## Sense of Place and Sense of Taste: Thoreau's Botanical Aesthetics

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### Introduction

The influence of 19th-century naturalist Henry David Thoreau's body of writings on contemporary American environmentalism has been extensively documented and theorized by literary scholars.[1] Thoreau's prose evokes the natural world in scientifically precise terms and in combination with philosophical ruminations, historical references, and aesthetic judgements.[2] As a transdisciplinarian, Thoreau's fascination for the local environment of Concord was not only scientific, but also cultural, historical, and spiritual. Bradley Dean[3] sees Thoreau as a "protoecologist" whose later work anticipates the birth of modern ecology through its meticulous description of natural occurrences. Four years after Thoreau's death in 1862 from tuberculosis, the German biologist and follower of Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, would propose the neologism *Oecologie* as "the science of the relations of living organisms to the external world, their habitat, customs, energies, parasites, etc."[4] Both terms *economy* and *ecology* share the Greek root *oikos*, originally denoting the daily operations and maintenance of a family household.[5] As many contemporary environmental writers have underscored, ecology is the study of the earth "household."[6] At the heart of Thoreau's protoecological writings is an aesthetics of the natural world. His ecological aesthetics resists paradigms of beauty that privilege art over nature, humanity over nonhuman life, and vision over the non-ocular senses of sound, taste, touch, smell, and spatial orientation. Moreover, Thoreau's aesthetic approach to ecology and the natural world is an embodied—rather than visually distanced—one.[7]

Thoreau's aesthetic engagement with nature is acutely evident in his posthumously published botanical writings composed approximately from 1859 until his death in 1862.[8] These works include *The Dispersion of Seeds*[9] and *Wild Fruits*[10] as well as a number of essays, such as "Wild Apples," culled by Thoreau from his manuscripts and submitted to *The Atlantic Monthly* and other

journals. The unfinished manuscript *Wild Fruits* principally reflects his unfulfilled desire to write a comprehensive environmental history of Concord, Massachusetts, focused on the seasonal patterns of local plants, animals, and weather. The natural phenomena observed and reflected upon in *Wild Fruits* are presented in order of their appearance from the emergence of the first fruits of spring (the winged seeds of elm trees in early May) to the last fruits of winter (the berries of *Juniper repens* in March). Thoreau referred to this ambitious undertaking as his "Kalendar," reflecting his familiarity with English gardener and diarist John Evelyn's *Kalendarium Hortense*, or *The Gardener's Almanac* (originally published in 1664), "directing what he [the gardener] is to do monthly throughout the year and what fruits and flowers are in prime."[11] As evident in these two manuscripts, Thoreau's botanical writings consist of factual information about the size, shape, and distribution of fruits blended with subjective, embodied, aesthetic, historical, environmental, and even political observations. The blended prose of *Wild Fruits* includes the visual accounting of botanical characteristics, reflections on historical sources such as the works of the sixteenth-century botanist and herbalist John Gerard, and evocations of nibbling, tasting, or consuming berries *in toto*. More importantly, plants in his oeuvre are not treated merely as the objects of scientific evaluation or visual appeal, but as subjects of complex embodied and multi-sensory human exploration of the natural world.[12]

This article will examine Thoreau's aesthetics of gustation—of taste—in *Wild Fruits* and, more specifically, his use of poetic language to express aesthetic experiences of tasting, sampling, eating, or rejecting as unpalatable Concord's local fruits. Thoreau's ecological gustation intersects with French philosopher Michel Serres' claim in *The Five Senses* that language mediates the sensory world and brings aesthetic experiences to reflective consciousness. Serres rejects the historical understanding of taste as a base or primitive sense, "the least aesthetic" of the five.[13] The problem of taste, as such, is one of language. "Taste is rarely conveyed well [as though] language allowed it no voice," Serres claims, because "the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste, expels it from discourse."[14] Thoreau's gustatory writings in *Wild Fruits* return discourse to taste and give voice to experiences of consuming the botanical environment—perhaps the most sensuous and aesthetically rich interaction one can have with nature. In doing so, his writings affirm the environment as a valid subject of aesthetic inquiry but also the sense of taste as an appropriate faculty of appreciation. Furthermore, rather than base or unrefined, Thoreau's ecological gustation, as presented in the text, is nuanced and discerning. Through taste, Thoreau distinguished the relative virtues of wild fruits, for example, considering the "bitter-sweet of a white acorn" more pleasing than "a slice of imported pine-apple."[15] We thus find proto-bioregional traces in *Wild Fruits*, praising the consumption of local foods and constructing *sense of place* through *sense of taste*, in this context, achieved through indulging in the pleasures of non-cultivated fruits. Indeed, Thoreau's critique

of the aesthetic sensibilities of his era, particularly "the coarse palates [that] fail to perceive" the flavors of wild fruits[16] could be relevant to us today.

