April 16, 2008. “I spent last weekend clearing a space and digging in the dirt; made six trips down the mountain to get cement and wood. I should have the foundation finished this weekend.” James Benning was suddenly planning to build a cabin in a manzanita grove in the Sierra Nevada to mimic the one that Theodore Kaczynski had completed thirty-six years earlier in the pines of Montana. The version of Henry David Thoreau’s cabin Benning had made the year before was located nearby but out of sight. The Thoreau cabin had a pragmatic beginning. Once Benning had finished remodeling the place he had bought in the mountains, he was eager to do more construction. Having never built a structure from scratch, he wanted to learn how. Thoreau’s quintessential American house came to mind.

Benning has long been concerned in his filmmaking with “landscape as a function of time.” He regards looking as method, form, and subject. In the late nineties, during a teaching residency in Korea, he went searching for something to read and found that the library at hand contained few English books. It was then that he read Walden. When he started teaching a class called “Looking and Listening” a few years later, he read the book again and further recognized his affinity with Thoreau in this passage: “No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking at what is to be seen?”

Benning’s awareness of Kaczynski was also kindled through reading, having come across Industrial Society and Its Future, aka the Unabomber Manifesto, when it was initially published in 1995. He was interested in its author “before

I am grateful to Laurie Monahan for dialogue and editorial advisement.

1 Correspondence with the author, April 16, 2008.
3 The New York Times received a letter on April 24, 1995, written under the guise of an anarchist group called FC, promising that if the Times or another national periodical would publish the essay Industrial Society and Its Future, FC would stop sending bombs. “If you can get it published according to our requirements we will permanently desist from terrorist activities. It must
I knew it was Kaczynski, when the bombings were happening and they seemed somewhat random. Then finally the FBI concluded that it was about technology and airplanes. Once he was arrested and was immediately painted as this weird fellow, I questioned who he really was. Whenever the media makes someone look so different than what they probably are, I get interested.”

More than a decade later, his curiosity was reawakened when he read that the cabin Kaczynski built in 1971 was modeled after Thoreau’s. On a plane en route to a conference about nature the week before “digging in the dirt,” Benning reread the manifesto and found it both “enlightening and totally crazy; it made me see everything different.”

The Unabomber campaign, carried out between 1978 and 1995, targeted individuals who stood for technological progress, and resulted in a range of injuries to twenty-three people and the deaths of three. It also publicized Kaczynski’s case against the technoindustrial system, which Kaczynski believes is society’s paramount problem, an all-encompassing, subjugating, destructive force that must be brought to an end through revolution.

In the media glare, Kaczynski was mainly portrayed as an eccentric madman who shunned civilization. That the Harvard-educated, once-brilliant mathematician and former Berkeley professor chose to live alone for twenty-five years in a ten-by-twelve-foot structure without electricity, running water, a car, or other amenities was incomprehensible to many.

During the lead up to the court case, Kaczynski’s cabin was depicted as evidence of his “insanity,” which was assumed to account for his violent acts and rejection of modern life. The cabin became an icon of the anarchistic rage he had enacted from its isolated interior.
To most, Ted Kaczynski represents the dystopian pole of social isolation, an indefensible variety of outsiderness. As a beloved dignitary of American history, Thoreau is admired for his profound attunement to nature and for his living experiment in the cabin he built in 1845 at Walden Pond. He is the embodiment of New England, constituted by resolve, earthbound knowhow, Yankee independence, and a wild-is-the-wind spirit. Thoreau’s cabin conjures a mixture of nostalgic American dreams, from instinctual kinship with nature to the aspiration to personal freedom to every citizen’s phantom entitlement – the paradisiacal homestead. While Thoreau is also “America’s favorite civil disobedient,” he is not normally celebrated for his participation in the Underground Railroad or for the nearly violence-inciting anti-slavery speech he delivered after the rendition of refugee slave Anthony Burns in 1854. Thoreau is foremost regarded as a naturalist with a gift for poetic language whose writings teach sensitivity to the perception of nature. Thoreau is the venerated voice of self-reliance presiding over a heritage of utopian individualists, the insider’s outsider.

In June 2008, Benning finished constructing his Kaczynski cabin and started assembling a library of more than one hundred titles that combines books Kaczynski read or owned with books that Benning was influenced by and that helped to focus his philosophical and artistic method of looking and listening. Mounted on the walls of both cabins are copies of paintings by “outsider” artists, also made by Benning. He began copying to learn how to paint and turned to the work of artists who fascinated him in their obsessive pursuit of a particular vision in order to better understand their ways of seeing and composing.

On the surface, Benning’s Two Cabins are night and day, invoking contradictory sets of reclusive intentions and divergent paths leading back out. Deeper inquiry reveals the Thoreau-Kaczynski equation to be inspired. Beyond differences, Benning’s engagement makes discernable a multitude of contacts between Thoreau’s and Kaczynski’s beliefs, political viewpoints, and experiences of seclusion. The apparent dichotomy loses its soundness as Benning’s formation artfully unfolds a complex articulation of practices of dissent, nonprescriptive ways of living, and the politics of solitude.

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9 Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” delivered at an antislavery rally in Framingham, Massachusetts, July 4, 1854.

10 Benning primarily works in film. Prior to beginning a film he researches a subject of investigation and its contexts for extended meanings. The knowledge he collects informs the course and imagery of each film.

11 Conversation, January 25, 2011.
He praised wild mountains and winter forests for their domestic air.
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

One thing about Thoreau keeps him very near to me: I refer to his lawlessness –
his dissent – his going his own absolute road let hell blaze all it chooses.
— Walt Whitman

From an early age, Henry David Thoreau spent a lot of time alone, reading and walking in the woods and meadows around his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. The introspective twenty-year-old was “already preoccupied with the idea of a primitive, heroic life” as he finished his studies at Harvard College in 1837. His junior year he had briefly boarded with radical Unitarian minister Orestes Brownson. Brownson’s interrogation of organized religion made a transforming impression on Thoreau, who characterized the six weeks as “an era in my life.” At Harvard, he read modern German philosophy and Goethe and was “deeply impressed” by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s seminal essay, Nature. Emerson delivered the keynote speech to Thoreau’s graduating class. Later that year, the two befriended each other. Like Thoreau, Emerson held the discipline of looking in high regard: “The eye is the best of artists.” On long walks, they discussed autonomy and the search for revelation in nature.

In 1838 Thoreau opened a small school in his parents’ house, and shortly after, he and his brother John founded a progressive independent elementary school. The same year, they took a two-week river journey through New Hampshire in a homemade boat, leaving behind “all time, all science, all history,” as they ventured into the wilderness. In 1841, Thoreau closed the academy due to his brother’s poor health. The following January, John died from a case of lockjaw, and Thoreau entered an extended depression.

His friendship with Emerson had steadily intensified. Thoreau moved into the Emerson household, where he received room and board in exchange for

12 Quoted in “The ‘Domestic Air’ of Wilderness: Henry Thoreau and Joe Polis in the Maine Woods,” (author unattributed), The Contemporary West 14, no. 3 (Fall 1997).
14 Ibid., p. 7.
16 Ibid., p. 15.
17 Emerson had attended Harvard himself between 1817 (when he was fourteen) and 1821.
19 Quoted in Richardson, p. 63.
doing chores and tutoring Ralph and Lydia’s son Waldo. Emerson was enthused by Thoreau’s philosophical perception and encouraged his writing. Thoreau valued Emerson’s support and acumen. The living arrangement was mutually nourishing, but Thoreau’s independence was soon threatened; the relationship became increasingly burdened. Fourteen years senior, Emerson considered himself Thoreau’s mentor. Thoreau was annoyed to be pegged the perpetual apprentice. Their professional asymmetry created friction, as did their divergent temperaments. To Emerson, Thoreau seemed wild and militant in his fervor to translate principle into action, and Thoreau was at odds with Emerson’s strictly cerebral and overcivilized orientation. Although their friendship cooled after a decade or so, they were exuberantly attuned for several years.

Both Thoreau and Emerson came to be prominent associates of American transcendentalism, which rejected religious doctrine in favor of individual intu- ition. They resisted the direction of modern industrial society in support of self-cultivation and communitarian ideals. They deemed nature the primary sustaining force for individual spiritual enrichment. Individual enlightenment was necessary for personal well-being and a prerequisite for contributing to a communally freethinking society. Their concept of individualism was not egoistic; its aim was particularized independence and, by extension, socially elevated conduct.

Thoreau’s philosophy inherently opposed prescription: “Fresh experience of the moment is critical to a life with principle.” The sovereignty of individual conscience, thought to be achievable through introspection, was elemental. The notion that individual integrity alone should guide one’s actions was in direct conflict with democracy. Some critics of transcendentalist thought wondered where the “church of one” could possibly lead. Thoreau’s writing of the late 1840s would attest to his lack of faith that the majority could act justly – “People obey out of self-interest” – and to his disbelief that government was capable of acting conscientiously. “Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?” He saw government as an expedient machine and idealized “a really free and enlightened State” that recognizes “the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived.”

20 Within weeks of John’s death, the Emens’ child Waldo died from scarlet fever.
21 Thoreau’s journal, May 25, 1853: “Talked, or tried to talk, to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Lost my time – nay, almost my identity. He, assuming a false opposition where there was no difference of opinion, talked to the wind – told me what I know – and I lost my time trying to imagine myself somebody else to oppose him.”
22 Quoted in Robinson, p. 164.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
Thoreau’s intellectual growth was nurtured by ongoing discussions with friends and by the extensive reading he did in Emerson’s library. Although he developed within a circle, he did so by way of his own uncompromising path. More practically applied than most, he “interrogated every custom.”\(^{26}\) He expressed sharp disagreement with overcivilized, conformist society and its “factory mode of production,” “general waste and extravagance,” and increasing division of labor, which narrowed people’s experience.\(^{27}\) Thoreau passionately opposed the modern system that incessantly demanded an army of laborers and focused people’s lives on unrewarding work with superficial consumption as compensation. He regarded the Industrial Revolution as dangerous in its potential to destroy nature and wilderness, as well as for the institutional degradation of human values it ushered into society.

Thoreau’s skepticism about institutions extended to those he felt affinity with. He distrusted giving utopian principles institutional form, including alternatives to prevailing modes posed by the collective living models fashioned in the early 1840s. He and Emerson perceived the Fruitland and Brook Farm experiments to be artificially staged; Thoreau tersely declined an invitation to join the latter community: “I had rather keep bachelor’s hall in hell than go board in heaven.”\(^{28}\) At the age of twenty-eight, he took to the woods.

Thoreau contends that his life at Walden Pond was not intended as an archetype, but was a private laboratory of undefined duration.\(^{29}\) “I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way.”\(^{30}\) He refuses to set an example while setting one.

Located one and a half miles outside of Concord, the site was isolated relative to living in town, but it was not remote. Thoreau stayed in close contact with Emerson.
with his family and friends while living there. His two years at Walden were “a life of labor and study.”

Walden was in part an immersion in writing to distill experience, including the death of his brother. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, written at Walden, he memorialized the river journey he’d taken with John seven years earlier without ever mentioning his name. The “reflective reconstruction” became his first book, self-published in 1849 after four rejections from publishers.

At Walden, Thoreau refined his insight from daily experiences into a preliminary manuscript he continued to ripen and revise for seven years after his departure. *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* was published in 1854. *Walden* makes evident that Thoreau had little use for human companionship, social convention, or the “conveniences” of modern life. He sought intimacy with himself and company with nature. He sought autonomy, intensity, economy, simplicity, and variety of experience: “Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?”

