Knopf, 1988, p. 6.

American individualism, they also were implicated in the history of racism that privileged the freedom of some but not all Americans.

Nevertheless, it was this traditional view of canonical American literature that appealed to Kelley, who found in Thoreau the exemplar of this subversive tradition. It is Thoreau who questions the validity of American freedom when he asks, "Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice? What is it to be born free and not to live free?"[9] The moral hypocrisy that he condemns in "Life without Principle" is that which he earlier had denounced in "Resistance to Civil Government" and "Slavery in Massachusetts." The same individualistic challenge to authority can also be found in the pages of *Walden*. And Kelley certainly read *Walden*, as notorious "Pond Scum" author Kathryn Schulz was begrudgingly forced to acknowledge.[10] In an article on Kelley, which proclaims him "The Lost Giant of American Literature," Schulz mentions that Kelley "had long since read Thoreau" and later in his life "embraced the idea of voluntary poverty" as Thoreau had when he went to Walden.[11] This greatly understates the importance of Thoreau to Kelley. To be sure, Thoreau's influence on this critical African-American writer was profound and even life-changing.

While Kelley's writings have drawn comparisons to such novelists as William Faulkner and James Joyce—two of his other literary heroes—no one has (until now) acknowledged the full impact of Thoreau on Kelley. This, I feel, is an important intervention, because there have been few African-American writers who have claimed Thoreau as a major influence. Recognizing Thoreau's presence in African-American literature expands our understanding of its contours. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Thoreau scholars, both past and present, are white. Perhaps by studying Kelley's work we can correct a critical blind spot in which Thoreau seems to have a limited cultural appeal and challenge the idea of Thoreau as part of a more racially-blind literary tradition, while at the same time expanding our understanding of Kelley by widening the scope of his intellectual milieu.

9 Thoreau, Henry D. "Life without Principle." *Reform Papers*, edited by Wendell Glick, Princeton UP, 1973, pp. 155-179, p. 174.

10 See: Schulz, Kathryn. "Pond Scum: Henry David Thoreau's Moral Myopia." *New Yorker*, 19 October 2015, pp. 40-45, which now also appears as: "The Moral Judgments of Henry David Thoreau." *The New-Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/19/pond-scum. Accessed 18 April 2020.

11 Schulz, Kathryn. "The Lost Giant of American Literature." *New Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/the-lost-giant-of-american-literature. Accessed 22 January 2018.

Several years ago, James Finley sought to "reclaim HDT" in an essay that showed how opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement were abusing the life and the words of Thoreau.[12] It is also worth considering how a major African-American novelist *uses* Thoreau. What does Thoreau have to say to a post-Harlem Renaissance, pre-Black Arts movement writer? And how does William Melvin Kelley respond to him? To help me answer these questions, I spoke with Kelley's widow, Karen Aiki Kelley; that interview gives us insight into both the work of this fascinating writer and his relationship with Thoreau. My argument is not simply that Thoreau was an important influence on Kelley but that, in *A Different Drummer*, Kelley subversively reappropriates Thoreau from the cultural sanctioning and depoliticization that would frame *Walden* merely as man communing with nature and not a revolution of consciousness. In doing so, I hope to redirect the critical attention of Thoreau studies in general toward writers outside of the largely white tradition of nature writing who have drawn upon his words for inspiration and provocation.

Kelley was born in Staten Island, New York, on 1 November 1937, and grew up in the Bronx. His father, William Melvin Kelley Sr., one-time editor at the African-American newspaper the *Amsterdam News*, and his mother Narcissa, tried to instill in their children the racial uplift philosophy of the Harvard-educated Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Following in the footsteps of the "talented tenth," Kelley would end up graduating from the private Fieldston School and go on to Harvard College in 1956.[13] He first thought about studying the law, perhaps working for the Civil Rights movement, but he eventually devoted his time to writing under the mentorship of John Hawkes and Archibald MacLeish. His short story, "The Poker Party," won Harvard's best-story award and garnered the attention of a few literary agents. He was just a semester shy of graduation when he decided to leave Harvard, move to Harlem, and pursue a career as a writer.[14]

12 Finley, James S. "#ReclaimHDT." *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, new series, vol. 23, 2015, pp. 121-131.