**Science, Sense, and Sexuality: An Embodied Aesthetics of Flora**

For Thoreau, the beauty of nature always inherently exceeds that of art. As apparent in his "scattered remarks on problems of aesthetics,"[17] Thoreau maintained a critical posture both toward humanist aesthetics that place art above nature and, later in his work, toward the picturesque preoccupation with vistas. Landscape art, such as that of the Italian painters Guido Reni and Titian, whom he mentions in his journal, should not be conflated with nature as "bald imitation or rival."[18] Reflecting the development of aesthetic sensibilities linked to place consciousness, Thoreau largely dismissed English art critic John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* (originally published in 1843) as a book that "does not describe Nature as Nature, but as Turner painted her, and though the work betrays that he has given a close attention to Nature, it appears to have been with an artist's and critic's design."[19] Rather than nature represented or mediated by artists and in works of art, Thoreau became acutely interested in immanent nature "as she is"[20]—an aesthetics of direct contact with the world that would come to underpin the detailed botanical writings of *Wild Fruits*. It is also documented that Thoreau studied the works of English artist and theorist William Gilpin, credited with conceiving of the idea of the picturesque, "at greater length […] than any other non-contemporary figure."[21] Through the positive effect of Gilpin's insistence on language as a fitting medium for picturesque representation (analogous to paint itself, so Gilpin suggested), Thoreau's journal underwent a transformation from the mundane accounting of facts and occurrences to the intricate textual illustration of natural phenomena and their cultural contexts. Additionally, Thoreau was also known to carry a Claude glass (a small convex mirror that imparts a painterly ambience to what is viewed) as part of his recording of the Concord environment (human and nonhuman, natural and cultural) in his notebook.[22] However, unlike Gilpin's emphasis on scenic grandeur and broad vistas, Thoreau would eventually gravitate toward less picturesque landscapes, such as wetlands, with keen attention to recording their minutiae and temporal changes. Hence, it could be said that one reason for Thoreau's departure from the picturesque aesthetic was geographic. The landscape of Concord is sufficiently different to that of Gilpin's English countryside and necessitates aesthetic ideas and approaches that deviate from conventions formulated elsewhere. Coming to regard the vista as an outmoded Romantic preoccupation, Thoreau attended to the minuscule detail of his environs, developing an attentive practice of multi-sensory environmental portraiture that reaches its zenith in *Wild Fruits*.

Thoreau's reinterpretation of humanist aesthetics and his valuing of wild nature over art were critical to his development of a particularly American mode of environmental thought and representation in the late 19th and early

20th centuries.[23] Specifically, his botanical aesthetics involve visual appreciation of flora in close connection to sensorial interaction with plants and their environments.[24] His mode of immersive corporeal engagement with the botanical world resists the predominantly ocular approach of scientific authority, as achieved in taxonomic classification and morphological description. Thoreau's embodied aesthetics of plants also intensely contrast to Kantian formalism and, principally, the contested notion of "disinterestedness." Based in the paradigm of aesthetics as a "science" of sensory perception, this principle dictates that "the pleasure which grounds a judgment of taste should not be desire-related"[25] and, even in "strong, moderate, and weak" forms, seeks to exclude highly subjective or idiosyncratic reactions to art and nature.[26] Abandoning the possibility of disinterestedness and the detached aesthetics of the picturesque, Thoreau affirms that our aesthetic tastes originate in our bodies in vibrant relation to nature.[27] Whereas Kant devalues sensuous experiences of human pleasure, particularly eating, Thoreau embraces them as part of a corporeal epistemology of the environment—one particularly centering on knowledge gained through acts of tasting, smelling, and touching.

Indeed, rejecting Kantian skepticism, Thoreau adopted a form of sensuous and even erotic empiricism involving contact with nature through "the bodily eye."[28] Rather than treating imagination and understanding, the body and the mind, science and art, as opposed terms, Thoreau sought their complementariness.[29] His perceptions of the environment are direct, affective, and, at times, idiosyncratic—in other words, anti-Kantian in their subjectivity. He recognizes the immanence of nature and resists its reduction to the moralistic symbols or figures of transcendence that define the Romanticist version of nature.[30] The sensuous "aesthetics of engagement" evident in his work regard the natural world as an active phenomenon – one that is contingent on human interactions with other living beings, natural elements, and ecological processes.[31] Dana Phillips 1) argues that the aesthetic and the erotic intermingle in Thoreau's prose, resulting in "an aesthetics of sheer sensual abandon."[32] For example, regarding high blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), the bushes during winter bend over "nearly to the ice [...] with lusty young shoots running up perpendicularly by their sides, like erect men destined to perpetuate the family by the side of their stooping sires."[33] In addition to imparting humor and lightness to the text, the eroticizing of plants reflects Thoreau's "embattled approach" to scientific knowledge, with which he was both conversant and critical.[34] Indeed, alongside his use of caricaturization and eroticization, he consistently inflects scientific understandings of plants in *Wild Fruits*, even speculating on the exact taxonomy of certain species, including a variety of high blueberry: "narrow leaves, and a conspicuous calyx, which appears to be intermediate between this and the *Vaccinium vacillans* or *Vaccinium pennsylvanicum*."[35] His prose (in its more descriptive and perhaps mundane moments) demonstrates an awareness of the botanical knowledge of his era, especially the taxonomic relationships between