Thoreau’s writing is rooted in lived experience. Walden the experiment and *Walden* the book illustrate his “principle in action” philosophy: precepts inspire active experience that calls for written consideration, which in turn arouses more action. Life at Walden was a milestone for Thoreau as an author and philosopher, and it clarified his model of living: the doctrine of the pilgrim. Feeling restless, he dispensed with the project at the beginning of the third year. “I left the woods for as good reason as I went there.… I had several more lives to live.” By way of example, *Walden* contrasts with the new religion of materialism. *Walden* does not prescribe, it bespeaks a call to life, to self-emancipation, and in so doing is as much a political treatise as any of Thoreau’s essays.

Judging the subject unworthy of his attention, Thoreau was disinclined toward politics per se. “What is called politics is something so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all.” “Politics” and newspapers were merely interference, enemies of his chosen introspective path. That said, Thoreau’s view of nature was not as refuge but as sphere for philosophical, physical, spiritual, and personal action – he understood nature and society to be inextricable. Living a natural

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31 Emerson, “Thoreau.”
32 Robinson’s term, p. 77.
33 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854).
36 Quoted in Robinson, p. 166.
Thoreau had stopped paying the local poll tax in 1842, because aiding and affirming a government that sanctioned slavery "violated his conscience."37 Arrested for nonpayment in July of 1846, he was put in the Concord jail. To his consternation, his debt was paid for him, and he was jailed for just one night; he refused to leave the cell and had to be kicked out. The experience was electrifying.

Two years later, he gave account: "It was like travelling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night…. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions…that in their sacrifices to humanity, they ran no risks, not even to their property."38

Quaker writers had advanced the idea of disobeying the law as a religious imperative to oppose slavery and war; Thoreau proposed civil disobedience as a secular, individual ethic. His pioneering essay specifies the legitimate prerogative to not comply with laws one regards as unjust, to oblige the state to recognize your dissent, and to register an appeal to peers including agents of government. "If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine."39 Thoreau delivered "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government" at Concord Town Hall in 1848, aligning with nonresistance as put forth by his friend Amos Bronson Alcott, an antislavery activist. Thoreau soon shifted his position to one of resistance akin to Frederick Douglass’s violent defiance as self-defense.40 Signaling his radicalization, he renamed the lecture "Resistance to Civil Government" when it was published.41 It was entitled "Civil Disobedience" after his death.42

Just as he understood his defiance as an act, he also regarded paying

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38 The essay “Resistance to Civil Government” derived from a lecture and was subsequently revised further. This essay is generally known as “On Civil Disobedience.” Retrieved from http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil.html.
40 Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself was published the year Thoreau moved to Walden Pond.
41 Published in the first and only issue of the Boston journal Aesthetic Papers in 1849.
42 Thoreau’s philosophy was always in flux, and his writings reflected that; he incessantly reworked texts as well as retitled them. It is unknown whether Thoreau indicated the term as
tax as action. Simply because it was the norm did not make it benign – paying tax indicated an active choice to support the state. “When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves… I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.”

Thoreau’s mother, Cynthia, and sister Helen were founding members of Concord’s Female Anti-Slavery Society. Concord’s proximity to Boston made it a fitting stop for the Underground Railroad. As was the case with other homes on Main Street, the Thoreaus’ served as a safe house for refugees traveling to Canada. Thoreau’s collaboration involved procuring passage for runaways, “whom I helped to forward toward the northstar,” and nursing back to health those who were too feeble or ill to travel. The 1846 annual meeting of Concord’s Anti-Slavery Society was held at the cabin’s doorstep.

In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, authorizing slaveholders and their bounty hunters to seize runaway slaves in the free states, including Massachusetts, where slavery had been illegal since the Revolutionary War. The law required all states to cooperate in returning escaped slaves to their “masters.” Anyone providing food or harbor to a fleeing slave was subject to six months’ imprisonment and a thousand-dollar fine. The law made marshals who did not detain alleged runaways liable for a thousand-dollar fine and offered bonuses to those who enforced it.

Thoreau was at home in nature and spent a minimum of four hours daily walking the countryside. His practice of walking was one of external discovery and internal meditation; his walks were sacred. According to Emerson, “He had no walks to throw away on company.”

As industry progressively encroached, Thoreau noted in his journal that it was impossible to go walking in the Concord woods in any season during daylight hours without hearing the sound of axes. “Thank God they cannot cut down the clouds!” He began walking in moonlight.

a title or did his sister Sophia, who, along with several of his friends, including Channing and Emerson, prepared his writings for publication and renamed it posthumously. Or perhaps the publisher renamed it.

43 Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience.”
45 Not the Female Anti-Slavery Society, but the male group.
46 Emerson, “Thoreau.” “It was a pleasure and a privilege to walk with him. He knew the country like a fox or a bird, and passed through it as freely by paths of his own. He knew every track in the snow or on the ground, and what creature had taken this path before him. One must submit abjectly to such a guide, and the reward was great.”
47 Richardson, p. 16.
48 Quoted in Emerson, “Thoreau.” Emerson said, “The axe was always destroying his forest.” "Thank God," he said, ‘they cannot cut down the clouds!’
to ensure tranquility and observe the way the light of the moon affected the land and the town. Slavery continued to disturb his attention: “Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her.”

In 1854, Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave from Virginia, was arrested and put on trial in Boston. Burns was the third test case to occur in Massachusetts. Shadrack Minkins had fled north from Virginia and was arrested in 1851. The armed Boston Vigilance Committee, led by transcendentalist minister Theodore Parker, activist Lewis Hayden, and a group of black antislavery protesters, successfully rescued him. Two months later, much to the chagrin of Boston abolitionists, escaped slave Thomas Sims was captured and given back to his so-called master without intervention. The nineteen-year-old Burns escaped to Boston in 1853 and worked at a clothing shop until his sudden arrest by marshals in May of the following year. This was a calculated move by the government to reassert the Fugitive Slave Act. A group of abolitionists and protesters tried to rescue Burns, and a courthouse guard was killed in the failed raid. Burns’s trial lasted three days, during which demonstrations protesting rendition grew and federal troops arrived to show their strength in the streets. When the court announced the decision, the city was placed under martial law until Burns was put on a ship back to Virginia. Thousands of protesters lined the path to the harbor, held in check by troops.

The case was a lightning rod of incitement for the abolitionist movement, for the Underground Railroad, for Boston, and for Thoreau. After Burns was extradited, Thoreau responded with fury, delivering the ironically titled “Slavery in Massachusetts” at a prominent abolitionist rally on July 4, 1854. The gathering subverted the traditional Independence Day activities by calling attention to the indignity of Burns’s return and Boston’s dishonor, bringing together militant objectors Stephen S. Foster, Reverend John Pierpont, and Sojourner Truth.

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49 Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts.” See Petrulionis. “His Journal for the spring months of 1854 records the annual break-up of the ice on Walden Pond, a trip to the Boston Society of Natural History Library, and the purchase of his first spyglass. But beginning on May 29, the Journal offers much more. Interspersed among canoe trips, forest walks, and sightings of spring flowers and birds are twenty-eight manuscript pages that attest to how deeply Thoreau had become caught up in the social and political fervor caused by Burns’s rendition and the state’s capitulation to the Fugitive Slave Law…. The publication of *Walden* itself merits but a scant two lines on August 9, 1854. But by this summer, Burns’s arrest had inflamed Thoreau’s rage over slavery to such an extent that it repeatedly spilled over into his most private writing.”

50 The committee was the chief organization in Boston providing fugitive slaves with material and legal aid.

51 The lecture was printed in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, *The Liberator*, and the *New York Tribune*. Sayre, p. 1,048. See Petrulionis for a detailed analysis of the relationship between spoken and written versions of “Slavery in Massachusetts” and the relation between that piece and the nearly simultaneous publication of *Walden*. Petrulionis traces how Thoreau toned down his journal entries...
boisterous objections from the crowd, estimated in the thousands, William Lloyd Garrison burned copies of the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the court decision on Burns. Thoreau seconded a call for the dissolution of a Union that condoned slavery. Such a weighty, incendiary, and highly public action was unprecedented for Thoreau, who was essentially reclusive and normally delivered talks on nature to local audiences. With the exception of “Civil Disobedience,” he had confined his antislavery agenda to working behind the scenes for the Railroad and supporting more outspoken abolitionists.

Walden was to be published within a month of the July Fourth rally. Excerpts were serialized in local newspapers. Anticipation was mounting in literary circles, and Thoreau was on the cusp of being taken seriously. His participation in the assembly was timely. Just as his budding reputation as a man of letters lent currency to the cause, the cause gave him a platform on which to link the personal responsibility and freedom he extolled in Walden with every person’s individual freedom and the moral imperative to overthrow slavery. The link between words and convictions was irreducible. In unison, Thoreau became visible as a social critic and a naturalist philosopher.

“Slavery in Massachusetts” is Thoreau’s most combative and inciting essay. He berates the “pernicious influence” of the press on civil affairs, as well as the public’s endless appetite for newspapers: “Are these the Flags of our Union?” With little exception, the Boston press supported the Fugitive Slave Act. He demands a complete overhaul of the press to purge its ubiquitous corruption and collaboration with the powers that be, and proposes boycott as an immediate solution within every person’s reach: “Could slavery suggest a more complete servility than some of these journals exhibit?” Here as in all of his political essays, Thoreau frankly scorns the passive acquiescence of his fellow citizens, indicting them for taking the path of least resistance and for not acting on behalf of justice. Heatedly, he challenges the government’s and the courts’ disingenuous adherence to the document of law and not the spirit. “The judges and lawyers … and all men of expediency, try this case by a very low and incompetent standard. They consider, not whether the Fugitive Slave Law is right, but whether it is what they call constitutional. … The question is, not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the Devil, and that service is not accordingly now due; but whether you will not now, for once and at last, serve God – in spite of your own past recreancy, or that of your ancestor – by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.”

Thoreau abruptly shifts toward the end of the essay:

for public address so as not to severely offend the audience in light of Walden’s pending publication.
52 See Petrulonis.
53 Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts.”
describing his encounter with the first pond lily of the season, he is reminded that purity resides in “the slime and muck of earth,” and “that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily.” Reflecting faith in nature’s capacity for renewal, he evokes the enduring cycle of growth, sounding the belief that social justice will eventually reign.

Thoreau was not one to join organizations, even abolitionist ones. Writing was his trench. Imbedded in his scathing critique of slavery-sanctioning society are multiple calls for revolution of the mind and revolutionary action. By 1854, it was clear he believed violence would be necessary in the fight to overthrow slavery.

Thoreau’s response to the tenth-anniversary questionnaire from his Harvard class reads: “I am a Schoolmaster – a private Tutor, a Surveyor – a Gardener, a Farmer – a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, A Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster.” On writing this, he reflected, “The fact is I am a mystic – a transcendentalist – & a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it – I should have told them at once I was a transcendentalist – that would have been the shortest way of telling them they would not understand my explanations.”