13 W.E.B. Du Bois, in his theory of social uplift, coined the term "talented tenth" to refer to a class of African-Americans who, because of their intellectual gifts, should take responsibility for the improvement of all African-Americans. Du Bois championed higher education for such "exceptional men" so they might become future leaders in the Black community. See: Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Talented Tenth." *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today*, edited by Booker T. Washington, James Pott and Co, 1903, pp. 31-75.

14 The most complete biography of William Melvin Kelley to date is found in *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African-American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*. New York UP, 1993, pp. 317-333.

Figure 10.2
Karen Aiki Kelley and William Melvin Kelley embarking for Rome in 1963. Courtesy of Karen Aiki Kelley

It was during his time at Harvard that Kelley first discovered Thoreau, according to Kelley's wife, Aiki. Born Karen Gibson, Aiki Kelley married "Willie," or "Duke" as he was sometimes known, while she was still a student at Sarah Lawrence College in 1962. During our conversation, she remembered a story Kelley had told her about an experience he had as a boy at a summer camp in Maine:

> The only time he really felt, I think, as a teenager, at peace with himself was when he went to camp in Maine. He went to this wonderful camp called Tacoma Pines. It was put together by some people from the Dalton School, which was another private school . . . . He found canoeing at camp. And in a canoe in Maine he felt at home in himself. That led him, I think, at Harvard to find Thoreau. So when he found Thoreau he said, "Oh, I understand this being out in a cabin on the lake." That was what he aspired to.[15]

Aiki firmly believes that Thoreau was a major influence on her husband's work: "The Thoreauvian philosophy gave him, especially in the beginning, a real vision for himself."

By the time Kelley arrived at Harvard, Thoreau certainly would have been on a few course syllabi. Thoreau had assumed greater critical prominence since the publication of F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* in 1941.[16] In addition, one of Kelley's mentors, Archibald MacLeish, was a devoted Thoreauvian. He

15 Interview with Karen Aiki Kelley. All subsequent quotations from Karen Aiki Kelley are from this two-part interview conducted in April 2018.

16 Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Oxford UP, 1941.

recorded his own readings of *Walden*[17] and *Civil Disobedience*[18] for Caedmon in the 1960s. When *A Different Drummer* was published in 1962, MacLeish wrote an endorsement that, evoking Emerson's praise for Whitman, appears on the front jacket:

> American Negroes have been myth-makers in tales and tunes from the beginning of their culture but here is a young Negro novelist who has used that mysterious power in a new way: he has imagined, not a myth of time gone, but a myth of time going—a myth for *now*. Many readers of novels will be glad, I think, to have met William Kelley at the beginning of what promises to be an exciting career, and particularly glad to have met him in this book.

MacLeish's emphasis on myth is significant, for myth and symbol were the foundation of literature studies at Harvard. MacLeish's fellow Harvard faculty member, the venerable Perry Miller, who dedicated his book *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto Lost Journal (1840-1841)*[19] to MacLeish in 1958, has assumed a mythic status of his own for his scholarship which helped establish the field of American studies. In large part due to the scholarship of Miller, Thoreau's Journal was just starting to be studied seriously. Studying under these influences, and taking his inspiration from Thoreau, Kelley began keeping a journal of his own, which he started while at Harvard in 1959 and continued for the rest of his life.

It is highly likely, then, that Kelley would have read Thoreau during his time at Harvard. What is surprising is that, despite having taken its title and its epigraph from some lines by Thoreau, *A Different Drummer* does not bear much resemblance to anything Thoreau wrote—at least not on the surface. The novel takes place in a fictitious Southern state in which all of its African-American citizens—a third of the population—follow the lead of Tucker Caliban, a Black farmer who, after destroying his farm and all his possessions, heads north with his pregnant wife and their child. For starters, the book's violent removal that inspires Black citizens to escape a society built upon white supremacy is more politically urgent than anything found in *Walden*. The reality of social and political oppression in the American South bears no resemblance to the safety of the Concord woods where the evils of slavery are an intellectual abstraction for Thoreau, who says, "It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to

17 Thoreau, Henry D., and Archibald MacLeish. *Walden*. Houghton Mifflin, 1968, Caedmon Record TC 1261.

18 Thoreau, Henry D. *Civil Disobedience*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1968, Caedmon Record TC 1263.