plants: "Huckleberries are classed by botanists with the cranberries (both bog and mountain) [...] plants of this order (*Ericaceae*) are said to be among the earliest ones found in a fossil state."[36]

While Thoreau's visual perception was acute, as exemplified in his careful observations of high blueberry, his prose shuns distanced ocular representation for more intimate contact with the environment. As some critics have observed, an aesthetics of the natural ornament can be found in his writing.[37] For example, Thoreau describes the berries of red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*) as "the pendant jewellery of the season dangling over the face of the river and reflected in it."[38] Represented as an ornament, nature reflects the balance, symmetry, and pleasing coloration of aesthetic beauty, or, conversely, nature becomes a template or model for the human creation of non-living ornaments.[39] However, rather than internalizing a concept of stasis, Thoreau's aesthetics of the ornament involve the instability and dynamism of natural objects—animate and inanimate.[40] His aesthetics of natural beauty do not adhere to a humanist paradigm of an artist shaping the natural world in his or her image; instead, form is the outcome of inherent temporal forces, or *poiesis*.[41] Ultimately, Thoreau's environmental ethos led him to reject aesthetic framing in terms that would have been familiar to Gilpin and other painters of the picturesque. A critique of the ornament is evident in *Wild Fruits* when he asks, "what, for instance, are the blue juniper berries in the pasture, considered as mere objects of beauty, to church or state?"[42] The visual beauty of the berries as ornaments is aligned with the dogma of church and state—those twin foundations of American democracy. In contrast, the sensuous and edible attributes of the berries embody the obverse: wildness. Whereas an ornament is visual rather than functional (excepting, for example, some architectural ornaments), the blue juniper berries are beautiful (visually appealing), sensuous (edible), and serviceable (used for the production of alcohol). This underscores that fact that Thoreau's embodied aesthetics is concerned with wild plants – those that consort with him in loosening the humanist grip on tenets of beauty defined through art and sight. In many instance, he refers to the "wild flavor" of certain fruits,[43] or those like the wild gooseberry that are "rather acid and wild tasted."[44]

## From Kant to Thoreau to Serres: Reclaiming the Sense of Taste

One of the ways in which Thoreau develops an aesthetics of flora and thereby rejects the ocularcentric Kantian tradition is through the radical acts of nibbling, tasting, consuming, and processing as food the berries of the Concord area. The sense of taste, however, has a much beleaguered position in the history of Western aesthetics. Aristotle only recognized four senses, correlating them to the four elements: vision with water, sound with air, smell with fire, and touch with earth. He regarded taste as a derivative of touch.[45] Later philosophers would pejoratively consider the olfactory and gustatory to reflect base or primordial levels of being.[46] For German philosopher Immanuel

Kant (1724–1804), interested in establishing a system of aesthetic judgements based on pure beauty, taste is not the sense itself but a metaphor for aesthetic sensibility in general (i.e. as Taste).[47] What results from Kant's metaphysics is a sense hierarchy, segregating judgements based on the distal senses of vision and hearing from those derived from the proximal senses of pleasure.[48]

The sense of taste as gustation, for Kant, entails bodily sensation not free from desire (hence not disinterested) and, therefore, fails to lead to the pure aesthetic judgement of beauty. As base, primordial, and carnal drives, hunger and sexual appetite interrupt pure aesthetic contemplation and the formation of judgements that could be considered valid between people and thus universal.[49] Kant distinguishes between the "objective" senses of seeing, hearing, and touch in contrast to the "subjective" senses of smelling and tasting: "The subjective senses are senses of enjoyment, the objective senses, on the other hand, are instructive senses."[50] For Kant, whereas the three objective senses principally (and more consistently) convey information about objects, the two subjective senses lead to highly subjective experiences of pleasure or displeasure. In his *Lectures on Metaphysics*, presented between the 1760s and 1790s, and later published, Kant asserts that "if one merely smells or tastes, one can not yet distinguish one thing from another. I cannot know color, shape, etc. [...] We can fall into a swoon from strong odors, and from foul taste nausea can be aroused and thereby set the entire body into convulsions."[51] As the hallmarks of visual beauty, color and shape relate to cognitive knowledge. In sharp contrast, smell and taste can result in negative effects on the body that occur regardless of our conscious faculties.