Thoreau never committed to one vocation: he had taught, lectured, published, and would invent a superior type of lead for the family pencil business, as well as become a land surveyor delimiting parcels for farmers and, somewhat incongruously, for logging enterprises. But he was never to make his living as an author. The literary market was largely hostile to his work; only two books were published during his life. A Week met with harsh critical reception and sold fewer than three hundred of the thousand copies printed, and Walden, which was reviewed more favorably than not, took five years to sell out the first printing of two thousand and did not go into a second printing until several years later. Thoreau’s work was meaningful in certain New England circles, but his reputation remained relatively local in his time. He could have made a living as an author and lecturer, following in the footsteps of Emerson, but to Emerson’s dismay Thoreau did not embrace that direction. A nativist at heart, Thoreau was antagonistic to New York and London literary culture. He was notoriously independent and resolute about his writing, refusing to be edited. He sought to make a living apart from writing, “If you would get money as a writer or lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly.” He wanted an audience, but felt

54 Sayre, p. 1046.
that whatever succeeded with an audience was bad.\textsuperscript{57} Despite the impression of Thoreau being in the thick of community and transcendentalist debate, he was solitary and individual in his actions. He was perceived as contrary, and his unconditional commitment to his convictions did not win him social standing. Even when his reputation was more established, his wild-card image persevered—he was never offered a professorship or an academic chair. His opinion of higher education probably secured exclusion: “What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free meandering brook.”\textsuperscript{58} Thoreau’s struggle to reconcile vocation with survival—to function in a society whose values were more and more at odds with his own—imbued his socially vested critique with pressing personal content.

In an 1854 lecture, he vehemently expressed the existential and ethical crisis he perceived in the ideology of materialism and its counterpart of aimless work for the sake of money. At the outset of “Life Without Principle” Thoreau warns, “I will leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism.”\textsuperscript{59} Incensed that profit has become king, he lambasts the collective embrace of working to make a living and nothing more, which he regards as idle, a form of death. He rails against low aims, the trivial obsessions of his neighbors, the news of the street, private property, commerce, slavery, foreign interests eclipsing local ones, and the disingenuous understanding of freedom that “this nation of politicians” bespeaks.\textsuperscript{60} He laments the loss of the intellectual realm and of human dignity and morality. He characterizes the California gold rush as a black spot on the country’s history and “the greatest disgrace on mankind.” Thoreau seethes with fury throughout: “Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant.”\textsuperscript{61}

His argument is personal, disclosing his lived experience in Concord, speaking to his neighbors about themselves,\textsuperscript{62} and passing devastating judgment on his fellow citizens, the country, and humankind. “I do not need the police of meaningless labor to regulate me…. If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen.”\textsuperscript{63} Whatever limited hope he harbors shows only when he speaks of the natural world and of future generations, which, he concedes, \textit{perhaps} may choose to liberate themselves from the autocracy of the market economy.

\textsuperscript{57} Emerson, “Thoreau.”
\textsuperscript{59} Thoreau, “Life Without Principle.”
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} See Cavell, especially p. 11.
\textsuperscript{63} Thoreau, “Life Without Principle.”
Three years later, in 1857, Thoreau attended a speech by the abolitionist John Brown, and the two met informally. Brown believed the violence of slaveholding had to be met with violence in order to free slaves. Thoreau was deeply impressed with the integrity Brown brought to the cause and became an active supporter, despite the fact that the majority of abolitionists were hostile to Brown’s strategies, considering him extreme. The two men met again in May of 1859 when Brown spoke at Concord Town Hall, several months before his attack on the federal arsenal stored at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, where he allegedly sought to incite and arm a slave revolt. At Harper’s Ferry, four days of battle claimed ten of Brown’s party, including two of his sons, as well as two soldiers and six townspeople, the mayor among them. Brown was captured and tried for murder, conspiracy, and treason. Six men in his party were also captured and subsequently executed. Thoreau saw Brown’s actions as heroic. Brown’s defense attorneys hoped he would plead insanity to avoid a death sentence. Unwilling to recant his actions, he staunchly refused. The noble demeanor with which he delivered his speech at the end of the trial helped transformed him into a martyr. “Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right; and every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.”

When Thoreau first delivered his rousing defense of Brown’s character in Concord, two weeks after the raid at Harper’s Ferry, the selectmen refused to ring the town bell, so he rang it himself. Days later, he gave the same speech to a large audience in Boston, replacing the scheduled speaker, Frederick Douglass, who needed to retreat from public visibility at the time. He read the speech “as if it burned him” at the Concord memorial he had helped organize on the day Brown was hung. “A Plea for Captain Brown” was a strong corrective both to newspaper accounts and to majority public opinion. The newspapers labeled Brown mad and portrayed his group as “deluded fanatics,” “crazed,” “mistaken men,” involved in a “misguided, wild, and apparently insane effort.” Thoreau conjured a different person altogether: “A man of rare common sense

64 “Brown’s trial lawyers had allowed him to maintain his dignity – his personal dignity and the dignity of the beliefs for which he was willing to die.” Mello, pp. 170. Mello draws a contrast between Brown’s and Kaczynski’s court cases, pp. 157–174.
66 Emerson, “Thoreau.” “Before the first friendly word had been spoken for Captain John Brown, after the arrest, he sent notices to most houses in Concord, that he would speak in a public hall on the condition and character of John Brown, on Sunday evening, and invited all people to come. The Republican Committee, the Abolitionist Committee, sent him word that it was premature and not advisable. He replied, – ‘I did not send to you for advice, but to announce that I am to speak.’”
and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles.” “He was the most American of us all…. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create. He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist.”

Thoreau likened the profound effect that Brown’s resolve, preparedness, and courage had on him to that of a “sublime spectacle.”

Again, the single expression of hopefulness in Thoreau’s tribute lay in the parallel he draws between natural reproduction and political evolution, presciently invoking the long-term consequences of Brown’s daring: “Such do not know that like the seed is the fruit, and that, in the moral world, when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate.”

The Harper’s Ferry mission was largely deemed a disaster in the short term, yet it played a major role in turning public opinion in the Northern states. Ultimately, it helped catalyze the Civil War.

Optimism was progressively restricted in Thoreau’s political speeches, but he nevertheless remained an idealist. Beginning around 1851, he cast his formidable power of natural observation in a more scientific, less transcendentalist manner. “Facts must be learned directly and personally.” Thoreau had always mined his journal extensively when composing lectures, essays, and books, including Walden, and he reconceived the journal as a primary literary form in itself, which increasingly became a reservoir of research. He started working as a land surveyor the same year, which “had the advantage that it led him continually into new and secluded grounds.”

Thoreau was no more seen as a radical in his own time than he is now. Obituaries announced the death of “the genial writer on the natural scenery of New England”…“the charming writer”…“the eccentric author.” Upon his death, his occupation was officially registered as natural historian. His political essays were for the most part ignored when he was alive and were the last of his works to be published after he died. Perhaps the combination of naturalist rambling the woods and confrontational political theorist did not compute for those beyond the few who knew his diversity in person. The tendency to interpret such contrasts as conflicts is a persistent one. For Thoreau, action and philosophy are equally essential to a natural life, which is indivisible from the practice of a societal life.

69 Ibid.
71 Emerson, “Thoreau.”
I thought of Ted’s cabin, which his lawyers had brought to Sacramento on a flatbed truck, planning to show it to the jury and ask the question: would anyone but a certifiable lunatic choose such a primitive abode? What they did not bring, of course, were the forests and rivers and mountains Kaczynski loved.

— William Finnegan

The more intimate you are with nature, the more you appreciate its beauty. It’s a beauty that consists not only in sights and sounds but in an appreciation of… the whole thing. I don’t know how to express it. What is significant is that when you live in the woods, rather than just visiting them, the beauty becomes part of your life rather than something you just look at from the outside.

— Ted Kaczynski

As a working-class couple with strong intellectual interests, Turk and Wanda Kaczynski stood apart from their neighbors. They were ardent readers who debated philosophy, politics, and current events and wrote occasional letters to the editor. Their first son, Theodore, showed signs of a brilliant mind early in life, skipping grades on more than one occasion. His mother came from a poor, low-status background and was concerned with social standing. Ted’s high I.Q. held the promise of respectability and prestige, and his parents began pressuring Ted to achieve. His intelligence isolated him from his peers, and he became progressively introverted. The innate sociability his pediatrician, teachers, and guidance

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72 Quoted in Mello, p. 68.
74 “Mr. Kaczynski described this skipping a grade [fifth] as a pivotal event in his life. He remembers not fitting in with the older children…. He did not describe having any close friends during that period of time.” Dr. Sally Johnson, “Psychological Evaluation of Theodore Kaczynski,” January 16, 1998, ordered by presiding judge Garland E. Burrell Jr. during pretrial.
75 Chase quotes neighbors who said Kaczynski’s parents were “obsessed with the prospects of Ted’s intellectual stardom,” and “pushed their son relentlessly toward academics.” Chase, p. 163. Kaczynski sees this as exaggeration, while admitting he felt under pressure from them beginning around when he was eleven years old. Theodore J. Kaczynski, “TRUTH Versus LIES,” 1998, unpublished manuscript, Ted Kaczynski papers, Labadie Collection, M Library, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, p. 18. Kaczynski chronologically details his school years and social experiences, and his relationship with his parents vis-à-vis academic performance and social confidence and status (pp. 78–172). “TRUTH Versus LIES” is a carefully detailed, tightly argued refutation of the representations of Kaczynski’s character, personal history, and psychological state as depicted by his mother and brother, former acquaintances, neighbors, classmates, friends, FBI investigators, reporters, and media agencies after his arrest, supported with documentation.
76 Kaczynski perceived “a gradual increasing amount of hostility I had to face from the
counselor witnessed in him until he was ten years old or so diminished soon there-
after. Kaczynski found it increasingly difficult to make and maintain relationships
outside his family, and social insecurity took hold.

In high school, Kaczynski was encouraged to apply to Harvard; he began his under-
graduate studies at the elite university in 1958 on scholarship. Being younger than other
students and from a working-class background, he felt somewhat out of place. "Up to the
time when I entered Harvard University at age sixteen I used to dream of escaping
from civilization and going to live in some wild place. During the same period, my
distaste for modern life grew as I became increasingly aware that people in industrial
society were reduced to the status of gears in a machine, that they lacked freedom and
were at the mercy of the large organizations that controlled the conditions under which
they lived."78

Several years later, upon nearing the end of his graduate studies at the University of
Michigan, Kaczynski made a plan: he would teach just long enough to save money to go
live in the wilderness. As an assistant professor at Berkeley, he taught mathematics
for two years before telling his boss, "I'm tired of teaching math that is going to be used
for destroying the environment."79 His father, an outspoken pacifist, encouraged his
resignation. "Shut down the war machine," he advised: stop helping students to design
weapons of war including nuclear bombs.80

By 1969, Kaczynski was writing letters to magazine editors about technology's effects
on autonomy. In 1971, he wrote a twenty-three-page essay warning that "continued
scientific and technical progress will inevitably result in the extinction of individual
liberty."81 That text would later play a role in his capture due to the resemblance of
some phrases and passages in Industrial Society and Its Future (ISAIF). He also
revealed in a note to technology critic Jacques Ellul that he had read Ellul's The
Technological Society at least six times.82 He referred to it as his "bible."83

Kaczynski's time at Berkeley coincided with the pinnacle of antiwar, anti-
establishment revolt on campus. Many pundits regard his antagonism for the
system and retreat to the woods as a common outcome of the sixties. Alternatively,
philosopher and journalist Alston Chase believes Kaczynski's thinking took
shape while he was steeped in the cold-war-era general-education curriculum at

77 Chase, p. 161.
80 Graysmith, p. 185.
81 Chase, p. 331; Graysmith, pp. 309, 312.
82 Johnson.
Harvard, which reinforced a “crisis of reason” and “culture of despair.” Chase traces the seeds for Kaczynski’s plans for violent revenge on society to his last year at grad school in Michigan. At the time, Kaczynski’s journal described a series of events that led to his first fantasy of killing someone, specifically a psychiatrist. The idea functioned as something of a revelation, liberating him from moral standards. He would later write in his journal that “there is no logical justification for morality.”

