

Afterword: "Back in a time made simple by the loss/ Of detail . . ."

John Elder

In all their rich diversity, the essays in *A Landscape History of New England* nevertheless give rise to one broad theme: namely, that an iconic—even mythic—status has often been projected upon this region, in ways made possible both by its long history of settlement and by what superficially appears to be the stable, if sometimes vestigial, character of its villages, farms, and forests. Many of the authors in this book have attempted to reintroduce complexity and concreteness to a part of the country often simplified and sentimentalized. While reading their essays, I was reminded of the first four lines of Robert Frost's 1946 poem "Directive":

Back out of all this now too much for us,

Back in a time made simple by the loss

Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off

Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather . . .¹

Frost's opening line acknowledges the desire to find in New England a refuge from the overwhelming circumstances of modern life. But the poet immediately follows with an admonition against idealizing the lives of early farm families in the region; the eroded headstones in the graveyard might reveal, if deciphered, the way in which a single season's flu could carry off many of the children in a given farming neighborhood, as well as the frequency at which women died during or soon after childbirth. Frost, as

Joseph Conforti notes in chapter 1, was often viewed in his later years as the “poetic tribune of an authentic Yankee regionalism.” So it’s all the more striking that in “Directive,” which is arguably his most ambitious poem, Frost chose to dwell on the riddling brokenness embedded in a landscape of loss.

Nostalgia for an imagined New England can exemplify what Freud would call an “illusion”—something believed less because of evidence than out of a need to believe it. But scholarship in our day may be more likely to fall into a sharply different error—an iconoclasm that endlessly delights in seeing through illusions but doesn’t get around to affirming a positive vision of its own. The essays in this collection, by contrast, fulfill both sides of the historian’s obligation, renewing the discourse about New England’s character and prospects in ways that are at once more firmly grounded in the available facts and more intellectually comprehensive. What is culture but the dialog between a community’s inherited stories and the urgencies that break in upon them and demand formulations more adequate to the new moment? And what is landscape, finally, but the grounded manifestation of changing cultural attitudes toward both people and place?

My response to this collection is that of a nonhistorian whose own writing generally focuses on the landscape around my Vermont home. Stimulated by both the local insights and the broad conceptual framework of *A Landscape History of New England*, then, I offer my family’s story of sugaring as a case study of how idealization may encounter jarring experience but also eventually converge with it into a more tempered sense of place. A second, closely related theme is for me the ever more alarming impact of climate change on New England’s landscape and communities. As Lloyd Irland’s essay in chapter 3 notes, while contemplating our region’s resurgent woodlands, we need also to acknowledge global warming as an “ominous shadow hanging over the forest.” Just as climate change has been the catalyst for rethinking my own assumptions about sugaring and the forests around my Vermont home, so too will it require a careful reassessment of every other aspect of the New England landscape.

My early tendency to idealize sugaring as a model for community-based conservation was to some extent an outgrowth of my immigrant’s ardor. After moving to Vermont in 1973, my wife Rita and I settled down in the village of Bristol and raised our three children here. Developing a sugar bush in the nearby mountains of Starksboro felt like a way to link our interests in conservation more closely to the rural traditions of our area. It was a value-adding enterprise, allowing us—like so many of our neighbors—to earn a modest profit from sustainably managing a midelevation woodlot.

Of equal importance was that it gave us an enjoyable family project that was integrated into the local economy and culture. Over our years of sugaring, I also came to think of it as a useful model for the conservation of America's rural landscape in the twenty-first century. Such a traditional, community-based approach, pursued on private lands, could complement the preservation of great tracts of public land in the twentieth century. Sugaring in Vermont had an important word to offer in the national conversation about environmental protection, stewardship, and sustainability.