The contemporary French philosopher Michel Serres counters the Kantian hierarchy of the senses that largely privileges the distal over the proximal senses—vision and hearing over touch, taste, and smell. For Serres, the intermingling of the senses is the mechanism through which the body interacts with the world and transcends the physical and existential boundaries of human subjectivity.[52] Serres disturbs the Kantian paradigm by stressing the correspondence between the sense of taste, the attainment of knowledge, and the faculty of language. "What we hear, through our tongue, is that there is nothing in sapience that has not first passed through mouth and taste, through sapidity."[53] Sapidity (the quality of having flavor) mirrors sapience (the quality of having wisdom and discernment)—the two words sharing an etymology in the Latin *sapere*, meaning both to taste and to be wise. In other words, both the experience of taste and the enunciation of wisdom (in the form of language) pass through the mouth and involve the tongue as the shared organ.[54] *Homo sapiens*, then, are beings who both taste and know; or know *through* taste. "Wisdom comes after taste, cannot arise without it, but has forgotten it [...] taste institutes sapience."[55] The modes of abstraction and analysis associated with sight and hearing "tear the body to pieces," negating taste, smell, and touch.[56] The antidote is a "return to things themselves,"[57] a return to the proximal senses, those which put human experience into direct, unmediated contact with the world and the body. On the contrary, logic and grammar (the

tenets of language) become "dreary and insane when they deny themselves bodies."[58] A language of taste is necessarily situated in the body; the tongue of taste *is* the tongue of language. However, the experience of taste is never confined to the physiological actions of the tongue in which taste receptors receive sensations from the substances of food and drink. Instead, using the example of wine, Serres constructs taste as the integration of climatic conditions, soil formations, wind patterns, water conditions, sun angles, and cultivation practices.[59] Put differently, taste is *a priori* an environmental sense that experientially maps onto its ecological provenance. Its boundaries (which separate it from the other senses) dissolve as its effects intermingle with the environment, the body, and sensation itself.

In *Wild Fruits*, Thoreau expresses this latter aspect of Serres' philosophy of taste eloquently. The taste of the wild-crafted berry embodies the taste of the earth, the environment, the seasons, the soil, the elements, the stars, the wetlands. One of the earliest wild fruits of spring, the strawberry makes possible a gustatory experience of the earth specific to this time of year:

> What flavor can be more agreeable to our palates than that of this little fruit, which thus, as it were, exudes from the earth at the very beginning of the summer, without any care of ours? What beautiful and palatable bread! [...] I taste a little strawberry-flavored earth with them. I get enough to redden my fingers and lips at least.[60]

This passage disrupts an aesthetics of the ornament (of "this little fruit"), focusing instead on the strawberry-infused taste of earth and the tactility of reddening fingers and lips. Thoreau likens the strawberry to a "concentration and embodiment of that vernal fragrance with which the air has lately teemed."[61] The condensation of spring's fragrance is both in the image and taste of the strawberries. The fruit as a "palatable bread" reflects Thoreau's knowledge of Native American cultures, particularly the reliance of some societies on pemmican, a dense mixture of fat, protein, and, depending on the season or ceremony, fruits. Moreover, the acidic fruits of high blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) "embody for me the essence and flavor of the swamp"[62] with their "little blue sacks full of swampy nectar and ambrosia commingled, whose bonds you burst by the pressure of your teeth."[63] We thus find in Thoreau's aesthetics of flora a distinctive ecological aesthetics of taste in which gustatory experiences of fruit are implicated with the environment in which the fruit matures and from which the fruit extracts a particular local flavor. The Serresian mingling of the senses, in this instance, involves synergism between vision ("little blue sacks"), touch ("bonds you burst"), and taste ("swampy nectar"). Other examples are apparent throughout the text. The early low, or dwarf, blueberry (*Vaccinium pennsylvanicum*) bears "a very innocent ambrosial taste, as if made of the ether itself."[64] The taste of the fruit is the taste of "ether," from the Latin *aethēr* for pure, bright, rarefied air; and invoking the

ancient alchemical element—the fifth, after air, earth, fire, and water—thought to be ubiquitous in the heavens but out of the reach of human perception. In contrast, the fruit of late low blueberry (*Vaccinium vacillans*) is "more like solid food, hard and bread-like, though at the same time more earthy,"[65] further revealing Thoreau's elemental ideas concerning plants and their fruits. Finally, the pores of a pear "whisper of the happy stars under whose influence they have grown."[66]