Kaczynski considers aversion to violence to be the result of brainwashing and regards ethical norms as social constructions that serve the system. “Modern society uses various forms of propaganda to teach people to be frightened and horrified by violence because the technoindustrial system needs a population that is timid, docile, and afraid to assert itself, a population that will not make trouble or disrupt the orderly functioning of the system…. By teaching people that violence is wrong (except, of course, when the system itself uses violence via the police or military), the system maintains its monopoly on physical force and thus keeps all power in its own hands.”

Kaczynski and his younger brother, David, had always been close. As adults they shared antipathy for the values of consumer society and a yearning for wilderness. After Kaczynski left Berkeley, the brothers took a trip to Wyoming in search of affordable, remote land. Eventually they went north to Canada, where they found a piece of property, but their land application was denied. David moved to Great Falls, Montana, in 1970. During a visit Kaczynski made the following year, they found a suitable lot four miles from the nearest town, in Scapegoat Wilderness, a mountainous region just west of the continental divide. Kaczynski had hoped for something more isolated but settled, and directly began building a cabin. His brother never lived there, eventually finding a more secluded spot in the West Texas desert.

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84 Chase, also a Harvard graduate, retired prematurely from academia, disenchanted – he was a philosophy professor – and moved to the Montana woods. He points out that Kaczynski’s fervent critiques of psychiatry, medicalization of the mind, and methods of mind control took hold after extended participation in a psychologically manipulative experiment conducted by Harvard professor Dr. Henry Murray. Chase, pp. 205, 362. Kaczynski barely references Dr. Murray or the experiments in his discussion with Dr. Sally Johnson and in “TRUTH Versus LIES,” pp. 160–61, 444. He may have written about the situation in his journal, but given that the FBI immediately leaked the journals found in his cabin and no journalist reported this, it seems unlikely he belabored it or that the experiments exerted great impact on him.

85 Chase, pp. 293, 306.


87 David sold his share to Ted in 1981. In 1994 and 1995, David lent Ted $3,000, earmarked for medical purposes. In 1995 Ted requested the county assessor reassign half of the property to David, as a way of ensuring his debt would one day be paid. Graysmith, p. 257.

88 For a couple of years, David lived in a four-foot hole dug in the ground covered with tarps and
Kaczynski migrated to the woodland mountains of Montana at age twenty-nine. He had limited capacity for human companionship, despised the status quo, and renounced modern society and its “comforts.” He craved personal freedom, wild nature, seclusion, and silence. He aimed to actualize his romantic fantasy of the wilderness life and regarded as a mission the acquisition of skills to emulate a primitive way of life that obtained from the local environment. He learned how to subsist on the land, identify edible plants, raise vegetables, and hunt and preserve meat. His journals attest to the intensity of his new self-sufficient way, and the extreme satisfaction and exuberance it gave him as lifelong fantasies became daily realities.

Throughout the seventies, Kaczynski spent periods away from Montana working at unskilled jobs. He needed to earn money and, to some degree, still hoped for social connection, friendship, and perhaps even female companionship, of which he had little experience. In 1978, traveling to his home state of Illinois, he stopped in Evanston, where he delivered his first bomb, then went on to Lombard, where his family resided at the time. After returning to Montana, with the exception of another trip in the mid-eighties, once more in search of isolated land in Canada, and the occasions he traveled to either mail or deliver his ingeniously crafted parcel bombs, he stayed put.

Although Kaczynski spent most of his time alone, he generally biked to Lincoln, the closest town, every few weeks on errands. Typically he visited the library to read and talk about books and politics with his closest friend in town, librarian Sherri Wood. He bought groceries at the market and stopped by the hardware store. He visited the post office and the bank. He’d stop to say hello to the Garland sisters, who ran the country store where he bought supplies. Sometimes he left homegrown vegetables for Carol Blowars at her real estate office where he parked his bike.

corrugated metal held in place by rocks. Eventually, he got a larger lot nearby, and in 1986 erected a cabin. He spent winters in Texas until the end of the Eighties. David’s Texas home is referred to in many articles and books, and details are confirmed in Kaczynski, “TRUTH Versus LIES,” pp. 235, 243, 311.

Dr. Sally Johnson conducted an extensive phone interview with Lincoln librarian Sherri Wood, who recounted some of the details of Kaczynski’s visits to the library, their friendship, and her impressions of Kaczynski’s changing demeanor in the first half of the 1990s. “She [Wood] enjoyed talking with him about his beliefs and indicated he had very strong feelings against government. Although she had the idea that their conversations never changed his opinions, he patiently listened to her ideas and made her feel that her thoughts were worthwhile....She described his ability to identify with her young child, whom she indicated shared some of the kinds of problems that Mr. Kaczynski may have had himself as a child. She noted that he patted her son on the shoulder twice, which is the only physical contact she ever saw him display over the 13 years of their acquaintance.” See Johnson. Kaczynski helped out when the library was remodeled and tutored Wood’s son Danny in math. Chase, p. 126.
After his capture, many townspeople refused to talk to the press; the majority who did portrayed him, in sharp contrast to the media stereotype, as courteous and consistently pleasant. “Later people claimed he smelled bad, but I never smelled him. He seemed quite gentle. You know, he was soft-spoken, and he had never done harm to us up here. He was just an excellent neighbor.”\textsuperscript{90} The principled Wood told the FBI after his arrest, “You will not see his reading list. That is confidential.”\textsuperscript{91} Only a couple, including Wood, fathomed the extent of his intelligence.

Kaczynski corresponded with his mother and brother regularly. After moving to Montana, he increasingly blamed his parents for his social ineptness, and wrote to them detailing instances of what he considered psychological abuse. By 1983, they were largely estranged. “The only way he spoke his mind,” said his brother, “or related to people was through letters.”\textsuperscript{92} His relationship with David was also under some strain, but their correspondence improved in the mid-eights, until David announced in 1989 that he was moving to Schenectady, New York, with his then girlfriend, Linda Patrik. Kaczynski was furious with David’s decision to suddenly opt for a normative middle-class way of life, and temporarily broke off contact. When their terminally ill father killed himself in 1990, Kaczynski was alienated from the whole family.

In 1988 and several times between 1991 and 1993, Kaczynski attempted to consult with mental-health professionals, purportedly to get treatment for chronic insomnia.\textsuperscript{93} In the summer of 1991, he wrote to his brother confiding that because his “social self-confidence” was “destroyed” he had become an outsider. “The fear of rejection – based on bitter experience both at home and at school – has ruined my life . . . except for a few years that I spent alone in the woods, largely out of contact with people.”\textsuperscript{94}

Kaczynski began writing a journal when he was a teenager.\textsuperscript{95} The Montana diaries reflect his love for living in the woods and his intimacy with the details of the surrounding nature, recording daily life from picking berries and plants.

\textsuperscript{90} Carol Blowars quoted in Graysmith, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{91} Graysmith, p. 234.
\textsuperscript{92} Graysmith, p. 374. One of Kaczynski’s closest friends for several years was Juan Sánchez Arreola, whom he never met. His brother, David, and Arreola were friends. David had written several stories about Arreola’s experiences in Mexico and forwarded them to Ted, who appreciated the accounts and admired Arreola’s campesino lifestyle. David introduced the two by mail, and beginning in 1988, they wrote letters to each other in Spanish several times a year, frequently expressing the pleasure they felt in their friendship. See Graysmith, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., p. 174.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 171.
\textsuperscript{95} The FBI confiscated Kaczynski’s journals from his cabin. Photocopies provided to his defense team were subsequently donated by Kaczynski to the Labadie Collection at University of Michigan.
to the number of shots expended hunting to the number of radishes coming up in his garden – even recipes for the stews he made. They contain a high volume of annotated notes from books, periodicals, and newspapers about topics ranging from the government’s development of electronic battle sensors, to life in the pre-industrial English countryside, to genetic-engineering predictions, to the psychological effects of technical training on boys. The journals chronicle his fury over development in the area and noise from logging machines, new construction, trucks, off-road bikers, snowmobiles, and airplanes that signaled the encroachment of technoindustrial society’s reach into his beloved mountains, ruining the quietude he delighted in. “You understand, it is not the noise in itself that bothers me, but what that noise signifies. It is the voice of the Octopus – the octopus that will allow nothing to exist outside the range of its control.”

Journal entries document his incremental decisions to take revenge on the system, beginning with local monkey wrenching and initial plans to act close to home; he considered shooting loggers and motorcyclists and even set himself up to do so, but for whatever reasons did not follow through. A larger plan of revenge on society had been gestating. His journal fluctuates between contentment and rage.

JULY 24, 1979: The 22nd was very bad for jets – heard many. Yesterday was quite good – heard only 8 jets. Today was good in early morning, but later in morning there was aircraft noise almostwithoutinterruption for, I would estimate, about an hour. Then there was a very loud sonic boom. This was the last straw and it reduced me to tears of impotent rage.

APRIL 29, 1983: After raising my coat and making a layer of branches to protect myself from the wet floor, I ate and went to sleep on the slope that was up and are sealed at his request. Many of Kaczynski’s personal belongings seized by the FBI, including his original journals, were auctioned by the General Services Administration, on behalf of the U.S. Marshals Service, on June 2, 2011, the proceeds slated for those of his victims who had sought restitution through the court. When he was sentenced in 1998, Kaczynski was ordered to pay his victims $15 million in restitution. The lawsuit was also lodged to block Kaczynski from regaining his belongings and donating papers to UM. In 2006, District Court Judge Garland Burrell, who presided over Kaczynski’s original case, ordered his personal effects to be auctioned in an Internet sale and proceeds go to the Unabomber’s victims. Kaczynski fought the decision in court, but in 2009, an appeals court affirmed the decision. Judge Burrell commissioned the sale in August 2010. The Department of Justice press release states: “We will use the technology that Kaczynski railed against in his various manifestos to sell artifacts of his life.”


97  Excerpts from Kaczynski’s journals were initially made available to reporters and researchers by the FBI, and therefore have been quoted extensively in print.
higher from the camp. The view seen from this slope is extremely beautiful….
After resting for a while, I walked barefoot from one side to the other of the hill
and forest that borders with it, in a very silent way. I like very much to walk
slowly and silently through the wild. The following day I went up the mountain
at daybreak. I felt very happy and energetic…. I was very sensitive to the
silence, to the beauty, and to the mystery of the wild.98

Growing up, Kaczynski imagined wilderness and civilization as discrete enti-
ties, that he could free himself from institutional reach by living someplace
remote. As he witnessed the incursions into nature close-up, his dream of refuge
shattered. He had found fulfillment and happiness during his first Montana years,
specifically on long camping journeys he took far away from his cabin. Kaczynski’s
solitude in wilderness clarified a key stake in his fight against consumer society –
authentic connection with irreplaceable beauty and space. His journals reflect
his realization that the tranquility wilderness offered was on the verge of disap-
pearance.99 For a loner religiously dependent on wilderness, its bondage and
threat of destruction seemed life threatening.

