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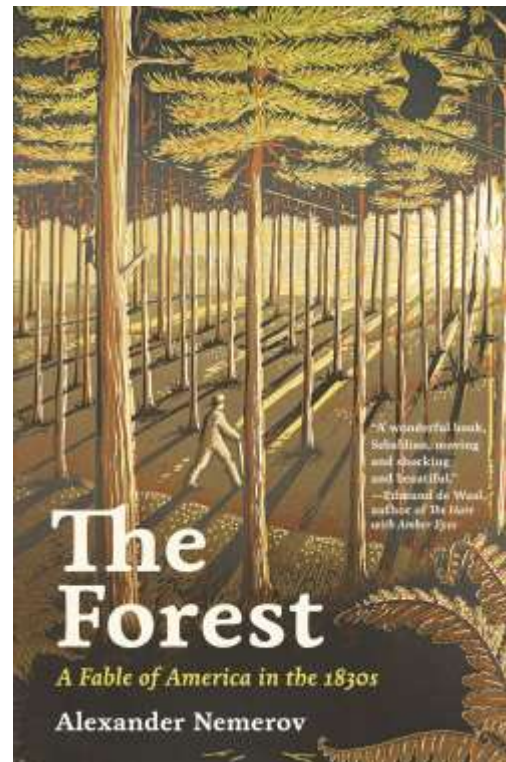
## *The Forest: A Fable of America in the 1830s*

By Alexander Nemerov

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. 336 pp.; 59 color illus.; 7 b/w illus. Hardcover: \$35.00 (9780691244280)

Reviewed by: Rachael Z. DeLue

Cicero called Herodotus of Halicarnassus the “father of history.” To others, he was *mendaciorum patrem*, the father of lies. Scholars today generally agree that Herodotus, author of a detailed account of the Greco-Persian Wars, straddled the divide, making strategic use of fiction in his historical accounting as a way of getting closer to the truth. A mash-up of formats, genres, and narrative styles, including tragedy, epic, dialogue, anecdote, citation, critical analysis, observation, and hearsay, the *Histories* ranges widely and digresses often but ultimately constitutes an organic whole as well as a generally convincing portrait of the period and its people.<sup>1</sup>



Alexander Nemerov's *The Forest: A Fable of America in the 1830s* takes a cue from Herodotus and weaves together varied and diverse episodes from the early history of the United States. Much of the book draws on the historical record, but as Nemerov notes at the outset, “only some of it is true” (ix). Part 1, titled “Herodotus among the Trees,” for example, begins with the felling of a pine tree in Maine and follows the tree as it travels to Philadelphia, Trenton, Boston, and Charleston, destined for use in building and manufacturing. This first part ends with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Indian Removal Policy, the chestnut blight of the early 1900s, and the decimation of the Iroquois language. In between, the narrative interlaces accounts of Nathaniel Hawthorne musing about trees, an axe-making factory in Connecticut, the artist Thomas Cole's fantastical painting *The Titan's Goblet*, the Great Awakening and the “burned over district” of western New York, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville's travels through the Michigan woods, enslaved men in Tennessee, the capture and torture of a Jesuit priest, and the author Margaret Fuller's epiphany in front of a sparkling pool of water. Collectively, these episodes meditate on the power of nature, the relationship between the human and the natural world, and the transformation of the North American landscape in the 1830s. Each of the book's remaining eight parts unfolds in similar fashion and likewise attends to a specific

cluster of themes, several of which—desire, loss, memory, time, sensory experience, interiority, divination, environmental degradation, and the affordances of art—recur throughout the book's sections, creating throughlines in the narrative or, as Nemerov might say, paths through the forest, an entity that in his book is at once a protagonist of sorts and a metaphor for human history.

There are precedents for the fabulations of *The Forest*. Again, Herodotus, but also art itself, which has always spun lies in the interest of telling a big-picture truth, from the preternatural clarity of early modern anatomical illustrations to Kara Walker's beautiful and grotesque tableaux of the antebellum South or the poignantly inauthentic settings of Wendy Red Star's photographic self-portraits. Historical fiction, too, blurs the distinction between fact and fancy to make the past and its legacies fully present and as palpable as possible. Recent examples of novels that dwell deeply in history while vividly conjuring whole worlds include Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003); Tommy Orange, *There There* (2018); and Daniel Mason, *North Woods* (2023). Another precedent might be Julian Barnes, whose *Flaubert's Parrot* (1985) and *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989) blend fact and fiction, taking as their jumping-off point the idea that, as Barnes puts it, "History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us."<sup>2</sup> Apposite, too, is the methodology of "critical fabulation" developed by Saidiya Hartman. Elucidated in Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts," critical fabulation confronts and redresses the silences of the archive of transatlantic slavery through writing that combines historical research, speculation, and fiction, generating narrative from absence and unrecoverable pasts.<sup>3</sup> Some of Nemerov's own publications, especially *Acting in the Night: Macbeth and the Places of the Civil War* (2010), *Soulmaker: The Times of Lewis Hine* (2016), and *Summoning Pearl Harbor* (2017), foreshadow those moments in *The Forest* where he similarly calls up presence from absence, constructing a richly detailed, often speculative or visionary story about the 1830s, in several instances from a known image or object—hence his characterization of the book as a fable rather than a history (ix).