My confidence in sugaring as a model for community-based conservation was shaken, however, by a growing awareness of how drastically climate change was threatening the ecological health of New England and the world. One of the appeals of sugarmaking for me was its immemorial quality—its lineage going back through nineteenth-century Yankee farmers to the Abenaki people. But though it may be a venerable practice, neither sugaring nor the maple forests of the Northeast possess the stability I wanted to attribute to them. Not only could I observe the sap runs beginning to shift earlier in the calendar, but the runs were becoming stutteringly intermittent rather than arriving like the exciting turning of a tide. For small-time operators like our family—who had no employees, who needed to hold on to our day jobs, and who could cope with sleepless nights only within a fairly compressed period—this blurring of the sugaring timetable was a serious challenge. Starting in about the winter of 2007, a wave of stories began appearing in the press that sharpened my concerns about the impacts on sugaring from climate change.

A representative headline in the *Burlington Free Press* for January 9, 2007, read “Imagine Vt. without maples.” It began, “Sap flowed last week when maple specialist Tim Wilmot tapped ten trees in an Underhill sugar bush. Down in Pittsford, scientist Alan Betts picked fresh Brussels sprouts from his garden. A record-warm start to winter has left Vermont ice fishermen, cross-country skiers, and snowmobilers wondering whether life might be better in, say, Labrador.” Because of our state's special prominence in American sugarmaking, many articles in out-of-state papers, too, focused specifically on the changing conditions in Vermont.

A March 7, 2007, *New York Times* piece profiled well-known East Montpelier sugarmaker Burr Morse. “The way I feel,” he was quoted as saying, “we get too much warm. How many winters are we going to go with Decembers turning into short-sleeve weather before the maple trees say, ‘I don't like it here any more?’” This article went on to document that since 1971, winter temperatures in the Northeast had increased by 2.8°F. “Over the long haul,” it continued, “the industry in New England may face an even more profound challenge, the disappearance of sugar

maples altogether as the climate zone they have evolved for moves across the Canadian border.” Tim Perkins of the University of Vermont’s Proctor Maple Research Center and Tom Vogelmann, chairman of the Department of Plant Biology at the University of Vermont, agreed that “while new sap-tapping technology is helping sugar makers keep up syrup production, for now, at some point the season will become so short that large syrup producers will no longer get enough sap to make it worthwhile.”

“It’s within, well, probably my lifetime that you’ll see this happen,” Vogelmann predicted. “How can you have the state of Vermont and not have maple syrup?” Another sobering comment in the same story came from Barrett Rock, professor of natural resources at University of New Hampshire: “In the ’50s and ’60’s, 80 percent of the world’s maple syrup came from the U.S., and 20 percent came from Canada. Today it’s exactly the opposite. The climate that we used to have here in New England has moved north to the point where it’s now in Quebec.”

Increasingly alarmed by these reports, as well as by a simultaneous series in the *Boston Globe*, I began to explore related citations on the Internet. One item of March 25, 2007, at <<http://www.stopglobalwarming.org>> stated:

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, over the last generation, the average winter temperature has risen by almost three degrees. That has led some Vermont researchers to conclude the state is in the grip of a long-term warming trend. And it raises the prospect that the climate here will one day no longer sustain maple trees. . . . One projection has Vermont’s climate becoming as warm as Virginia’s. The climate to sustain maples would move two degrees north, from the 45th parallel that runs along Vermont’s northern border, to the 47th parallel, in Canada.

Tim Perkins was once again quoted as saying that such a climatic shift “would be a death knell for the maple industry in his state.” Already, he added, “the syrup season has shrunk by 10 percent because of the warmer winters”; the shift from winter to summer comes faster, shortening the critical time when maple syrup is made.

Such reports, reinforced by our family’s own experience in the sugar bush, made the shattering truth inescapable. Sugaring, which I had viewed as a bridge between Vermont’s traditional rural lifeways and for the potential for new initiatives in community-based conservation—between its past and its future—was itself severely threatened. Rather than a stable model that might be adaptable in other rural areas of the United States, it was looking more like a dwindling relic of deep winters that were themselves beginning to feel historically remote.