## Thoreau's Ecological Sense of Taste: Themes in *Wild Fruits*

Turning from the conceptualization of taste (with a lower case "t") in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophies, this section will analyze the dominant themes in *Wild Fruits* that coalesce Thoreau's ecological gustation. The gustatory philosophy presented in *Wild Fruits* follows Serres' assertion that, rather than an undeveloped, isolated, and merely carnal sense, taste imparts complex knowledge and wisdom; and that taste intermingles with our other senses in our experiences of it and the natural world. To taste is also to smell, touch, hear, see, think, dream, and imagine. For Thoreau, the practice of tasting (or, often, nibbling) fruits is continuously informed by Native American and Anglo-European botanical traditions, both of which are contingent upon largely proximal – rather than entirely distal –interactions with plants satisfying the (unmistakably "interested") carnal drive to consume foods and medicines, to attain nourishing substances, to find relief from disease, and, eventually, to survive and even flourish in one's environment. Conversant with these traditions, Thoreau references key studies along with his personal observations of Native American and Anglo-European ethnobotanies. Through these means, he develops a sophisticated empiricism of taste, which cultivates, rather than mutes, the discriminatory and knowledge-making capacities of this most "subjective" and primal sense. Although Thoreau[67] at one point characterizes the sense of taste as "commonly gross," he suggests that regular practices of gustation assist in developing human acuteness of perception.

In *Wild Fruits*, taste is not isolated from its manifold sensory, environmental, *and* cultural contexts. The sensuous aesthetics of *Wild Fruits* is ostensibly informed by Native American traditions of harvesting wild foods and, in particular, consuming berries. Lawrence Willson and, more recently, Timothy Troy have noted Thoreau's intensive interest in the cultural traditions of Native Americans.[68] Thoreau also made use of what we would today call ethnographic approaches, particularly one-on-one field interviews and "mobile ethnographies"[69] involving walking and other forms of movement, to access environmental knowledge and understand the natural history of the Concord area. In his extended rumination on the black huckleberry, Thoreau observes plainly that "the berries *which I celebrate* [and which most other Anglo-Europeans do not] appear to have a range, most of them, very nearly coterminous with what has been called the Algonquin Family of Indians [...] these were the small fruits of the Algonquin and Iroquois Families [emphasis

in original].”[70] In fact, he derived some of his knowledge of edibles from “walking behind an Indian in Maine and observing that he ate some [berries] which I never thought of tasting before.”[71] Thoreau was also an advocate for the use of the Native American names for plants, in lieu of “the very inadequate Greek and Latin or English ones at present used”;[72] alongside Latin designations, he presents the common, folk, local, indigenous, and historical names of flora.

However, other aspects of Thoreau’s ethnobotanical knowledge were second-hand, as he references, for instance, French explorer Jacques Cartier’s observation of indigenous Canadians drying plums for the winter, just as the French did.[73] As well as Native American sources, Thoreau draws from Gerard’s *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597).[74] Like ethnobotanical traditions, herbal knowledge is based upon proximal interactions of tasting, smelling, and touching plants as medicines. Thoreau commends Gerard’s careful, embodied reporting of sensations produced by plants and seems to prefer his accounts of English flora to those of other nineteenth-century botanists and naturalists.[75] The example of the sweet flag is indicative of the extent of Thoreau’s reading, encompassing indigenous, ancient Greek and Roman, and contemporaneous sources. Thoreau quotes Gerard, who explains the esteem that Tartars held for the root: “they will not drink water (which is their usual drink) unless they have just steeped some of this root therein.”[76] In the same passage, Thoreau subsequently refers to the nineteenth-century Scottish naturalist and explorer Sir John Richardson’s documentation of the Cree name *watchuske-mitsu-in* for sweet flag and its use by Native Americans as a treatment for colic. However, knowledge of the palatability of the “inmost tender leaf” was, at least by the mid-nineteenth-century, preserved among Concord children as the folk knowledge of those who went “a-flagging” (sweet flag harvesting) in the spring.[77] Again, in his passage on wild strawberries, Thoreau quotes Gerard, who depicts their taste as “little, thin and waterish, and if they happen to putrify in the stomach, their nourishment is naught.”[78]

Subtleties of language and expression reveal Thoreau’s discerning between pleasurable, neutral, and repellent tastes. Gustatory variations between the opposite poles of agreeable and disagreeable are expressed in his work. Thoreau’s acts of nibbling local plants and forming opinions about their qualities underlie an empiricism of taste, in which, contrary to Kant but affirmative of Serres, information is derived through gustation and knowledge is gained. Indeed, his occasional walking companion Ellery Channing discussed Thoreau’s “edible religion” involving sustained devotion to sampling, through taste, nearly every wild plant that he could access.[79] The red low blackberry has a “lively acid but pleasant taste, with somewhat of the raspberry’s spirit. They both taste and look like a cross between a raspberry and a blackberry.”[80] Here, Thoreau contemplates the natural hybridization of the raspberry and blackberry that has resulted in a berry with a “raspberry’s spirit”—one in which its taste is tantamount to its visual appearance. This practice of empirical deduction constructs the sense of taste not only in terms of generalized

appreciation of nature but for its capacity to inform aesthetic judgements, underpin ecological knowledge, and prompt the differentiation between species according to their gustatory qualities (rather than their visual attributes in the Linnaean genus-species taxonomic model, which largely ignores taste). Regarding the smooth sumac, he notes "that sour-tasting white and creamy incrustation [*sic*] between and on the berries of the smooth sumac, like frostwork. Is it not an exudation? Or is it produced by the bite of an insect?"[81] Taste (sour and creamy) precedes sight (frostwork) and initiates deductive questioning regarding the ecological purpose of the unusual encrustation.