“The best place to me was the largest remnant of this plateau that dates from
the tertiary age…. That was the best spot until the summer of 1983. That summer
there were too many people around my cabin so I decided I needed some peace.
I went back to the plateau and when I got there I found they had put a road right
through the middle of it. You can’t imagine how upset I was. It was from that point
on I decided that rather than trying to acquire further wilderness skills, I would
work on getting back at the system.”100

Despite Kaczynski’s assertion, summer 1983 does not accurately mark his
shift into vengeance. He had set six bombs during the previous five years, none
of which, according to journal entries leaked by the FBI after his arrest, had
performed as effectively as he had hoped. Kaczynski is reputed to have an unus-
ually precise memory and to be a stickler for detail and fact. He has carefully
documented his life in writing to ensure his experiences do not disappear.
After his arrest, he labored intensively to disprove the misrepresentations by
his family and the media. It seems doubtful that on his decision to get back at
society he misremembers his own chronology. Perhaps his recollection alludes

98 Quoted in Waits, p. 283.
99 Even if the wild is a constructed concept, the intense feeling of liberation one can experience
in wilderness settings is palpable. I can attest to an encompassing feeling of wonderment from which
society simply recedes, accompanied by the thought of “not going back.”
100 Quoted in article retrieved from http://www.primitivism.com/kaczynski.html. Kaczynski read
Thomas Carlyle’s history of the French Revolution around the same time that he decided to make it
his mission to retaliate, and felt optimistic about the possibility of substantial social upheaval. He read
extensively about the French and Russian revolutions.
to a shift of motive, from seeking relief for enduring personal anger over the shrinking possibility for either integration or escape, underpinned by antipathy to society, to a resolute desire to exact retribution on technoindustrial society, with revolutionary cause in mind.

Contingent and subjective, solitude has the capacity to exhilarate, cause despair, and everything in between. For a time, isolation reduced the pressures Kaczynski felt, but overall it intensified them. He failed to evade the reverberations of family bonds, and cultural expansion threw a monkey wrench into his design. By 1982, his estrangement from his family had intensified, as had his anger and despair. His internal narratives increasingly gripped him and the reality of no exit took hold. He had been branded an outsider and felt as such. He had chosen seclusion in part because he suffered from chronic social isolation. Kaczynski’s primary dialogues were with books and published accounts of events that he debated in his journal. Without counterpoint, the mind has difficulty finding purchase. Isolated existence becomes global. The nature of Kaczynski’s solitude shifted from serenity to wrath. At some unpinpointable time in his state of social deprivation, people had become an abstraction for him and Kaczynski waged war by targeting individuals as emblems of the technological system’s “sinister” dimensions.

The FBI attributed sixteen parcel bombs to the Unabomber, beginning in 1978. The fourth one, sent to United Airlines president Percy Addison Wood in June 1980, was the first to bear a signature. From then on, the letters “FC” were found punched or drilled into an indestructible fragment of each device, permitting the bureau to link the bombings and analyze the series with the hope of ascertaining a motive. The bombs grew increasingly sophisticated and devastating. On February 20, 1987, the disguised Unabomber was glimpsed placing a box behind a computer store in Salt Lake City. The FBI’s sketch of the hooded suspect wearing sunglasses captured public attention. No FC-authored bombs turned up between March 1987 and May 1993. In June, FC resurfaced, and in a letter to the New York Times claimed responsibility for recent attacks that had seriously injured geneticist Charles Epstein and, two days later, computer engineer David Gelernter. Normally terrorists connect their acts to demands, but no one had answered for the fifteen-year sequence of bombs until the letter announcing the existence of the anarchist group FC.

One reason it was so difficult to apprehend the bomber is that by carefully keeping to himself, Kaczynski avoided the chance of unwittingly disclosing secrets. Primarily, though, he eluded pattern by continually changing his bomb-making technique and targeting methods, as well as locations. His motive was indecipherable. Some of his early victims seemed accidental. They didn’t fit the semblance of a pattern that FC finally articulated in another letter to the Times in late April of 1995. “We would not want anyone to think that we have any desire
to hurt professors who study archaeology, history, literature or harmless stuff like that. The people we are out to get are the scientists and engineers, especially in critical fields like computers and genetics.”

On April 24, 1995, FC’s most powerful device killed timber-industry lobbyist Gilbert Murray. A letter boasting of the newly realized capacity to make stronger, farther-reaching bombs, “free of limitations on the size and shape,” arrived at the Times the same day. The letter proposed a deal: publish ISAIF, and FC stops its terrorism. “By terrorism we mean actions motivated by a desire to influence the development of a society and intended to cause injury or death to human beings. By sabotage we mean similarly motivated actions intended to destroy property without injuring human beings. The promise we offer is to desist from terrorism. We reserve the right to engage in sabotage.”

After breaking his silence, Kaczynski as FC sent a dozen letters to public figures and periodicals during the next two years, including geneticists Richard Roberts and Phillip Sharp, Gelernter, Penthouse, the San Francisco Chronicle, and Tom Tyler, a social psychologist, to whom he enclosed a copy of ISAIF, requesting his response to its content. Kaczynski corresponded with Earth First! anarchist John Zerzan for more than a year before his arrest. His 1995 communiqué to Scientific American clarifies his position:

Scientists and engineers constantly gamble with human welfare, and we see today the effects of some of their lost gambles: ozone depletion, the greenhouse effect, cancer-causing chemicals to which we cannot avoid exposure, accumulating nuclear waste for which a sure method of disposal has not yet been found, the crowding, noise and pollution that have followed industrialization, massive extinction of species and so forth…. We emphasize the negative PHYSICAL consequences of scientific advances often are completely unforeseeable…. But far more difficult to foresee are the negative SOCIAL consequences of technological progress. The engineers who began the industrial revolution never dreamed their work would result in the creation of an industrial proletariat or the economic boom and bust cycle.

Kaczynski’s writings were to become the core of the Unabomber case: they led to his arrest, they were the primary evidence the prosecution would rely

102 “The people who are pushing all this growth and progress garbage deserve to be severely punished. But our goal is less to punish them than to propagate ideas.” Quoted in Chase, p. 76.
103 Graysmith, p. 245.
104 Chase, p. 83.
105 Corey, p. 175
on in proving his guilt, and they spoke to his motivations and mental state, his philosophy and politics. Even his sanity, once it was put in question, hinged on his written record.

Kaczynski’s long-term motives stemmed from his absolute antipathy to contemporary society and its ideology of scientific and technological progress. Personal rage unquestioningly played a key role, as did his paradoxical relationship to isolation. Kaczynski chose his targets based on a mixture of symbolic and concrete objectives, combining associations from his private history and literature with public figures who promoted technoindustrial expansion. His anger seems to have been so entangled that it is impossible to decipher the undercurrent of his actions or know to what degree private and public distress were symbiotic.

In his journals, he explained his perspective and purpose. In the event he was caught, he did not want to be psychologized or depicted as sick. "I intend to start killing people. If I am successful at this, it is possible that, when I am caught… there will be some speculation in the news media as to my motives for killing…. If some speculation occurs, they are bound to make me out to be a sickie, and to ascribe to me motives of a sordid or 'sick' type. Of course, the term 'sick' in such a context represents a value judgment…. This powerful bias should be borne [in mind] in reading any attempts to analyze my psychology." Indeed, the question of Kaczynski’s sanity was to become the salient issue framing his public image, his court case, and its outcome.

The news media swarmed around the arrested Unabomber suspect. Journalists scrambled for biographical puzzle pieces and dramatic family narrative to compose a particular portrait of the suspect. The question was not, Who is Ted Kaczynski but Who is this madman?

Kaczynski was quickly overloaded with labels guaranteed to repel majority opinion, which pathologized eccentricity as menacing and confused loneness with

107 Kaczynski kept detailed records of his bomb "experiments," including fabrication notes and drawings and his reactions to their efficacy. Many of the reporters and lawyers and psychiatrists who were granted access to his journals by the FBI have verified Kaczynski’s scientific, clinical remove. Some journal entries demonstrate a dispassionate attitude toward his victims and an absolute lack of remorse over the injuries, maiming, and deaths resulting from his bombs.

108 For instance, Chase explains that Theodore Roszak’s 1972 book, Where the Wasteland Ends, a copy of which was found in Kaczynski’s cabin, condemns Professor James McConnell’s behavioral research into manipulating and controlling people’s minds. Kaczynski sent MacConnell a bomb thirteen years after the book was published. Chase, pp. 59–60. Graysmith, among others, has speculated that Kaczynski’s target choices, fictional return addressees, and other details of the bombings are all symbolic clues to his psychological map.

109 Chase, p. 138.

110 See Mello for what appears to be a comprehensive and insightful account of Kaczynski’s court case, including in-depth discussion of the mental-defect plea his defense team put at its center.
mental illness. According to the multitude of headlines and stories, he was “ripe-smelling, and wild haired. A misfit hermit. A mad genius. A Luddite sociopath. An evil coward.” Reporters looked under every rock for former neighbors, classmates, dorm mates, and people who had casually encountered Kaczynski—whoever was willing to verify his abnormality. He was “the ultimate loner,” who acted “like a frightened puppy” and “stared at the ground when he walked.”

"At Harvard, “his room was filthy.” “One of the strangest people I met at Harvard.” “Why we didn’t put two and two together and say this guy needs help, I don’t know.”

Kaczynski’s classmates were indiscriminately interviewed, whether they knew him well or at all was immaterial. Reporters neglected to situate comments from Harvard classmates in the larger fact that neither Kaczynski’s appearance nor his behavior was unusual. Napoleon Williams, one of his two close friends there, remarked, “He was a typical mathematician. Most young, talented mathematicians tend to be unkempt, ascetic, awkward, shy, totally wrapped up in their own world.”

Like a group of high school bullies, the media attacked Kaczynski. This was simply business as usual for media agencies. According to the pulp paperback Mad Genius, which Time magazine hastily published after his arrest, “The press, in fact, was reveling in an embarrassment of riches – and some of the revelry got out of control. Someone had leaked David Kaczynski’s involvement in the news, and his home in Schenectady was overrun, his wife ambushed on the job…. One-time object of his unrequited affections, Ellen Tarmichael, complained that she had photographers hanging off her trees. The media chased the story of Theodore Kaczynski’s life down every possible road.”

For Kaczynski’s mother, Wanda, and brother, David, who, at the urging of David’s lawyers, aggressively promoted the belief that Ted suffered from mental illness his whole life, his life was exactly what was at stake. They believed only an insanity plea could save Ted from the death penalty that Attorney General Janet Reno demanded at the insistence of President Clinton. Evidently, Kaczynski’s defense lawyers agreed.


112 Ibid., pp. 26, 29, 33, and Chase, pp. 215–16. Kaczynski takes issue with some of the statements made about him to investigators and in the press in “TRUTH Versus LIES” and provides many plausible reasons for misunderstandings, mistakes, and misrepresentations. He also discusses media culpability in terms of “irresponsible quoting” and putting forward “emotional language,” “indefinite assertions,” and false impressions in order to portray him as a villain at odds with society’s values. pp. 428–29, 430.