As soon as I consciously acknowledged the fact of this inexorable decline, examples of broad, deleterious change in Vermont's maple forest seemed to be everywhere. It could be registered in the challenges to sugar maple regeneration. Maple seeds germinate at 34°F, colder than the temperature required for any other native hardwood. But as germination begins to happen more often during January's increasingly extended thaws, it may often still be followed by more cold weather and heavy snows in February or March, resulting in the loss of many seedlings. The growing prevalence of exotic invasives like buckthorn in Vermont's forests correlates with gradual warming, as does the greater incidence of insect pests typically associated with more southerly climates. Where I had looked in hope to a long-established, stable practice, and where I had taken delight in a traditional, seasonally inflected celebration, I began to find instead a dispiriting story of fractured patterns and damaged health.

If the changing climate was one discouraging factor for me, the response to it by certain representatives of the Vermont sugaring industry was another. An understandable tendency of some of the largest producers has been to emphasize high-tech approaches to tapping and processing sap that partially offset climate-related reductions. But in sugaring, as in the so-called Green Revolution in grain and rice production, technical innovation can put off dealing with the underlying issues for only a few years. We are ultimately required to rethink our assumptions on both ecological and ethical levels.

A particularly disappointing story came out in the April 2007 issue of *Maple News*, which I receive as a member of the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers' Association. It was headlined "A Lot of Hot Air" and was subtitled, "Sugarmakers question impact of climate change." The story's lead was: "All three of Vermont's top industry leaders last month disagreed with recent media reports on global warming and its effect on maple[s]." The president of the Vermont Maple Foundation was quoted as saying, "I think people are making a bigger deal of it than it is." He and the other leaders were interviewed in the front lawn of the capitol in Montpelier on March 23 prior to a tree-tapping ceremony with Governor James Douglas. "People are getting worked up," said the Maple Foundation representative, who went on to recall many January thaws from sugaring in his boyhood. The presidents of the Vermont Maple Industry Council and the Vermont Maple Sugar Makers' Association were also quoted as downplaying warnings about climate change.

These influential sugarmakers were probably right in asserting that sugaring will not disappear during their lifetimes. But their bluff disclaimers of the science of

climate change sounded to me like Louis XV's "Après moi, le déluge," casting future generations adrift. It was mortifying to see them downplaying obvious changes in our climate and in forest ecology in order to avoid any impression that sugaring in Vermont was weakening. It felt like a triumph of marketing over truth—a parallel to the way in which President George W. Bush's appointees at NASA tried to intimidate and stifle scientists like James Hansen, whose statements about global warming conflicted with the short-term interests of the oil industry.

Two things struck me about these statements by spokesmen for prominent sugaring organizations. One was their denial of the ample evidence for climate destabilization, when the rapid changes in our woods should by rights impel sugarmakers to become leaders in climate-related activism. The other was the emphasis in these quoted statements on the word "industry" to describe sugaring, as opposed to such terms as "community" and "tradition. There was a striking dissonance between this industrial rhetoric and the iconography through which Vermont maple syrup often continues to be marketed. In light of this contrast, the images on our quart cans of wool-jacketed Vermont farmers pouring buckets of sap into tanks drawn through the wood on sledges by gray draft horses could feel like just another nostalgic fantasy, made simple by the loss of detail. Noel Perrin (as cited by Mark Lapping in chapter 7) in fact describes such a quaint approach to marketing as the "Wooden Bucket Principle," under which products are offered as emblematic of a way of life that is at once old-fashioned and authentic.

Rewind. I can feel my distress about this example of denial leading to unhelpfully stark and divisive conclusions. Sugaring in Vermont still includes a remarkably diverse collection of participants and still has important connections to its origins and lineage. Numerous small-scale, old-fashioned operators continue to operate in the state (and collectively to conserve vast areas of undeveloped forest land). Many of us in this category also depend upon the generous advice and assistance of the largest operators in our parts of the state. Such interplay between sugarmakers at every scale is one of the valuable characteristics that distinguishes sugaring in Vermont. In addition, as shown by their neighbors' highly enthusiastic response to sugarmakers' open houses each April, both the traditional process of sugarmaking and the taste of syrup remain essential to many Vermonters' sense of place.