The dynamics between taste, smell, vision, and sensuality more broadly constitute a salient theme in Thoreau's ecological gustation. As such, *Wild Fruits* compellingly illustrates Serres' notion of the mingling of the senses. On the late low blueberry, Thoreau observes that "these almost spicy, lingering clusters of blueberries contrast strangely with the bright leaves."[82] This statement is a surprising instance of synaesthesia in which the sapidity of the berries (their piquancy) is pitted against the visual characteristics of the leaves (their intensity). Usually, tastes are compared to other tastes; sights to other sights; but Thoreau disrupts this kind of experiential correspondence and expectation. The dynamics between the senses sometimes result in an opposition, rather than a contrast or complementarity, as the flavor of the blueberries "prevents our observing their beauty."[83] We find an aesthetics that counters the idea of nature as an ornament or decorative object. Thoreau's immersive sensuality—one can imagine his whole face plunged into the bush, mouth ready and lip taut to pluck the berries—diverges sharply from the disinterested contemplation of beauty inherent to Kant's aesthetic philosophy. The volatile chemicals of fruits are often smelled before they are tasted or seen in an uncanny inversion of visual order and an interpenetration of the senses. The fruit of a particular wild apple tree has a "peculiarly pleasant bitter tang, not perceived till it is three-quarters tasted. It remains on the tongue. As you eat it, it smells exactly like a squash-bug."[84] The mingling of taste (the apple's "bitter tang") and smell (pungent "like a squash-bug") has much to do with the physiology of smell. Olfaction occurs *orthonasally* (through the nostrils into the nasal cavity itself) and *retronasally* (via the palate within our mouths), the former also being the pathway of taste.[85]

## Wild Tastes and Local Foods: Thoreau's Aesthetic Lessons

Much of *Wild Fruits* concerns finding the appropriate and most evocative language to capture, convey, and give voice to experiences of tasting fruits (and a few roots) in prose. Ultimately, Thoreau confers a discourse to taste that involves the human *sensorium*—the sum of a being's perception linking sense experiences together as bodily sensation in a place or bioregion. The botanical aesthetics of *Wild Fruits* give discourse to the wild—and at times unruly and unpredictable—tastes of local foods. Thoreau suggests that their abandonment occurs as Anglo-European palates become increasingly accustomed to

cultivated varieties. For instance, some wild fruits are highly astringent and largely considered unpalatable in quantities. Referring to chokeberry (*Pyrus arbutifolia*), "I *eat* the high blueberry [a prized wild fruit among locals], but I am also interested in the rich-looking, glossy-black chokeberries, which nobody eats and which bend down the bushes on every side – sweetish berries, with a dry and so choking taste [emphasis in original]."[86] By late August, the chokeberries have "a sweet and pleasant taste enough at first, but leave a mass of dry pulp in the mouth."[87] These are uncelebrated fruits, their profusion a result of their disregard—their disregard a reflection of their caustic flavor and its unsettling physical sensations.

A cloying effect is also evident with the choke cherry (*Cerasus virginiana*), which "[so furs] the mouth that the tongue will cleave to the roof, and the throat wax hoarse with swallowing those red bullies."[88] Using an apt metaphor from domestic life for their astringency, Thoreau observes that "the juice of those taken into the mouth mixed with the saliva is feathered, like tea into which sour milk has been poured."[89] However, this "natural raciness" could have less to do with the inherent qualities of the fruits themselves and more to do with their human reception, as "the sours and bitters which the *diseased* palate refuses, are the true condiments [italics added]."[90] In terms that pathologize civilization, Thoreau implies that a "diseased" palate is one which is no longer in a natural state—one which refuses to accept wild sourness and bitterness because of its prolonged, even inherited, exposure to the supposedly more refined tastes (sweeter and less bitter) of cultivated fruits. Whereas Thoreauvian taste is wildly disconcerting at times (as the furring sensation of the choke cherries and chokeberries indicates), the Kantian aesthetic paradigm would seek to dismiss wildness as an embodied taste in favor of wildness as a perfected image, in the tradition of the painters Guido Reni, Titian, and Caspar David Friedrich. However, Thoreau seeks to navigate the intricacies and entanglements of taste rather than reducing the natural world in his prose to a series of images.