19 Miller, Perry. *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto Lost Journal (1840-1841)*. Houghton Mifflin, 1958.

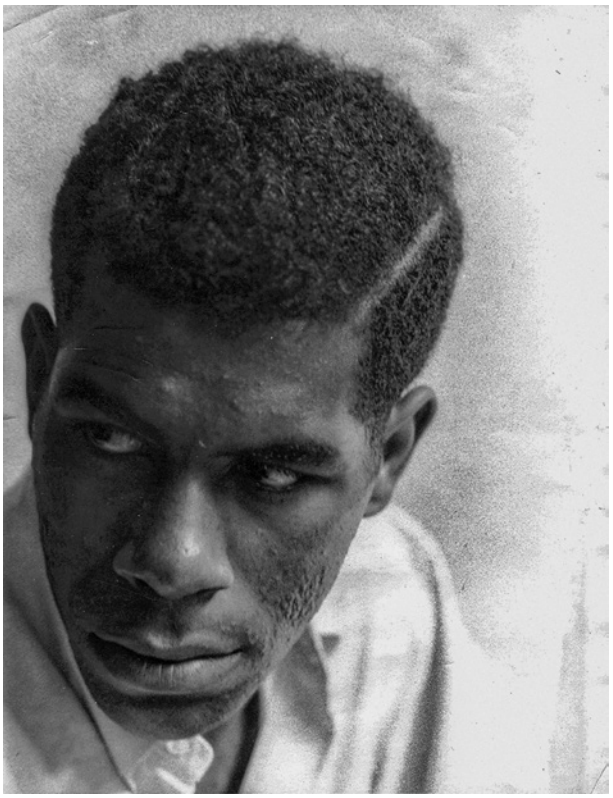

Figure 10.3
William Kelley at Harvard. Courtesy of Karen Aiki Kelley

have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself" (*Walden* 7). For the millions who uprooted themselves and moved to cities like New York and Chicago during the Great Migration or during some of the periodic mass migrations since Reconstruction, *Walden* might be just another book from a white, nineteenth-century writer bearing little relevance to the lives of twentieth-century African-Americans. Then again, not all of Thoreau's treatments of race were as removed from the reality of slavery. And it should be remembered that Thoreau's work on the Underground Railroad involved breaking immoral laws that posed real danger to real people.

Kelley's use of a figure in the American literary canon in *A Different Drummer* is, like that of many African-American writers before him, an act of transformation. As Daniel Hack has recently shown, there is a tradition of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African-American writers who appropriated the forms of Victorian literature and, through a process Hack describes as "African Americanization," recontextualized a shared literary

tradition and reimagined the possibilities for African-American literature.[20] Kelley does exactly this with Thoreau, but vis-à-vis an intermediary: the interpretive framework of R.W.B. Lewis.

Kelley's "Legend of Tucker Caliban" (the original title for what would become *A Different Drummer*) is a satire of Lewis's concept of the "American Adam" as exemplified in *Walden*. According to Lewis, the "American Adam" serves as one of the central myths in the formation of American literature during the nineteenth century:

> The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. All this and more were contained in the image of the American as Adam.[21]

The authors Lewis chooses to study were, for the most part, writers popular with American Victorians: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry James, James Russell Lowell, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, just to name a few. Lewis's subjects are the canonical white, male authors. He makes no mention of any black authors. It would seem, then, by Lewis's omission, that this Adamic archetype did not shape the African-American literary tradition, however popular these same American Victorians were among African-American readership.