Our choice now is not between either abandoning the traditional imagery of sugarmaking or decrying the significant influence of larger-scale and more technological approaches. What we should do at this moment of ecological crisis is to turn back together to the deeper cultural meaning and possibilities of this venerable rural lifeway. Through honesty about the grave danger facing the maple forests of

Vermont, we may find that both the preciousness of our sugaring legacy and our state's capacity for authentic leadership will be enhanced. I believe that the hundreds of small-time operators scattered across Vermont may have a special responsibility now in guiding our whole community of sugarmakers back in this direction.

The defeat of a cherished illusion can bring with it valuable new possibilities for connection, as I discovered one August morning in the Green Mountains as I was climbing into a sugar maple costume. A group of us were assembling in a parking lot beside the Robert Frost Trail in Ripton, getting ready for a five-day walk from Bread Loaf, where Frost summered in his latter years, to Burlington. This project was the brainchild of Bill McKibben, who is a Ripton resident in addition to being a leading writer on global warming. Our goal was to raise awareness of climate change and its consequences.

Even in environmentally oriented Vermont, astonishingly little action had been taken to steer our economic and transportation systems away from dependence on fossil fuels. The media, too, were only intermittently attentive to climate change. As Nicholas Kristoff wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, though global warming was the most important story of the century, it never seemed to make the headlines on a given day. Our little band hoped that as we walked along Vermont's highways with our signs and held rallies in each town where we stopped for the night, our demonstration would be vivid enough to engage our fellow citizens. At our concluding demonstration in Burlington, we would ask Vermont politicians to endorse the climate change legislation that had been proposed by James Jeffords during his final session in the Senate.

In support of our attempt to get some press coverage, volunteers had come up the mountain on this first morning with a stack of signs for walkers and a couple of large cardboard boxes filled with costumes. I had just picked out a colorful sign saying "Sugarers to Save Maples" (though I would have preferred "Sugarmakers") when Sophie McKibben, the teenage daughter of Sue Halpern and Bill, shouted over that there was an outfit I needed to try on. I found that it was in three pieces. A long, dark-brown shift of cotton fell from my shoulders to the tops of my boots. Someone had put a lot of effort into indicating the characteristic fissures and texture of maple bark with a black marker. Toward the upper part of this garment, artificial maple leaves of yellow, orange, and red sprouted thickly, indicating the start of the tree's crown. A sturdy dowel was slid in across my shoulders to suggest branches within the mantle of leaves. And then there was the headpiece—much too grand a construction for the simple word "hat." Inside, it was a stiffened cone of fiberglass

fabric. But that shape was totally obscured by a vivid explosion of leaves that rose almost a yard above the top of my head.

I donned this costume with a solemn sense of satisfaction in helping to bring some color to the march's first day. Despite the daunting realities of global climate change, we wanted to set a celebratory tone for our passage through the fields and villages that inspired us to action and gave us strength. Our hope was to incite solidarity, not to spread gloom. But as soon as I was suited up, I realized that this costume was not simply colorful. It was ludicrous, provoking laughter on all sides, from old friends and total strangers alike. Looking at the photographs of maple-me that subsequently appeared in various local newspapers and magazines and that long continued to arrive in the mail from fellow marchers, I can see why my appearance in this tree suit struck so many as so ridiculous. One especially stupid-looking detail in these pictures is the broad, snow-white elastic band that anchors that weighty headdress around my chin. It seems to shout, "Gawky home-made costume!" and to evoke an indulgent parent's efforts on behalf of a small child at Halloween. Even funnier, I have to admit, is the face peering from this towering swirl of leaves. My gray beard bristles around the prim white strap, as my eyes squint out through professorial little rimless glasses. I'm peering timidly into a crowd that finds me much, much funnier than I'd expected.