113 Chase, p. 217.

114 Gibbs et al., p. 134.

115 Kaczynski believes their motives for mounting what he considers to be a dishonest campaign were more complicated; that his mother was horrified to have people think that she might have been a bad mother, and that David acted primarily from a desire to get back at Ted for previous emotional injuries.
Public defenders Quin Denvir and Judy Clarke carefully planned a mental-defect defense that would portray Kaczynski as a paranoid schizophrenic. Denvir and Clarke considered his cabin to be Exhibit A and wanted it shipped from its temporary storage at Malmstrom Air Force Base, seventy miles from Lincoln, to Sacramento so the jury could witness the meager environment for themselves. This is not a A-frame in Tahoe,” Denvir said. “This is the rural equivalent of living in a box or out of a shopping cart. This is a very grim way of living.” Asked if the living conditions spoke to Kaczynski’s mental state, he said: “It speaks to everything about him.” In anticipation of the pending trial, the cabin was transported for storage, ten minutes’ drive from the courthouse.

Knowing he was vehemently resistant to a defense based on impaired capacity, Kaczynski’s lawyers kept him ignorant of the extent of their strategy. When, soon before the trial was to begin, he realized that they meant to depict him as a paranoid schizophrenic, he was adamant in his opposition and remained so during the following six weeks of jury selection. Kaczynski had documented his rationale extensively to insure against being portrayed as crazy. Clearly, he did not respect medical authority or agree with the classification system of behavior and mental deficiencies that it advances.

On the first day of court, January 5, 1998, Kaczynski petitioned the presiding judge, Garland E. Burrell Jr., to have his defense attorneys replaced. It was nineteen months after his arrest, the jury was in place, and Judge Burrell did not want the trial delayed. He ruled against the defendant’s request as “untimely.”

Since Kaczynski “had been denied both the counsel of his choice and the control of his own defense,” he then invoked his Sixth Amendment right to represent himself. Judge Burrell insisted on a series of psychological examinations to determine his competence. Kaczynski agreed and was, not surprisingly, found competent. Both the defense and the prosecution filed briefs conceding that he had a constitutional right to represent himself. Nonetheless, Judge Burrell went out on a judicial limb and denied Kaczynski’s request, again, as ’untimely.”

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116 Soon after Kaczynski’s arrest, the government transported the cabin from its original site for storage in the base near Great Falls, Montana.
117 Quoted in Cynthia Hubert, “Court Filing Says Defense Wants to Bring Cabin to Sacramento,” Sacramento Bee, October 24, 1997, in Mello, p. 58.
118 “As early as June 1997, Kaczynski maintains and the court record does not dispute, he wrote his attorneys, ‘I categorically refuse to use a mental status defense.’” Chase, p. 134.
119 “The paradox, as his case neared trial, could not have been lost on Kaczynski. His own lawyers, talented idealists intent on saving his life, were striving mightily to label him mentally ill. The prosecutors, meanwhile, intent on having him executed, were ready to accept him as the dead-serious dissident and violent anarchist that his writings said he was.” Finnegan, p. 55.
120 Mello characterized Burrell’s ruling as “in flat disregard for the law.” Mello, p. 50.
121 Finnegan, p. 61.
The prosecutors were worried that Burrell’s ruling opened the door to a guilty verdict being overturned on appeal. But Kaczynski felt cornered; either he could go through the trial being branded crazy or he could plead guilty. He offered a guilty plea to avoid the trial and the death penalty, but “insisted on reserving the right to appeal the judge’s ruling that upheld the legality of the search of his Montana cabin.” His proposal was rejected; he could proceed with a defense he found “unendurable” or plead guilty unconditionally and relinquish all rights to appeal in exchange for life imprisonment. Stonewalled, Kaczynski tried to hang himself in his cell that night. The next day, he accepted the plea bargain, and the trial did not happen.

The court chose to preclude any possibility that Kaczynski would use the trial as a soapbox to publicize his anti-technology logic. Public degradation of Kaczynski’s autonomous, secluded life in the woods played an important role in the larger scenario of “pathologizing radical dissent” that was enacted by forces Kaczynski identifies in ISAIF as some of the crucial protagonists in the techno-industrial system’s control of society – propaganda, behaviorism and psychiatry, and the courts. Kaczynski as “psychopath” was more palatable to the public than the fact that he’d acted from rational subversive conviction. And this in spite of his being declared “sane” by court-appointed “experts.” After all, his philosophy of autonomy challenges nearly everything dominant society takes for granted.

Regardless of crime or guilt, the rights to consideration in court as instituted by the Sixth Amendment are the principal means to ensure a defendant not be target to vindictiveness. The defendant is an equal, no matter what. As a check against state power, jury trials depend on proper deliberation by peers, and state power is a check against the vengeful sentiment of public opinion and the angry mob. It is worth belaboring the interlocking media and court scenarios so as not to gloss over the gravity of the results. The state, the legal system, and the media effectively linked arms to railroad and muzzle Kaczynski. In the process, the jury, which stands for citizenry, was also silenced. The courtroom is a moral classroom. When the state exercises moral law immorally, it undermines its legitimacy and calls its motives into question.

122 Mello, p. 79.
123 Finnegan, p. 60.
124 Finnegan’s term, p. 54. Mello has asserted that the public perception of Kaczynski is forever fixed. “Once a simple label has been applied, it becomes a truth regardless of fact. In the American mind, the complexity that is Theodore Kaczynski has been encapsulated by two words: paranoid schizophrenic…. That his family and his defense team inaccurately portrayed him, to the court and to the world, is a moot point.” Mello, p. 53. The speculative equation made over and over between Kaczynski’s chosen isolation in the Montana woods and his alleged insanity seems to verge on blaming the wilderness itself for Kaczynski’s violent actions.
125 The use of “rational subversive conviction” is not meant to discount the role Kaczynski’s anger and desire for personal revenge played in his actions.
Since May 5, 1998, Kaczynski has been imprisoned in the federal government's premiere Supermax penitentiary in Colorado, ADX Florence. ADX is a high-tech control-unit facility designed for keeping high-security prisoners in solitary confinement under constant surveillance. There Kaczynski lives in extreme isolation under twenty-three-hour-a-day lockdown. His cell, which is a bit smaller than the cabin he lived in, is austere and appointed with immovable concrete fixtures – a bed, a desk, and a stool; a four-inch-by-four-foot window positioned high up the wall permits a limited view of sky and roof. Prisoners are allowed to exercise alone one hour a day while shackled in a small outdoor pen with tall concrete walls obstructing views of the outside. Human contact is minimal, including with prison personnel. Food trays are pushed through a slot into each cell. Telecommunications are prohibited. Visits are conducted through a thick glass partition. Written correspondence is permitted (but screened).

Solitary confinement is widely used in the U.S. for hard cases and high-security prisoners. Mentally ill offenders are customarily placed in solitary, a.k.a. “the hole.” The U.S. boasts the most control-unit penitentiaries of anywhere in the world, and the most technically advanced ones. In penal practice, extreme isolation has proved to foster memory loss, loss of focus, profound depression, existential crisis, changes to brain physiology, mental illness, and suicide – it is undeniably a form of psychological torture. Paradoxically, Pennsylvania Quakers originated the concept of solitary confinement in the late eighteenth century as a mode of prison reform, the idea being that a prisoner isolated in a stone cell with a Bible, would, through introspection, find the path to repentance. (Thoreau’s belief in individual conscience had its roots in Quaker thought.)

In this deprived circumstance, where one rarely speaks or hears his own voice, correspondence takes on extra weight. Kaczynski is an inexhaustible correspondent who answers each of the many letters he receives with characteristic fastidiousness. More than ever, letter writing is his primary medium for human exchange. Kaczynski’s dissent is now exclusively expressed in written form, his autodidactic focus rechanneled from bomb making to political theory.

Ironically, the duration of the Unabomber campaign proved both Kaczynski’s dispassion for his victims and his passionate abhorrence of technindustrial society. While he did not attempt to publicly link his violent attacks to specific messages or demands, his paper trail testifies to the duration of his antipathy for and critical analysis of contemporary society, and his evolving appeal for a counterrevolution to the Technological Revolution. Why he chose not to connect the two publicly until 1993 is anyone’s guess. Perhaps he did not want to risk his campaign being cut short by getting caught. The Unabomber had been on hiatus since being spotted in 1987. When he recommenced with more potent bombs, they were accompanied by the announcement of FC. In the interim,
Kaczynski had been estranged from his family and repeatedly sought professional help for chronic insomnia, which may or may not have been his sole reason for seeking help. His promise to stop terrorism if ISAIF was published may well have been resolute.

One need not identify with Kaczynski in order to identify with and defend his status as a person. Kaczynski's crimes cannot be reconciled with socially acceptable actions. There is no public record of him showing remorse or seeking absolution, and it is unlikely he will ever be collectively forgiven. Nor does he seek forgiveness, since the cause is his primary concern and the bombings were part of that. He is marked as unforgivable, raising key philosophical questions: does justice condemn the act or the agent? Is crime inseparable from the guilty party? Is condemnation absolute? Is justice vindictive?

Incarcerated for life, Kaczynski continues to file legal briefs and appeals against the government when his rights are transgressed. On the one hand, it seems surprising that someone who attacked society and killed people has any expectation that the courts will ever rule in his favor. On the other hand, if he and each of his cases are not given proper consideration, justice is cynical. Kaczynski may be strategically pushing the legal system in order to expose its orientation: that "punishment always remains imprisoned within the repetition of vengeance."

Punishment is the criminal's right and disgrace. Without penalty, he has no way to understand his crimes. Punishment also reasserts the supremacy and durability of society and state. Kaczynski's punishment neutralizes the mortal and moral disruption he executed and restores the acceptable protocols of violence. Kaczynski's punishment is conceptual and empirical: permanent solitary confinement and ineradicable, wholesale condemnation. Widespread hatred is essential to the program.

Are other mortal crimes more comprehensible than Kaczynski's? Insurgent crimes for warranted cause? Assassinations by the U.S. government? Are the casualties of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry more defensible than the Unabomber's? Are violence and terrorism tolerable if the political objective is clear and worthy (in other words, if enough people agree with it)? Is it a particu-

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127 The cases, for example, against his cabin being put on display in a museum, and see note 95.
128 Ricoeur, "Memory, History, Forgiveness": "This word, 'consideration,' is of great importance to me, because there is in the idea of justice left to its own device something that is vindictive, something that is very hard to distinguish from vengeance. Hegel discusses this in a passage from the Philosophy of Right on punishment. He shows that punishment always remains imprisoned within the repetition of vengeance."
larity of American culture to assert outrage over individual crimes through venge-
ful punishment while sublimating governmental crimes as well as the public’s
congress to them in both monetary and psychological ways?

Need actions of violence entirely discredit a person? Dr. David Skrbina notes
in his introduction to Kaczynski’s collected writings: “The entire focus of this
book is the problem of technology: where we stand today, what kind of imminent
future we are facing, and what we ought to do about it. The challenge to the
reader is to make a firm separation between the Unabomber crimes and a rational,
in-depth, no-holds-barred discussion of the threat posed by modern technology.
Kaczynski has much to offer to this discussion even if we accept that he was guilty
certain reprehensible crimes. We do ourselves no favors by ignoring him. His
ideas have no less force, his arguments are none the weaker, simply because they
issue from a maximum-security cell.”

In a letter to Skrbina dated July 10, 2005, Kaczynski speculates, “A question
has to be raised about the people who are promoting all this mad technological
growth – those who do the research and those who provide the funds for research.
Are they criminals? Should they be punished?”

Parallels and intersections radiate from Benning’s Thoreau-Kaczynski juxta-
position. Thoreau’s disdain for “overcivilization” is echoed by Kaczynski’s antipathy
for “oversocialization.” Each man pursued wilderness until the point when
preoccupations with their disagreements with society obligated them to redirect
attention. Both were staunchly antireform. But Thoreau hailed independence
in society, and Kaczynski declared independence from society. Thoreau’s social
agency primarily took literary expression. Until his capture, Kaczynski’s violent
attacks constituted his public voice.