Nonetheless, Lewis's interpretation of *Walden* becomes part of the postmodern intertextuality of Kelley's novel. The new American Adam that Thoreau projects in his *Walden* persona—Lewis's "natural man" (*Adam* 23) who enacts "the title renunciation of the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable, the well-worn paths of conduct, and the total immersion in nature" (*Adam* 21)—is the white analogue to Kelley's Tucker Caliban, a

20 Hack, Daniel. *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature*. Princeton UP, 2016.

21 Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. U of Chicago P, 1955, p.5. (Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Adam*.)

symbol of a new Black man. Tucker is a descendent of the "African," a superhuman enslaved man whose escape from bondage at a slave auction becomes a folk legend in Kelley's fictional South. Like his ancestor, Tucker undergoes a destructive, ritual-like rebirth through what can be described as a primitive rite of purification, such as those which are associated with a young man's coming of age. Lewis, whose 1955 classic of the myth and symbol school of literary criticism was required reading in Harvard's English Department during Kelley's time there, makes the case that *Walden* is itself a highly symbolic "rite of purification" (*Adam* 15): "Thoreau, alert to the ritual aspects of human behavior and the primitive energy of words, gave voice to the same instinctive need" for a purgatorial cleansing, as expressed by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his story "Earth's Holocaust" (1844), "while he was reflecting on 'the essential facts of life' at Walden Pond. He made semantic fun of a deacon whose dreary effects had been sold at auction: 'Instead of a *bonfire*, or purifying destruction of them, there was an *auction*, or increasing of them.' This private little joke," Lewis says, "led Thoreau to wonder whether the tribal customs of [in Thoreau's words] 'some savage nations' might not be usefully instituted in America" (*Adam* 14). Citing Thoreau's source, Lewis interprets *Walden* as "a metaphoric expansion of [William] Bartram's busk—the busk of the human spirit, when clothes and pots and pans are discarded as symbols of ambitions and interests" (*Adam* 15).

Therefore, the symbolic busk in *Walden*, emphasized in Lewis's reading, serves as the inspiration for Tucker Caliban's ritual sacrifice of his home and his land in *A Different Drummer*. Through the eyes of a sympathetic white boy, Harry, the reader sees Tucker methodically salting his land "*Just like he's planting seed*": "*Not running out like a mad dog and putting down the salt like it* was *salt, but putting it down like it was cotton or corn, like come fall, it'd be a paying crop*" (*Drummer* 42). Men from town, both white and Black, watch in confusion as Tucker turns his acreage into a "whitened field" (*Drummer* 44), and then cuts down an historic tree at the edge of the old plantation before putting down his horse and his cow. He makes one more symbolic act as the sun sets on his life and his family's history in the South: he destroys his grandfather clock, an heirloom that once belonged to his great-grandfather that had been given to him on his "seventy-fifth year" by General Willson for "years of good and faithful service, first as a slave and later as an employee" (*Drummer* 48). Finally, with his family ready to leave, Tucker torches his home. They watch the blaze light up the night until "only glowing coals remained, and the rubble of the destroyed house looked like a huge city seen at night from a great distance" (*Drummer* 49). Thus concludes Tucker Caliban's ritual busk.

Kelley originally wrote the chapter on Tucker's purification ritual for John Hawkes's class at Harvard. Before that he had written a short story at Fieldston

about a mass exodus of African-Americans in the South. The inspiration for this came from either a Langston Hughes sketch or an actual event which took place in South Carolina in December of 1881.[22] Approximately five thousand Black people of Edgefield County, South Carolina, left the state—one-fifth of the county's Black residents—and headed toward Arkansas by way of Augusta, Georgia. From there, most went by train, though many took the 750-mile journey on foot, arriving at their destination a month later. Kelley would use the story of mass migration and combine it with his dual myths of the African and Tucker Caliban for a fable of the South in the 1930s, one that mythologizes as an act of resistance the exodus of African-Americans from the South to Northern cities.

As an American fable, Kelley's experimental novel resembles some of the work that inspired him, particular the novels of William Faulkner and James Joyce. To be sure, the young William Kelley would find many role models to emulate, among them not only Faulkner, Joyce, and Hughes, but also, later, Marcus Garvey (another Harvard alum) and Malcolm X. Yet it was Thoreau who gave him a model for himself as a writer and as a man of—to borrow a word from his Harvard professor Perry Miller—consciousness. Significantly, Kelley's discovery of Thoreau took place before Thoreau had become interpreted as the original hippy, counterculture nonconformist. Kelley's interpretation of the "Thoreauvian philosophy" was informed by readings of Thoreau as an avatar of an exceptionally American consciousness, or what Aiki Kelley refers to as a sense of "Americanness":

> On the cultural level, and in his deepest, most American self . . . [Thoreau] spoke to his Americanness. And there was an Americanness about him that he connected with Thoreau. Thoreau spoke to Kelley's Americanness apart from race, apart from slavery, apart from everything. What was it about this country, what was it about canoeing in Maine, what was it about America and its vastness, its possibilities? That spoke to him.