I didn't wear the maple get-up for very long after the opening speeches were over. The unyielding dowel and the headdress's chafing interior would have been more than a little uncomfortable while descending Route 125 through the Middlebury River's dramatic gorge. But even for the hour or so I had it on, this costume transformed my outlook on both sugarmaking and conservation. Nothing stronger than Gatorade was being drunk in my vicinity, but between my costume and the half a dozen others scattered through the milling crowd, a sense of irrational exuberance took hold. Our symbolic celebration of the landscape lurched into the hilarity of an actual party.

I had just about gotten used to looking totally stupid when a radio reporter came up, laughing, and raised a microphone to my foliage. "Who are you?" Declaiming in my best Ent-like "Hoom-hoom," I found myself saying, "I am a sugar maple tree." His next question, after a pause, was rather more tentative. "And what are you doing *here*?" As I responded with "Global warming makes me v-e-r-y uncomfortable," I was expecting that our conversation would soon ratchet down into an out-of-role exchange about the march and its goals, but he was backing away nervously by now.

This antic encounter suddenly reminded me of how it had felt to wear a costume for Mardi Gras as a little boy in New Orleans. In particular, it brought to mind the

Keystone Kops outfit, complete with hat and oversized buttons, that my grandmother had made for me when I was a shy six-year-old. Standing on the Canal Street parade route in this get-up, I was amazed to hear myself yelling for folks on the floats to pelt me with the beads, trinkets, and candy they were scattering to the crowd. My elaborate costume was (if I do say so) widely, if laughingly, admired. And I was totally happy to mug for strangers, as coached by my whispering grandmother—rocking back and forth on my heels and twirling my toy truncheon while holding my mom’s hand on the other side. My blue uniform felt like the ticket to an expanded identity in this exciting, if also rather confusing, community festival.

Such strong childhood associations with New Orleans, here at the edge of the Green Mountain National Forest, quickly brought their second jolt of revelation. With winter shortening and the average onset of sugaring season in Vermont edging earlier into February, our own seasonal celebration in the woods was beginning to overlap with Mardi Gras. I saw for the first time that there was a parallel between this carnival, so important in Latin cultures around the world, and our tradition of sugaring in northern New England. The usual mundane routines get thrown out in favor of lively gatherings of friends and neighbors that bring shape to the circle of the year. Such celebrations represent not only an experience of release but also an opportunity to prepare for what comes next. Mardi Gras and sugaring can help communities, as well as individuals, get through a dark time. They create a harmony that encompasses apparent opposites, offering a symbolically charged outburst of collective energy while clearing a space for composure and patience. Carnival-goers bolster their resolve for the long austerity of Lent. Sugaring helps families like my own in Vermont hang in there during what might otherwise feel like the endless suspension of mud season. In each case, the focus is ultimately on renewal and spring.

At one point in chapter 1, Joseph Conforti referred to New England as having been, from its inception, “a place of the moral imagination.” This new association with Mardi Gras helped me move beyond my sense of disillusionment about sugarmaking’s significance and its future to a new sense of possibility. Mardi Gras is both a more socially inclusive party than sugaring and a much wilder one. It invites a Vermont sugarmaker, too, to begin thinking of our own late-winter celebration as a cathartic preparation for personal and community transformation. Ash Wednesday, coming on the heels of Mardi Gras, ushers in Lent’s forty days of repentance, atonement, and renewal. Even without that specific theological framework, though, citizens of the consumerist West today face the same basic challenge that has always

been encountered by the faithful during Lent: the need to restrain our appetites in the interest of reordering our priorities. For conservationists, too, a wild party might be just the thing to burn off indulgent energies—and perhaps to prepare for that special kind of mindfulness that can come with an aching head.

While reflecting about the potential for a more seasonal, ecstatic, and symbolic approach to conservation, I got hold of the catalog for an exhibition of the nineteenth-century American artist Eastman Johnson's sugaring paintings that had been presented at the Clark Institute in Williamstown. These monumental oils confirmed that sugaring, with its alchemy of sap into syrup, has *always* felt to New Englanders like a party—promising that even after a long winter life could be sweet. They also showed, though, that when such local festivities have been pursued with an awareness of their connection to vaster political challenges and out of sympathy with other, far-flung communities, they can sometimes take on an enhanced power and intensity.