Thoreau wrestled with the realization that American democracy is governed
by public consent, placing grave weight on the individual and independent moral
sense. He recognized the power and responsibility of “the fact that we now con-
sent to social evil,” and theorized civil disobedience as a method for officially
denying assent to the government. Democracy implicates individuals in political
guilt for “crimes” of the state.

Government is less relevant to Kaczynski, who believes that the techno-
industrial system has commandeered society. For Kaczynski, social evil –
dehumanization, decimation of freedoms, environmental destruction, etc. –

130 Ibid., p. 337.
131 Thoreau’s and Kaczynski’s terms, respectively.
132 Cavell, p. 82.
is written into technology itself. He extends the notion of public political guilt beyond state crimes to the cataclysmic consequences of technological and scientific “progress” for the social and natural environment.

How does Thoreau’s concept of individual conscience as sovereign conjoin with Kaczynski’s self-appointed renegade mission?

Thoreau’s self-imposed isolation lasted for just over two years. His cabin was eventually dismantled, its parts recycled into farm buildings in the area. Although he bid farewell to Walden, solitude remained a vital part of his daily life and practice his whole life. He died in 1862 after a cold he caught while counting tree rings in the woods worsened.

Kaczynski’s self-segregation continued for twenty-five years. His cabin, stored in Sacramento since his imprisonment, was transported in 2008 to Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC. There, it has been displayed as an artifact in the exhibition “G-Men and Journalists: Top News Stories of the FBI’s First Century” at Newseum, a private institution financed by individual donors and media corporations. Kaczynski lives in the epitome of the dehumanizing technoindustrial society he has argued against most of his life, his unending state of solitude no longer a choice.

Only when history undertakes to be turned into an art work and thus to become a purely artistic picture can it perhaps maintain the instincts or even arouse them.

— Friedrich Nietzsche

I must tell you that mathematicians are not scientists, they are artists.

— Ted Kaczynski

133 “Emerson then bought the house from Thoreau and resold it to his gardener, Hugh Whelan, who intended to convert it into a cottage for his family. Whelan’s drinking problems, however, prevented him from completing the necessary modifications and the house remained empty until 1849, when it was purchased by James Clark, who then moved it across town to his own farm and used it for grain storage. The roof was removed in 1868 and used as part of a pigsty, and in 1875 the floor and remaining timbers were made into a stable shed. Later, timbers from the collapsed shed were used to patch up the Clark barn.” Retrieved from http://www.library.ucsb.edu/thoreau.

134 Kaczynski tried to stop this through legal action and failed.


After building his Thoreau cabin, Benning installed some of the paintings he had recently been making of works by Bill Traylor, Mose Tolliver, and Henry Darger. The counterbalance was interesting, but over time he realized he wanted a wider opposition. When he brought Kaczynski into the picture, he was reminded of a structural solution he had used once before.

Twenty-seven years ago, Benning transcribed the diary of fellow Milwaukee resident and would-be assassin Arthur Bremer in his own handwriting. Beginning on April 4, 1972, Bremer’s diary traces his travels from Milwaukee to New York and back, on to Canada, and then to Washington as he tracks President Nixon with intent to assassinate. It ends May 15, 1972, when, after failing to get Nixon, he instead shoots George Wallace. Benning’s transcription is one of the structural layers of his film *American Dreams* (1984). The handwritten diary begs to be read as it moves from right to left at the bottom of the screen, reminiscent of emergency warnings and news bulletins that punctuated TV broadcasts in the 1960s. Bremer’s diary is juxtaposed throughout the film with close-up shots of baseball cards and memorabilia that venerate the Milwaukee Braves’ Henry (Hank) Aaron, shown chronologically and methodically. The material begins in 1954, charts Aaron’s career—which lasted till 1976—and backtracks to end in 1974, when he attains his goal of 715 home runs, breaking the all-time record held by Babe Ruth. Aaron, as a black player in the Major Leagues, which until 1946 had banned blacks, triumphed against institutionalized racism with his accomplishment.

Juxtaposed temporalities—the dual dramas of Bremer’s mounting anxiety to get Nixon and of Aaron’s relentless pursuit of home runs—intertwine and undercut each other. Aaron’s and Bremer’s ambitions are contextualized by each other’s, and by the competition-driven American cold-war culture evoked in the film by political speeches heard as the fronts of the baseball cards are displayed, and excerpts from popular songs of the period as the cards’ backs are shown. (For example: “Rock with Me Henry” by Etta James; an NBC National News broadcast reporting that on May 5, 1959, a U.S. spy plane was shot down over Russia and that Washington authorities denied having sent the plane, but admitted such a flight probably happened; the “Ballad of the Green Berets” by SSgt. Barry Sadler; Father James Groppi speaking on the unlivable conditions blacks are confronted with; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government”; Bob Dylan singing “Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat”; Patty Hearst declaring her commitment to the Symbionese Liberation Army; “How Deep Is Your Love” by the Bee Gees.)

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138 The baseball cards are Benning’s own.
139 Benning recalls that his belief in governmental truth was ruptured when he was eighteen and heard the NBC broadcast.
The individuated narratives of Aaron and Bremer are framed by the same historical conjunctions of American culture evoked by the broadcasts – economically stratified, competitive, masculinist, polarized, imperialist, and violent. *American Dreams* culminates in Bremer shooting Wallace, and Aaron hitting his 715th home run. The names of James Benning and Arthur Bremer as authors of the film and the diary are superimposed at the film’s end.140

Following paths of recognition and curiosity, Benning often investigates public figures he identifies with, whether through personal history, aesthetically, or politically. Kaczynski, Benning, and Bremer come from similar working-class backgrounds in the Milwaukee-Chicago area. Kaczynski, like Benning, is a mathematician. “Math is a way of thinking, and it is this kind of thinking that informs my art. When I read Kaczynski, no matter if it is personal, political or philosophical, I can feel him thinking very much in the same way.”141 With Thoreau, he shares a deep understanding of solitude and being present through “looking and listening.” They are likewise attuned to distilled, artful conveyance.

Thoreau’s and Kaczynski’s original cabins proposed symbolic purification by “starting anew” with simple shelter and natural beauty – the pioneer essentials. Benning’s cabins are not historical reconstructions or reenactments – they are more in the spirit of possessing the house as a “poetic exercise.”142 Such an undertaking involves identifying the ideal spot, planning placement, sight lines, seclusion, and visibility, preparing the land to break ground, and building a structure. Each step entails philosophical and pragmatic deliberation.

The autodidactic orientation of both Thoreau and Kaczynski finds correlation in Benning, who takes immense pleasure in learning. Thoreau’s “natural skill for mensuration, growing out of his mathematical knowledge, and his habit of ascertaining the measures and distances of objects which interested him,” likewise find parallel in the artist.143 Benning constructed his Thoreau cabin relying on description from *Walden* and his memory of a visit to Walden Pond. Stylizing in the process, he rebuilt certain details to a tee and ignored others.144 Benning’s and Thoreau’s sensibilities are enjoined in the unwitting collaboration.

141 E-mail to author, July 6, 2011.
142 Cavell’s term, speaking about Thoreau’s cabin, p. 60.
143 Emerson, “Thoreau.”
144 For instance he used contemporary single-paned windows instead of smaller multipaned versions of Thoreau’s time, and used store-bought shingles rather than fashioning them from trees as Thoreau had done.
For the Kaczynski cabin, Benning combed the public record for details and came across a series of forensic-style images by photographer Richard Barnes that view the structure straight on and from the front, the back, and both sides. Barnes documented the Unabomber cabin while it was stored in a federal evidence warehouse in 1998, waiting to "go on trial." Using the photos, Benning calculated the cabin’s dimensions and devised a "to-scale" construction plan. While studying the images, he discovered the cabin’s roof structure was asymmetrical, with ten joists on the right side (spaced unevenly in a 2, 3, 3, 2 pattern) and eleven on the left (also spaced unevenly, but in a 1, 3, 3, 3, 1 pattern). He mimicked the scheme and found that Kaczynski’s alternative building method made the roof stronger and less prone to torque.

Benning’s decision to build a second cabin established a relay with the first. And at that moment, a triangular configuration similar to the setup in *American Dreams* took form. Each cabin has a distinct atmosphere: part present, part past; part Benning, part Thoreau; part Kaczynski, part Benning – their proximate pairing impacting the meanings of both.

Several years earlier, the wish to learn about painting motivated Benning to duplicate certain works, beginning with drawings and paintings by Traylor. Benning has been interested in "outsider" artists since the late Seventies and sometimes likens himself to a folk artist. In 1989, he met Tolliver when friends that he and his daughter, Sadie, were staying with in Montgomery, Alabama, took them to spend the day with the painter. During the visit Benning bought a painting for Sadie, which he filmed ten years later for *Four Corners* (1998).

*Four Corners* is Benning’s most obsessively structured film and discloses histories and views of the intersecting states of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. It is divided into four proportionate sections with precisely the same format. Each segment begins with eighty seconds of rolling text using 1,214 letters each. These are brief biographies Benning wrote about four artists: Claude Monet, Tolliver, Yukuwa, and Jasper Johns. The biographies situate the artists in place and time, recounting geographic movements, marriages,

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145 "When I first started making films I was like a folk artist." Benning in conversation with Lynne Cooke on the occasion of a screening of his films at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York, September 21, 2008. Benning had no formal training in filmmaking when he began making films. "What I’m really learning is how different artists think. And about obsession. In order to copy I have to understand how each artist works, and this has helped me to better understand myself. It has informed the way I looked in the last few years." Benning quoted from lecture, Vienna Film Museum, November 21, 2004.

146 Benning, *Fifty Years to Life*, pp. 193, 197, 201, 205–206. Yukuwa is an imaginary Native American woman artist Benning portrays to accompany the image of the Horseshoe Canyon Pictographs in Utah. p. 201.
and births, and each ending with the naming of one of their artworks. During the static shots of the paintings, histories of ethnic and cultural conflicts and disappearing communities in the region – stories of exploitation – are told, each with 1,186 words. These are followed by thirteen forty-second scenes of locations and areas mentioned in those narrations, shot respectively in summer, fall, winter, and spring. Benning’s use of precise symmetry reflects an “obsession for democracy, desire for the perfect square, which of course is impossible.”

In the second section, the static shot of Tolliver’s painting George Washington (made after a dollar bill he pulled from his pocket) is juxtaposed with Benning’s spoken description of the Milwaukee neighborhood he grew up in. Intending “to place my life in a larger historical context,” his story is actually an armature to articulate stories of interlacing constituencies whose histories generated Milwaukee. The Milwaukee narrative is used to “develop these larger histories of land ownership or land use, and how the native peoples who were there were systematically removed.” In so doing, Benning highlights the cyclical quality of conflicts over land use and the transformation of the land, which is reiterated in other sections of the film. In so doing, he links his life to Tolliver’s.