That Kelley would find in Thoreau an appropriate muse is not without its historical context. Thoreau was at the time known to have inspired the nonviolent protests of Martin Luther King, Jr.[23] To a certain extent this relationship

22 The event alluded to may have been the 1881 mass migration of an estimated 5,000 individuals from Edgefield County, South Carolina, to Arkansas. See: Kemme, Steve. "William Melvin Kelley: Interview." *Mosaic Magazine*, 30 October 2012, https://mosaicmagazine.org/william-melvin-kelley-interview. Accessed 29 April 2019.

23 King states that, while a student at Morehouse, he was introduced to the idea of "nonviolent resistance" in "Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*." See King, Martin Luther Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story.* Harper & Row, 1958, p. 91.

between Thoreau and King authorized Thoreau's radicalism in the eyes of many Americans. In his appropriation of Thoreau, Kelley asserts himself as an American writer within an American literary tradition that was still segregated in the 1960s, assuming the same self-authority that Thoreau claimed in his own story of regeneration. As a story of Black resistance, emerging from a fictional South, told from the perspective of white characters, *A Different Drummer*, while erasing the boundary between the American novel as historical fiction and the novel as social protest, declares itself part of a tradition of radical empowerment going back to Thoreau.

The consciousness that Kelley shared with Thoreau is reflected in the two quotations he chose as the epigraph to his novel, both of which are from *Walden*. The first is an expression of Thoreau's contrarian spirit: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" In *Walden*, Thoreau answers his rhetorical question: "You may say the wisest thing you can, old man—you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind,—I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels" (*Walden* 10-11). There is a generational shift in consciousness. The youth chastise the old for their misguided ways and abandon the old way of doing things—old manners, old politics, old culture. Thoreau calls for a revolution of the spirit. Kelley, on the other hand, writing after the Harlem Renaissance and before the Black Arts Movement, was enacting his own revolution in consciousness—as an American writer, and not only an African-American writer.

Kelley often talked about how it was important for him to resist being put into the "literary ghetto" (Karen Aiki Kelley) of an African-American tradition tied to histories of slavery and oppression. Recent critics such as Kenneth W. Warren have argued for the periodization of African-American literature as "a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation, which ensued after the nation's retreat from Reconstruction."[24] Kelley's novel escapes the strictures of what W.E.B. Du Bois once defined as the "Criteria of Negro Art" through a form that reflects on a myth of Black self-determination and nationhood that is fictionalized through a community of white voices.[25] These voices comment on this Black experience in a way that attempts to

24 Warren, Kenneth W. *What Was African American Literature?* Harvard UP, 2011, p. 1.

25 W.E.B. Du Bois. "Criteria of Negro Art." *The Crisis*, vol. 32, October 1926, pp. 290-297.

delegitimize their selfhood, claiming that they are acting on a blood instinct, or speculating that their actions do not have the proper philosophical or political grounding. As such, the novel anticipates much of the nascent Black Power and Black Arts movements in the United States.

The second of the two epigraph quotations, the one from which Kelley takes the title of his book, is found in the conclusion to *Walden*: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (*Walden* 326). It can also be found in Thoreau's "lost 1840-1841 Journal," which is distinctly different from the version of the passage that appears in *Walden*: "Let not the faithful sorrow that he has no ear for the more fickle and rabble harmonies of creation—if he be awake to the slower measure of virtue and truth. If his pulse does not beat in unison with the musician's quips and turns—it may yet accord with *their* larger periods."[26] Perry Miller notes that this appeared in Thoreau's essay "The Service" with the awkward last part changed to the slightly better "it accords with the pulse-beat of the ages," before Thoreau rephrased it completely in *Walden*.[27] There's a trickster-like irony to Kelley's appropriation of "a different drummer" through a distinctly Africanist reading that might find something in Thoreau's invocation of drums. But in its early form, the "different drummer" quotation speaks of conscience as a state of being "awake" and attuned to a truth that one hears over the din of politics, society, and popular culture.