Though most of these paintings were produced in the early 1860s, the details in Johnson's scenes were drawn particularly from his experience of sugaring while growing up near Fryeburg, Maine, during the 1820s. Instead of an evaporator within a sugarhouse, he thus depicts a huge black kettle suspended over a bonfire. Rather than being tapped into hanging buckets, the maples encircling that kettle dripped into wooden troughs set on the ground; the contents of those containers were then transferred into barrels on runners for transporting to the fire. Syrup would continue to thicken in the enormous cauldron shown by Johnson until it was ready to be ladled out into wooden pans and cooled into cakes of sugar. This early-nineteenth-century process bequeathed to us the terminology of sugarmaking, sugar bushes, and sugarhouses, even though our main product now is syrup.

Johnson's paintings show logs being chopped and carried, containers of sap being transported to the fire, and a smoke-swirled clearing where most of the people seem to be drinking, dancing, and flirting, temporarily released from their usual chores. A work like "Party in the Sugar Maple Camp" (ca. 1861–1866) thus represents "the raucous parties, held in the woods when the winter's first sap was boiled into maple sugar, [that] signaled the end of a harsh winter and the beginning of spring."² An especially striking connection with the festivities in our own Starksboro sugar bush comes in the figure of a fiddler sitting atop a pile of logs and playing for the carousers around the bonfire, just as our son Caleb's fiddling sometimes sings out over our own little clearing in the woods. I don't know what Johnson's fiddler was playing, but we hear tunes like "Soldier's Joy," "Haste to the Wedding," "Over the Waterfall," and a long skein of medleys and improvisations.

The experiences of delight and community can be amplified, as they were in New England's sugaring celebrations during the Civil War and again in the post-Hurricane Katrina celebrations of Mardi Gras, by correspondingly strong feelings of protest and activism. In the wounded ecological conditions and confused social and economic status of sugaring today, celebration may in fact become more emotionally available within an activist context. In "The Party in the Maple Sugar Camp," as in many of Johnson's paintings, the fiddler perched atop that towering pile of logs is African-American. This detail reinforces a crucial aspect of sugaring for the artist and his contemporaries. Abolitionists had long noted the link between cane sugar and slavery. As the exhibition's curator, Brian Allen, writes in the catalog, "about two-thirds of the 20 million slaves taken from Africa to America labored to produce cane sugar, which was exported to Europe and later sold in urban American markets. Maple sugar had no such stigma. . . . Quakers and, later, a range of New Englanders deemed maple sugar 'innocent' precisely because it was not 'sprinkled with the tears and blood of slaves' but rather 'made by those who are happy and free.'"³

The participants' delight in the "bacchanal" of sugaring was thus strengthened by its connection with strongly held political convictions. Making and consuming maple sugar helped rural families to remain mindful of the larger struggle of their time and offered a way to express solidarity with the many young men from their own community who were off fighting for the Union. Though my earlier sense of the sugaring party in the woods came to feel simplistic in a time of global warming, I do still believe that a combination of seasonal festivity and solidarity within a larger cause would be worthwhile to cultivate in sugaring today. Whereas abolitionism and Union patriotism reinforced traditional New England practices during the Civil War, the production of maple syrup can be aligned in our time with efforts to protect the Northern Forest and the traditional rural culture within it. But this will be possible only if we also focus steadily on the most encompassing problem of our own time—global climate change.

I had earlier conceived of our state's landscape as a sort of *refugium*, to use a biologist's term for isolated environments harboring *relict* species. From such refugia, the surrounding landscape could be replenished as, for example, after the retreat of glaciers from the denuded lower elevations of the New England landscape. But, once more, such a conception really just located me within what James Lindgren calls the realm of "idealized landscapes and wholesome images" in chapter 16. The fact of the matter is that sugarmakers have long since been pulled into an industrialized landscape of collision and confusion—of loss, but also promise. Although a place

like Vermont can still feel like a green and pleasant world to visitors and residents alike—one that is superficially remote from the congestion, stress, and sprawl afflicting so much of the country—we face a world in which every country, state, and valley lies open to the same changing and disorienting sky. Rather than viewing this one living tradition as a hopeful example for the country as a whole, I now see sugaring as having been cast adrift in a melting world.