This approach to capturing the experience of people and the patterns of life in the past yields forms of insight that conventional histories might strain to produce, not least because such histories tend to recoil from ambiguity and the unknown or disavow their own inevitable fabrications. Nemerov's embrace of the episodic, the vastness and variety of his cast of characters, and the constant detours and digressions of his text effectively render the messiness, contradiction, uncertainty, and brutishness of America as a nation and collection of individuals in the wake of revolution and independence. The ever-branching narrative of *The Forest* also reveals connections that discipline-specific writing may not always discover, as in the section in part 5, "Animals Where They Are," that interlinks John James Audubon, the cholera epidemic, transatlantic travel, realism, and animal trafficking (83–86). Especially elegant is the way Nemerov uses a historical condition, the outbreak of disease, as a framework for theorizing the operations of Audubon's art making as kin to transmission and contagion.

*The Forest* feels deeply Emersonian in its exploration of the matter of establishing relations between the self and the world or failing to do so, making it as much about the human condition as it is about a specific historical period. In the essay "Experience," Ralph Waldo Emerson laments what he characterizes as the essential alienation of the human subject. "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest," he writes, "to be the most unhandsome part of our

condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. . . . Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual.”<sup>4</sup> In *The Forest*, Nemerov presents a collection of things and sensations that elude or exceed human grasp. For a woodsman, “the phlegm of the cut and the scratch in the throat made no common language” (1). Trees are “strange presences,” and forests “phenomena untinged by human likeness” (3, 18). Animals are “remote,” ever “creaturely” (82, 100). Beekeepers encounter a world “they were not supposed to see” (181). A feather on the grass “came from nowhere and everywhere” (182). Elm trees stand wholly indifferent to “human spectatorship” (222). Even an artist’s picture of the natural world divulges a land “that could have been witnessed by no human being” (169). To be sure, there is an attractive plenitude to Nemerov’s text, a Whitman-like overflowing of experience, sensation, people, and things. Yet one comes away from the book suspecting that it is ultimately and deeply concerned with absence and loss. The section “Longleaf Pine and a Length of Time” at the heart of the book, for instance, narrates the destruction of vast forests and the extinction of the ivory-billed woodpecker, also known as the “Lord God Bird.” The section immediately following, “Shades of Noon,” like so many episodes in the book, also ends on a dire note, associating deforestation with the loss of insight, mystery, and deeper meaning.

*The Forest* closes with a postscript that recounts a young girl’s discovery of a box containing a carved wooden shield on the bank of a stream near her family’s farm. The shield, which the family sells to an antiquarian, calls back Nemerov’s mention of the shield of Achilles on the first page of part 1. Together, the two artifacts signal the importance of ekphrasis in *The Forest* and elsewhere in Nemerov’s oeuvre—both as a descriptive technique and as a method for helping a reader envision an absent work of art or, more generally, an aspect of the past that cannot easily be seen. The antiquarian’s description of the wooden shield further suggests that it is meant to serve as a figure for Nemerov’s book. He thought of the shield “as a chronicle—a series of episodes, each happening in isolation, moving around the object and encompassing, so it seemed, a whole age” (244). Toward the close of the postscript, Nemerov shifts into the first person and describes finding among the antiquarian’s effects a handkerchief bearing a “strangely printed impression” of the shield (246). The handkerchief, too, serves as an emblem for the book and for the work of historical inquiry itself, which always happens at a remove from the real. As Nemerov writes of his project, “Reading books, filling in the blanks with my imagination, I sought to restore the stories of the figures in the original I had not seen” (247).

No single book of any sort can encompass all aspects of a historical moment, or a “life world,” to use Nemerov’s phrase (247). Nor can any one account do justice to the experiences and perspectives of all historical actors or replace all archival silences with fulsome speech. Certain absences, however, can feel more glaring than others. The voices of Indigenous Peoples and communities, for example, might have been more present, made more resonant, in *The Forest*. The book is rife with named individuals, but the majority are white (and male). Native America enters the picture mostly through group names—Mohawk, Ojibwe, Seneca, Pottawatomie—and via narratives of displacement, loss, ancientness, and otherness (22, 43, 82, 115, 167–69). Nemerov freely and at times movingly fabricates the voices and thoughts of Black or female figures from the past, such as Fanny Kemble and Harriet Tubman (145–52, 152–55), so the problem does not appear to be one of

identity or identification. Redress could take a variety of forms, and the imaginativeness and pith of Nemerov's book lays the groundwork for this next step.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Pantheon, 2007); Anthony Ellis, "Fictional Truth and Factual Truth in Herodotus," in *Truth and History in the Ancient World: Pluralising the Past*, ed. Lisa Hau and Ian Ruffell (New York: Routledge, 2016), 104–29.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 240.

<sup>3</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, Number 26 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: James Munroe, 1844), 54.