This brings me back to the term "woke," for Kelley himself shared an affinity for what was one of Thoreau's favorite metaphors for a revolution in consciousness. To be sure, Thoreau's idiom, "to be awake," has an optimistic connotation. It does not preclude dreaming, for example: "Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake."[28] And it is much more individualistic in Thoreau's usage—"Only that day dawns to which we are awake" (*Walden* 333)—than it might be in the more communal sense of "woke." To "reawaken and keep ourselves awake," Thoreau says, requires "an infinite expectation of the dawn" (*Walden* 90), whereas "stay woke" means more than a sunny disposition. "For black people stay woke is anything but [a trend]," according to Elijah C. Watson. It's a way of life:

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26 In Miller, Perry. *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto Lost Journal (1840-1841)*. Houghton Mifflin, 1958, p. 141. Emphasis in the original.

27 *Ibid*.

28 Thoreau, Henry D. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Edited by Carl F. Hovde, Princeton UP, 1980, p. 297.

> Each and every day, having to be aware that because of the color of your skin you could be legally defined as someone's property; you could be shot and hung for allegedly talking to or whistling at a white woman; you could be arrested and placed in one of the most dangerous jails in the country for a crime you never committed. Woke was simultaneously a cool and militant descriptor for our experience, a word that channeled our reality into something empowering. Now, it's gone. ("The Origin of Woke")

Woke, like so many other slang terms that enter into popular culture, is effectively dead to those who, like Watson, felt that it was powerful so long as it was exclusive to Black culture. It is interesting to note, in light of the cultural appropriation of "woke," that Kelley's novel takes Thoreau's "different drummer," a term which would become synonymous with 1960s counter-culture non-conformity, and gives it a more radical valence that is more akin to the Black militancy of that same period.

Aiki Kelley believes that the term "woke" resonated with her husband in part because of its association with Thoreau:

> For him, it probably meant pretty much the same thing as it meant to Thoreau but he wasn't directly quoting him at that time. It wasn't uppermost in his mind at the time. "Oh, Thoreau talked about being awake, and here is 'woke.'" But it was, I'm sure, in the back of his mind, because it meant being conscious, being able to see through the paradigms that you have been given, to be able to have another perspective on your situation.

That reframing of one's experience is represented in *A Different Drummer*, wherein the story of African-American characters is told from a multi-vocal white perspective. Through the radical example of Thoreau, the intertextuality of Kelley's novel adds to the story that is the complicated inter-relationship that American literature has with its Black identity.

Thoreau continued to inspire Kelley long after his days at Harvard. Just before the publication of *A Different Drummer*, Kelley reached out to and began a correspondence with Thoreau scholar Walter Harding, who helped find him a teaching job at SUNY Geneseo.[29] Not long after that, Kelley would move his family from Harlem to Jamaica, embracing the Thoreauvean philosophy as he understood it: a life of voluntary poverty. What motivated him was not the moral virtue of simplicity but the threat of racial violence that he saw after the murder of Malcolm X. Kelley's decision to remove his family from New York

29 William Melvin Kelley correspondence to Walter J. Harding. Series I.A.56, Walter Harding Collection. The Thoreau Society Collections at The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods.

society to the rural solitude of Jamaica was motivated by both a desire for a writer's retreat and a haven from a more hostile, inhospitable environment—the action of a different drummer, to be sure.