Much of the diversity of Vermont's forests today comes from a "hypsithermal" warming interval four thousand to six thousand years ago, when southern species like hickories, chestnuts, and oaks forged north through the Connecticut River valley, becoming interspersed with northern hardwoods like maples, beech, and birch, as well as with our coniferous trees. Similarly, it may be that the story we have to tell today has less to do with the New England landscape's distinctiveness and separateness than it does with the possibility for a new era of disorientation, exploration, dialog, and diversity. Streams of local history and stories of traditional and sustainable practices converge with other streams, articulating the welling logic of a watershed. Maggie Brook, flowing through our family's sugar bush, joins with Baldwin Creek and the New Haven River, then heads north as part of Otter Creek, through Dead Creek, and into Lake Champlain. Through the Richelieu River and the St. Lawrence Seaway, it eventually makes its way to the sea. As Gary Snyder has remarked, finally, the whole earth circulates through a single watershed.

Vermont's maple forests and sugaring practices similarly become ingredients in a new cultural *mélange* along with stories and practices from other parts of North America. For me, at least, such a flow has become primarily southward. One implication of this fact is that issues of racial inequality, so dramatic in the aftermath of Katrina, will need to become much more central to my own thinking about Vermont, conservation, and the Thoreauvian tradition of nature writing that's been such a big part of my own teaching over the course of a career. Climate destabilization offers yet another reason for rethinking the image of New England as a self-contained "white village." Looking at all these matters through the lens of Mardi Gras brings a welcome access of zany energy, though, as I first experienced when donning the tree suit.

Too often in considerations of environmental justice, there is a tone of judgment and obligation; conservationists and writers engage with this political and ethical mandate with the solemnity of activists trying to do a hard thing. But when the indomitable hubbub of New Orleans echoes into the sugar bush, the sober conversation about sustainability and balance can morph into a wild party with great food and music. The sexy voltage of impromptu French Quarter parades (all those naughty nuns) suggests that a truly significant dialog between nature and culture

may be propelled more powerfully by humor, dancing, and desire than by a high-minded sense of obligation. Rather than struggling so hard with environmental ethics at an academic level, we might move more swiftly toward an ecologically informed society by celebrating the *erotics* of conservation.

After Mardi Gras, the community “gets its ashes” and girds for the real work of discipline, self-restraint, and reverence. But the party that burns away indulgence may also be a portal into new possibilities for community. Both the festivities and their aftermath are motivated at the deepest level not by obligation but rather by desire. Too often, the environmental conversation focuses on purity and seeks to approach that goal through externally enforced restrictions. But at this time of disaster and confluence, we would do well instead to think of conservation as an invitation to a Creole celebration, a gathering of diverse constituencies in preparation for the real work. We may finally be ready, under a warming sky, to hear the festive as well as the sacramental character of Frost’s concluding lines in “Directive.”

After the reader’s long bushwhack through suspect terrain, that poem arrives at the spot where a family of hill farmers once made their home. All that remains of their dreams is a slowly filling cellar hole, a few broken dishes beneath a pine, and a cup beside the spring that was once “the water for the house.” But the collapse of that house has also opened a new imaginative possibility for connection. “Directive” concludes with an invitation to deeper communion with the sometimes baffling story of an abandoned farm site deep in the woods: “Here are your waters and your watering place./Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”⁴ In a similar sense, this volume’s remarkable collection of reconsiderations, critiques, and syntheses may now serve as both invitation and prologue to our next attempts to read and write New England under a changing sky.

Notes

1. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed., Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1969), 377.
2. Brian T. Allen, *Sugaring Off: The Maple Sugar Paintings of Eastman Johnson* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2004), 7.
3. Allen, *Sugaring Off*, 38.
4. Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, 379.