Other variations of wild taste are more pleasurable and desirable than their cultivated counterparts, at least to Thoreau's sensibilities. With an air of regional and national pride, Thoreau emphasizes that these flavors distinguish the Concord (and, more broadly, the American) landscape. The taste of wild apples is "more memorable […] than the grafted kinds; more racy and wild American flavors do they possess […] an old farmer in my neighborhood, who always selects the right word, says that 'they have a kind of bow-arrow tang.'"[91] Moreover, the apple's flavor is contingent on its environment and dramatically transforms for the worse when brought indoors, that is, as it becomes domesticated. The fruit, "so spirited and racy when eaten in the fields or woods, being brought into the house, has frequently a harsh and crabbed taste."[92] In this statement, we find a friction between the tastes of domestic (or cultivated) and wild (or uncultivated) fruits, the latter needing to be consumed in the environment in which it matured in order to be fully appreciated. Thoreau explains that wild flavors are designed for savoring in their natural

settings and with the same freedom of spirit exerted during their collection: "the Saunterer's Apple not even the saunterer can eat in the house. The palate rejects it there, as it does haws and acorns, and demands a tamed one."[93]

Coming to know the wild fruits (and other foods) of one's area necessarily involves becoming physically immersed and sensuously interconnected. Thoreau explains that "our diet, like that of the birds, must answer to the season."[94] Regardless of the effects of modernization and industrialization on food production and consumption, "it is surely better to take thus what Nature offers in her season, like a robin, than to buy an extra dinner."[95] While some wild flavors, such as chokeberries and choke cherries, require the re-education of the human senses to appreciate, others are immediately pleasing and without parallel: "No tarts that I ever tasted at any table possessed such a refreshing, cheering, encouraging acid that literally put the heart in you and set you on edge for this world's experiences, bracing the spirit, as the cranberries I have plucked in the meadows in the spring."[96] This demonstrates the true range of wild tastes and the discourses given to them, from "encouraging acid" to "bow-arrow tang." As Thoreau dismantles the distance between himself (as subject) and fruits (as objects), and discovers the language for doing so, he at the same time reveals the complexity (and joys) of the taste faculty and the fruits it promises for a more sustainable and sensual future.

In closing, I suggest that Thoreau's botanical aesthetics, as enunciated in *Wild Fruits*, can be understood as "proto-bioregional" (as well as proto-ecological). An environmental movement inaugurated in the Western United States in the 1970s, bioregionalism values the importance of "place" (delineated according to natural boundaries), including the foods that are local and well-matched to one's seasons and environment, in contrast to those imported from elsewhere.[97] Indeed, Thoreau entreats us to consider the practical benefits and bodily pleasures of local consumption; his endorsement of the local was a precursor to bioregionalism's commitment to regions as potentially self-sufficient entities, particularly in relation to their food economies. Thoreau evokes a bioregional ethos, through gustation, in praising the "bitter-sweet of a white acorn" over the intense sweetness of "a slice of imported pine-apple."[98] Whereas the pineapple is indigenous to South America and suits tropical climates, the white acorn is the local food—literally the bread—of Thoreau's home region, which he considers more broadly than Concord town and (defying Anglo-European political boundaries) aligns with the Algonquin and Iroquois nations. Thoreau's position is crucial for us today as the production, transportation, and consumption of food are recognized as important aspects of contemporary environmental sustainability.[99] In *Wild Fruits*, Thoreau compellingly suggests that living locally can be an immensely gratifying experience—one which also connects us to the human and nonhuman inhabitants of our home region and better ensures vibrant and *tasteful* lives for all.

## Notes

[1]for example, see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995 and Dana Phillips, "Thoreau's Aesthetics and 'The Domain of the Superlative'" in *Environmental Values* 15 (3) (2006): 293–305.
http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5967.
[2] John Charles Ryan, *Unbraided Lines: Essays in Environmental Thinking and Writing*. (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2013), 13-25.
[3] Bradley P. Dean, 2000a. "Introduction." In *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*, edited by Bradley P. Dean (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000a) xii.
[4] Quoted in Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 192.
[5] Worster, *Nature's Economy,* 192.
[6] for example, see Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes & Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*. New York: New Directions Books, 1969.
[7] Daniel Dillard, "'What is Man but a Mass of Thawing Clay?': Thoreau, Embodiment, and the Nineteenth-Century Posthuman." *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 26 (3) (2013): 254–269.
[8] Bradley P. Dean, "A Thoreau Chronology." In *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*, edited by Bradley P. Dean, 273–275. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000b), 274.
[9] Henry Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993.
[10] Henry David Thoreau, *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*. Edited by Bradley P. Dean. New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.
[11] John Evelyn *Kalendarium Hortense or, The Gard'ners Almanac*. London: George Haddleston, 1699.
[12] John Ryan, *Green Sense: The Aesthetics of Plants, Place and Language*. Oxford: TrueHeart Academic Press, 2012.
[13] Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. (London: Continuum. 2008), 153.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits,* 3.
[16] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits,* 75.
[17] Horstmann quoted in Jannika Bock, *Concord in Massachusetts, Discord in the World: The Writings of Henry Thoreau and John Cage*. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008), 100.
[18] Henry David Thoreau, 2005. *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*. (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005), 176.
[19] Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 1837–1861*. (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2009), 458.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Harding and Meyer quoted in John Conron, *American Picturesque*. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2000), 291.
[22] Ibid., 292-294.
[23] Theo Davis, "'Just Apply a Weight': Thoreau and the Aesthetics of Ornament." *ELH* 77 (3) (2010): 563 doi: 10.1353/elh.2010.009.