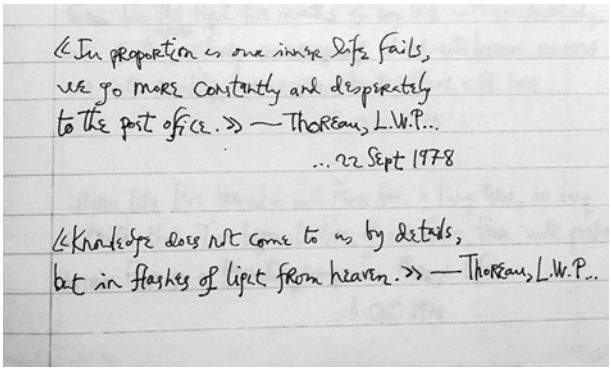
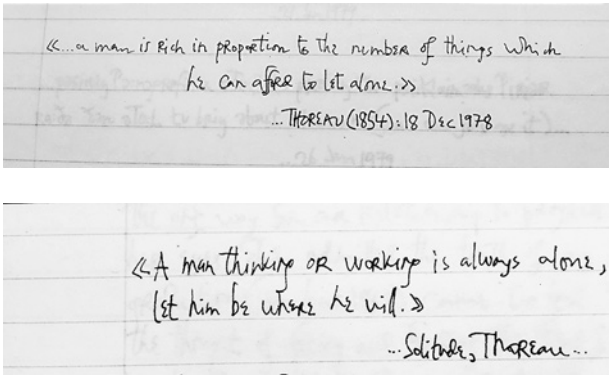


Figure 10.4 Kelley recorded numerous quotations by Thoreau like these in his personal journal. Courtesy of Karen Aiki Kelley

Eventually, Kelley moved his family back to Harlem, where he continued writing, finding inspiration in the words of Thoreau that he collected in his notebooks for the rest of his life.[30] One will find more than a few lines from *Walden* in Kelley's personal journal. There are also entries with quotations from "Life without Principle": "In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office"; and "Knowledge does not come to us by details, but in flashes of light from heaven."[31] Kelley clearly admired Thoreau for his Transcendental philosophy as well as for his political economy. And he appreciated the reflections of the later Thoreau, whose lived philosophy matures after his days at Walden Pond in the essay on "Life without Principle," or as it was known in an earlier incarnation, "Getting a Living." This essay in particular resonated with the William Melvin Kelley who had the added responsibilities of being both husband and father. Thoreau could never speak to that experience.

30 Kelley transcribes quotations from Thoreau in his personal journal. Kelley's journal is in his family's possession.

31 Thoreau, Henry D. "Life without Principle." *Reform Papers*, edited by Wendell Glick, Princeton UP, 1973, pp. 155-179, p. 169, 173.



Figures 10.5 & 10.6 Courtesy of Karen Aiki Kelley

Thoreau's words were important to Kelley. One of the words that has a strong association with Thoreau is the word "deliberately." As Thoreau tells his reader, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately" (*Walden* 90), though his Concord neighbors would have remembered what had happened when Thoreau went to the woods the year before—starting an accidental fire that raged out of control and caused an enormous amount of property damage. The younger Kelley, who drew one of his epigraphs from Perry Miller's *Consciousness in Concord*, may have read about the Concord forest fire in the introduction to Miller's book, where he argues that Thoreau's psyche was afflicted by the consequences of his "conflagration" long after the event.[32]

The very word Thoreau chooses to describe how he will live at Walden, to live "deliberately," makes the Walden experiment sound like a post-traumatic response to that unfortunate accident. Thoreau, however irresponsible he may have been that day, and however valiant he was in alerting the townspeople to the danger, could not escape either a reputation as a firebug—especially as he stood and watched the flames from Fairhaven Hill—or the question of whether his neighbors thought he set the fire deliberately. This is to say that by describing his motive for a life in the woods as deliberate—not to live morally or ethically, but just to live and to do it deliberately—Thoreau finds irony in his return to the woods. It would give him agency to do so, despite his past. He might also find redemption in alerting his neighbors once again, like chanticleer in the morning to the glory of spiritual rebirth and not to the danger of their homes and property.

32 Miller, Perry. *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto Lost Journal (1840-1841)*. Houghton Mifflin, 1958, p. 119.