Benning’s curatorial criteria for inclusion in the cabins are multiple. Works by Traylor, Tolliver, and Darger – all long-term inspirations – were foundational and were the first to be installed. After that, one thing slowly led to another. For instance, Benning was taken with Joseph Yoakum’s sensuous landscapes and realized that one looked a lot like the canyon where Kaczynski used to experiment with his bombs. Benning had been copying the outspoken signage of Jesse “Outlaw” Howard for years, and wanted to bring a written work into the mixture. Benning had learned of Martín Ramírez’s work, coincidentally, around the time he was filming RR (2007), and brought him into the project. And Benning

147 Similarly to those in “Twelve People” in this volume.
149 Benning continues, “The diagonal of any square is an irrational number, some multiple of the $\sqrt{2}$. So perfection is impossible. The $\sqrt{2}$ can never be precisely known – its decimals go on forever….” E-mail to author, May 13, 2011.
150 Benning quoted in Scott MacDonald, “Exploring the New West: An Interview with James Benning,” Film Quarterly 58, no. 3 (Spring 2005), p. 9.
151 Benning’s lived experience of Milwaukee is integral to his understanding of place as an aggregate of histories and thus is prerequisite for making such an investigative analysis as Four Corners. His self-inclusion into the otherwise southwest-focused framework demonstrates the degree to which witnessing processes of displacement and disenfranchisement in his original neighborhood, and participating in its transformation, educated him and imprinted his psyche. Milwaukee as matrix is essential to Benning’s way of seeing and has incalculable influence on his work – as story, location, memory, history, imagery, and metaphor.
initially installed a copy of a Howard Finster painting in the Thoreau cabin, but later rejected it. "The first time I met Finster he wanted me to stay and have some Hormel chili with him. He told me there was money to be made in art. The second time I was a witness and babysitter for a couple that came to be married. I found the Rev. to be a bit of a skemmer. But maybe it was more of a personality thing. He’s very outgoing, and I’m not. But the real reason I got rid of the Finster painting was because it wasn’t very good, I mean, my painting wasn’t. It was of one of his early ones with a number under 1000. All of those paintings are great. But I never worked hard enough to get it right. I guess I just didn’t connect with him." He replaced the painting with one he made after "William Hawkins Born July 27, 1895," whose work he had freshly encountered. The “finished” selection came about incrementally as the artist, informed by perpetual research, worked through ideas and possibilities to compose each cabin interior and articulate the larger configuration of Two Cabins conceptually as well as materially.

Self-taught and independent, Benning feels compelling affiliations with the artists he copies, with their extreme focus, obsessive methods, and the ways in which their works reference their lives. “Traylor works from both memory and current observation. He ends up documenting his life through his painting and drawings. After copying his work for a number of years, it made me think, I believe I’m doing the same thing.” Each of the artists he unites with has created his own visual language. The paintings are at once idiosyncratic models of autobiography and perspectives on the social landscape. They all come out of poverty.

If I think about autonomy, Ramírez immediately comes to mind. He completely lost control of his life. The institution he was confined to took away all of his freedom. He had none, yet he was able to find freedom on his own terms. Inside that mental ward he created a life where he could do what he actually wanted to do, which is quite remarkable. They allowed him this, of course, because when he was working, he caused them little trouble. But I’m not sure if he was aware that he had reclaimed his autonomy in a place where they took it completely from him. He just worked.

Re-creating is intimate. Learning how others see and compose requires suspending one’s subjectivity and authorial program to open onto understanding.

153 Conversation, January 25, 2011.
154 Hawkins signed all his paintings with the place and date of his birth.
155 The project is a laboratory so I would be surprised if any aspect of it is truly finished.
156 Benning presentation at San Francisco Cinematheque, February 28, 2010.
157 They died in poverty as well. Although others have profited substantially from their work.
158 Conversation, January 25, 2011.
The original concentration of, for instance, Ramírez intently painting voluminous train tunnels over and over, or Kaczynski meticulously writing out the number code he devised to shield self-incrimination in his journals, is mirrored by Benning’s absorption as he transcribes— as their ways of working pass through him. Making a faithful resemblance requires deep consideration. These works are acts of acknowledgement and devotion. Empathy is palpable in his copies, and so is Benning, who leaves traces. For instance, he painted Black Hawk’s *Dreams or Visions of Himself Changed to a Destroyer or Riding a Buffalo Eagle*, 1880–81, on the back of an 1882 photograph and allowed writing on the back of that photo to surface in the replica as a reference to the writing found on ledger paper used for many of the Plains Indian drawings. After living with the works for a while, Benning sometimes goes back into them to make adjustments, to “get it right,” and to integrate new research.\(^{159}\)

The discovery of more than 250 books in Kaczynski’s cabin after his arrest was a source of fascination for some journalists, who attempted to interpret him from his reading list, combing every volume for clues to his rationale and modus operandi.\(^{160}\) Benning was struck by the overlap between titles owned by Kaczynski and himself, both of them born in 1942 and schooled in the general-education curriculum of the period. Although he grew up in a home without books, Benning is an active reader.\(^{161}\) He began making a library for the cabin as soon as he finished construction. Filtering Kaczynski and inserting himself to articulate an intersection of their references and histories, he researched, added to, and reworked the collection over the next two and half years.\(^{162}\) Kaczynski’s titles include *Autopsy of Revolution*, *Recommended Dietary Allowances*, *Topology of Plane Sets*, *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks*, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System*, and *History of the French Revolution*;\(^{163}\) to which Benning joins, for instance, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, which he consulted researching for *Four Corners; Meteorology for All*, used while working on *Ten Skies* (2004); *Martin Eden*, which affected him deeply when he read it in high school;\(^{164}\) as well

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159 Likewise with the cabin ingredients. For example, after a year or so he replaced one painting after Jesse Howard with another that he felt related more poignantly to the Kaczynski material.

160 In particular see Chase and Graysmith.

161 His father read the daily newspaper and fishing and hunting magazines, and his mother read women’s magazines. E-mail to author, May 20, 2011.

162 Benning combed secondhand-book stores and websites to gather the particular editions he wanted; for instance, those referencing Kaczynski’s titles are from well before his arrest. “It just occurred to me that assembling the library is a lot like collecting baseball cards.” E-mail to author, October 27, 2008.

163 Kaczynski intermittently visited Aunt Bonnie’s Books in Helena to trade and acquire secondhand books.

164 E-mail to author, August 4, 2008.
as allusions to the cabins project, *The Outsider, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, & Tradition in 19th Century America,* and *Henry Darger's Room, 851 Webster,* composed of photographs of the artist’s single-room residence, where he lived and made his work for four decades.

Looking for a structural solution for the collection’s arrangement, Benning ordered the books by height. Then, starting with the largest and working from left to right across the nine-foot-ten-inch-by-eight-and-a-half-inch bookshelf he had installed on the west wall of the cabin, he sequenced them into eleven stacks, in the process allowing the categories, topics, and sources to intermingle in each pyramidal pile.

What kind of historian is Benning? Although interpretation is suffused in every step of research, selection, assigning relevance, joining to, making connections, and making present, he refrains from both narration and judgment. By judiciously withholding, he launches a clearing in the midst of the project so that others may tap social memory and affinity through their own constellations of experience, consciousness, curiosity, bias, and belief.

Joining to those he feels correspondence with, Benning maps himself into the duplicated cabins, paintings, and artifacts, and as a peer, implicates himself in their histories, and them in his. The cabins are a laboratory in which ideas incubate and instigate further inquiry, and where Benning inevitably links to his own history. Self-reference and self-reflection run through his work. Over time, he has created a rich feedback system in which personal history, passions, methods, and convictions echo. Just as his films are visual journals of his exploration and witnessing, Benning investigates and reports himself from Two Cabins. A conceptual chain of obsessions and problems is literally framed out in the structures themselves.  

I want to talk about how things fit together. It’s directly related to what I teach in my “Math as Art” class, that is, mathematics grew up here and there – things were discovered independently from one another. For example, the growth constant $2.7182\ldots$ known as $e$ was found from banking; fractals date back to the golden ratio and Greek architecture. Other things were found from pure play, but as they were brought together, they would fit, and eventually formed a precise structure. And that’s how I believe the cabins work too. I was discovering things here and here and here, and all of a sudden it became coherent. I didn’t invent the juxtapositions or their meanings – I discovered them.  

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165 The laboratory also had the onetime function as “film set.” See James Benning, *Two Cabins,* 2009, 30 min.

166 Conversation, January 25, 2011.
James Benning “took to the woods” in the spring of 2002, buying his first house ever on two and a half acres in the Sierra Nevada north of Bakersfield, California. A hand-painted sign hangs from a thick rusty chain crossing his driveway: “POSTED Henry David Thoreau KEEP OUT.” Far from being a recluse, he is nonetheless a loner with a great need and aptitude for solitude. Autonomy is the religion that satisfies his temperament.

Solitude does not just happen now, nor did it in Thoreau’s time. It has to be created. Solitariness is at once environmental and internal. As much as solitude implies privacy and tranquility, it also involves withdrawal and segregation. Remove from the mediating presence of others reorganizes the architecture of the psyche, producing a space prioritized by consciousness of oneself. Finding and losing oneself ad infinitum. A one-to-one relationship with place or object transpires – geometrically different from the attention-diverting triangulation that happens when another is present. Reflection concentrates. Whatever its objective, focus within privacy achieves different depth.

Benning’s solitude gains contour from acute observation and artistic focus, arousing history in the process.

The myth of America as “new world”: imagining itself liberated from history but oblivious to its genocidal origin and repressive history in the making. Can a culture rooted in actively forgetting its own history do anything other than repeat itself?

Thoreau sought to “wake up the neighbors” when the country was still in formation, slavery was overt, industrialization was fresh, and the paradoxical consequence of America was beginning to sink in. Kaczynski began sounding the alarm against science-and-technology-driven society when he was in his early twenties. Benning’s love/hate relationship with America runs through his life, evidenced in nearly forty years of work.

Two Cabins conjoins a variety of voices that induce the problematic of America – its false promise of freedom from and freedom to that simply will not square, a promise deeply imbedded in its very conception that can never be satisfied. Apparitions of embodied autonomy populate the cabins: America as infinite producer of hope and despair and agitation. “Somehow I have to make

167 He didn’t exactly move to the woods; he also lives in Val Verde to be near CalArts, where he has taught film and math since 1988.
168 The sign is a recycled license plate. For a while it read, POSTED T. J. Kaczynski KEEP OUT. Benning paints it over periodically.
169 This is keenly evidenced in his work, especially in durational films such as Sogobi (2001), 13 Lakes (2004), and casting a glance (2007).
170 Thoreau wrote, “to wake my neighbors up.” Quoted in Cavell, p. 36.
an argument for ‘a wanting of a utopia’ that will surface under any conditions, with the idea that at least some people will always be able to reclaim their autonomy – even after it has been completely stripped from them.”

By authority of affinity, Benning has called this eclectic town meeting to order. Each attendee has a story to tell in a visual language of their making. The meeting is cochaired: Thoreau insists on our duty to the present and to individual conscience, gesturing to the pilgrim’s life. Kaczynski sounds an apocalyptic forecast and a call to revolution, motioning to the primitive life. Discussion goes every which way: live in the mind, remake the world, go off on your own, make your own world; visions proliferate of old times, other times, times to be. Benning, standing to the side, asks that we give consideration.

Benning’s settlement is a compendium of refusals to go with society’s current. It is at once an account of people who take nothing for granted and an avowal of independence in creativity. A compilation of lives and places and temporalities recuperated and made present. James Benning congregated this homestead so he might live in its midst and take part in the dialogue of compulsions. An outlook from which to know his ground, take stock, feel affinity, and reflect on the angles at which he stands to the world.

171 Conversation, January 25, 2011.