[24] Arnold Berleant, *Thoreau's Aesthetics of Nature*, http://www.autograff.com/berleant/pages/Thoreau%27s%20Aesthetics%20of%20Nature%20.6.htm. n.d.
[25] Christopher Janaway, "Kant's Aesthetics and the 'Empty Cognitive Shock'." In *Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays*, edited by Paul Guyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 71.
[26] Norman Kreitman, The Varieties of Aesthetic Distinterestedness. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2006 http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=390.
[27] Phillips, "Thoreau's Aesthetics," 303.
[28] (1993, 26)
[29] Phillips, "Thoreau's Aesthetics," 302.
[30] Phillips, "Thoreau's Aesthetics," 304.
[31] Arnold Berleant, *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.
[32] Phillips, "Thoreau's Aesthetics," 30
[33] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 34.
[34] Phillips, "Thoreau's Aesthetics," 299.
[35] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 34.
[36] Ibid., 34
[37] Davis, "Just Apply a Weight."
[38] (2000, 123).
[39] Davis, "Just Apply a Weight," 561.
[40] Ibid., 564.
[41] Ibid., 572.
[42] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 5.
[43] Ibid., 59.
[44] Ibid., 62.
[45] Steven Connor, "Introduction" In *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, 1–16. (London: Continuum, 2008), 2.
[46] Maria L. Assad, *Reading with Michel Serres: An Encounter with Time*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1999), 84.
[47] Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 54.
[48] Ibid., 54.
[49] Ibid., 56.
[50] Kant quoted in David Berger, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory: The Beautiful and Agreeable*. (London: Continuum, 2009), 34.
[51] Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Metaphysics*. Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 251.
[52] Connor, "Introduction," 3.
[53] Serres, *The Five Senses*, 162.
[54] Assad, *Reading*, 84.
[55] Serres, *The Five Senses*, 154.
[56] Connor, "Introduction," 26.
[57] Serres, *The Five Senses*, 112.

[58] Serres, *The Five Senses,* 235.
[59] Assad, *Reading,* 83.
[60] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 12.
[61] Ibid., 12.
[62] Ibid., 31.
[63] Ibid., 33.
[64] Ibid., 22.
[65] Ibid., 36.
[66] Ibid., 128.
[67] quoted in Victor Karl Friesen, *The Spirit of the Huckleberry: Sensuousness in Henry Thoreau.* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1984), 15.
[68] See Timothy Troy, "*Ktaadn*: Thoreau the Anthropologist." *Dialectical Anthropology* 15 (1) (1990): 74–81; and Lawrence Willson, "Thoreau: Student of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 61 (2) (1959): 279–289.
[69] James Evans and Phil Jones. "The Walking Interview: Methodology, Mobility and Place." *Applied Geography* 31 (2011): 849–858.
[70] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits,* 46.
[71] Ibid., 46.
[72] Ibid., 50.
[73] Ibid., 112.
[74] John Gerard, *The Herball or General Historie of Plantes.* London: John Norton, 1597.
[75] Friesen, *Spirit of Huckleberry,* 70-71.
[76] Ibid., 8.
[77] Ibid., 7.
[78] Ibid., 11.
[79] Friesen, *Spirit of Huckleberry*, 27.
[80] Ibid., 26.
[81] Ibid., 125.
[82] Ibid., 37.
[83] Ibid., 33.
[84] Ibid., 86.
[85] Cain Todd, *The Philosophy of Wine: A Case of Truth, Beauty and Intoxication.* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.
[86] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits,* 66.
[87] Ibid., 66.
[88] Ibid., 72.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., 87.
[91] Ibid., 84.
[92] Ibid., 85.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 107.
[95] Ibid., 142.
[96] Ibid., 106.
[97] for example, Peter Berg, *The Biosphere and the Bioregion: Essential Writings of Peter Berg.* Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Eve Quesnel. Milton Park: Routledge, 2014.
[98] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits,* 3.

[99] Peter Oosterveer and David Sonnenfeld, *Food, Globalization and Sustainability*. Milton Park: Routledge, 2012.

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