Like Thoreau, Tucker Caliban finds liberation in a deliberate action. A newspaper clipping saved by one of the characters in the novel tells that story: "*A fire razed the house of farmer Tucker Caliban, two miles north of here—and none of the thirty-odd spectators made any effort to extinguish it. Witnesses stated the fire was started deliberately by Caliban, a Negro, himself*" (*Drummer* 165). Tucker's symbolic gesture makes him the chanticleer of his own story—the story of an African-American character who removes himself from an oppressive white South and, by extension, out of the genteel tradition of the American social protest novel. Like Thoreau, he wakes his neighbors up, but rather than "brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost" (*Walden* 84), Kelley's protagonist proclaims a revolution in consciousness not in word but deed. Tucker, embodying a myth of a radically self-reliant African American, wakes an entire population of politically disenfranchised, economically oppressed, and physically threatened people for whom exodus, not exile, resonates most.

Tucker's leadership is in contrast to the character of Bennett Bradshaw, the Black leader who is murdered at the end of the novel. Bradshaw is the embodiment of the talented-tenth Black man that Kelley would have known at Fieldston and Harvard. Bradshaw looks to the success of Tucker, an uneducated radical, for inspiration. Once he arrives in Sutton, however, Bradshaw becomes a scapegoat for the uprising of his entire community. The humiliating spectacle of Bradshaw's lynching can be interpreted as Kelley's rejection of the nonviolent strategies that would make martyrs out of Martin Luther King, Jr., and those African-Americans who marched alongside him in the Civil Rights Movement.[33] Tucker, on the other hand, is the Black antihero who creates a new myth of Black emancipation, a desperate action rooted in a primitive ancestral culture. It is an ironic reappropriation of the busk-like ritual of Thoreau, a white writer who was sanctioned by the genteel white and Black communities for his civil disobedience.

In order to understand *A Different Drummer*, one must understand how Kelley identified with Thoreau as a white writer who expressed a radical ambivalence in his sense of place as would Kelley, a Black writer, to American literary culture and the United States itself. The Thoreau who inspires Kelley is the one who would have returned to the woods of Concord with a feeling of ambivalence, if not outright shame, for what he had done. That same Thoreau also found himself living in what he describes as a formerly Black neighborhood on

33 For more on Kelley's rejection of "civil rights as a narrative of charismatic leadership" (107) in *A Different Drummer*, see: Edwards, Erica. *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership.* U of Minnesota P, 2012.

the outskirts of Concord. He imagines the lives of the woods' "former inhabitants"—Cato Ingraham, Zilpha, and Brister Freeman—telling his readers where they lived and what they lived for. Thoreau acknowledges the invisibility of African-Americans in the place but not in the history of Walden.[34] That identification with enslaved and formerly enslaved persons who lived in the Walden Woods is what draws a writer like Kelley to him. Just as "Kelley's invisible southern state," according to Trudier Harris, "becomes a convenient metaphor for the relationship of African Americans and African American writers to the South,"[35] so does the African-Americanization of Thoreau's radicalism, recontextualized as it is in the story of Tucker Caliban, speak to the relationship of African-American writers to a segregated American/African-American literary tradition.

If Kelley uses (or abuses) Thoreau, it is because he shares his same ironic sensibility about the possibilities of language. Just as Kelley himself followed Thoreau's dictum to "live deliberately," Tucker Caliban also takes Thoreau at his word; that is, he de-liberates himself, escaping from the liberated life that a descendant of enslaved persons would have experienced in the early-twentieth-century South. The paradoxical expressions that Thoreau is apt to make, such as the one about himself and his penchant for doing good, are sources of inspiration for Kelley. Kelley's ironic reimagining of Thoreau's dictum is the kind of word play that Thoreau reveled in himself. Moreover, the very idiom Thoreau chooses to express this lived philosophy—"live deliberately"—would have jarred the ears of his critics in the same way that "woke" has sounded to many outside of Black culture. In both these expressions, words push against the boundaries of convention, disobey the rules of grammar, and convey a form of freedom through resistance.

My thanks to Karen Aiki Kelley and Jesi Kelley for their gracious assistance and cooperation.

34 For a history of slavery in Concord and the lives of some of its first Black residents, see Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2011.

35 Harris, Trudier. "William Melvin Kelley's Real Live, Invisible South." *South Central Review*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2005, pp. 26-47, p. 43.