

International Symposium: “Thoreau from across the Pond”

October 18-20 2017, Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon

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- 1 In honor of Henry David Thoreau's 200th birthday in 2017, a three-day international symposium took place at the ENS de Lyon in October, organized by Julien Nègre (ENS de Lyon), François Specq (ENS de Lyon) and Laura Dassow Walls (University of Notre Dame). It featured 19 Thoreau specialists from around the world, bringing a wealth of perspectives and yielding rich discussions on current issues in Thoreau studies. The three keynote speakers, Branka Arsić (Columbia University), William Rossi (University of Oregon), and Laura Dassow Walls (University of Notre Dame), are among the greatest authorities on Thoreau. The high quality of the papers and the debates they sparked revealed Thoreau's continuing importance as a thinker.
- 2 Henrik Otterberg (Gothenburg) opened the conference appropriately by giving an in-depth analysis of the original title page of *Walden*, showing the history of the figure of Chanticleer as a symbol of awakening, and offering contemporaneous comparisons for the engraving. Yohei Yamamoto (Meiji University) continued with a discussion of Thoreau's political and economic views and their relations to liberalism, abolitionism, transcendentalist aesthetics and the notion of time. Laura Dassow Walls (University of Notre Dame) gave the first keynote address, a fascinating analysis of Thoreau's place in the theory of the anthropocene, situating his environmental thought within a tradition including Alexander Von Humboldt's *Kosmos* and George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature*. François Specq (École Normale Supérieure de Lyon) offered an elegant reading of Thoreau's ethics of reading that forms part of an *ars vivendi*. Daniel S. Malachuk (Western Illinois University) made a strong argument for Thoreau's universalism, seeing him as a Transcendentalist globalist, as opposed to a Transcendentalist nationalist on one hand (as the 100-year anniversary in 1917 generally framed him), and to an ironic globalist on the other (the reigning view of him today). Mary Grace Albanese (Binghamton University) took Thoreau's essay "A Plea for Captain John Brown" as the starting point in a discussion of the importance of John Brown in Haiti.

- 3 The following morning, Dominic Jaeckle (Goldsmiths, University of London) presented a creative video essay which picked up on themes from Thoreau's *Cape Cod* and investigated issues of facts, technology and recording techniques in Thoreau's thought. By exploring the ideas of (literal and ideological) blindness and insight, Benjamin Pickford (University of Lausanne) showed how the text of *Cape Cod*, rather than the geographical space it is named after, can be understood as the "neutral ground" pursued by Thoreau for a vantage point on capital's processes. Christa Holm Vogelius (University of Copenhagen) studied the formal and thematic similarities between Thoreau's *Cape Cod* and Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*, and examined Thoreau's fascination with this transitional space and the lure of a nationless site in a Western world increasingly defined by nation states. Branka Arsić (Columbia University) delivered the second keynote address, exploring Thoreau's analogical mode of thought, its relation with his particular form of radical empiricism, and its grounding in an ontology of singularities and contingency. Michael Jonik (University of Sussex) discussed Thoreau's philosophical letters, their stoicism, and their themes of friendship and sincerity. Elise Lemire (Purchase College, State University of New York) spoke about current efforts in the town of Concord to look at its own history regarding racial issues, celebrating its nineteenth-century abolitionism without frontally tackling its own older record of slaveholding. Michael Weisenburg (University of South Carolina) placed *Cape Cod* in the context of nineteenth-century historiography, arguing that Thoreau's particular methodology attempted to reinvent history-writing by questioning the teleological orientation of nationalist historians of his time and taking into account the sedimentary cultural geology of a place.
- 4 On the final day of the symposium, Cristin Ellis (University of Mississippi) focused on Thoreau's science of subjective experience and temporality, and linked this to contemporaneous medical instruments developed to measure the life of the body. Rochelle Johnson (The College of Idaho) spoke about the importance of an active human role in the curation of nature, and compared Thoreau's work with that of Susan Fenimore Cooper (*Rural Hours*, 1850). Julien Nègre (École Normale Supérieure de Lyon) offered an in-depth analysis of Thoreau's mapmaking, showing the interaction between his map use and his writing. William Rossi (University of Oregon) gave the final keynote address, a wide-ranging interpretation of *A Week* which considers this early work as much more complex than it is often seen. Kristen Case (University of Maine Farmington) investigated Thoreau's views of time and music, and demonstrated the detailed work that goes into transcribing the *Kalendar*, arguing that the charts provide a technique for the simultaneity of perspectives. Danielle Follett (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle) ended the symposium with a discussion of Thoreau's theory of the music of nature and his incorporation of discord into his idea of harmony.
- 5 All in all, the symposium created the occasion for many extremely rich and diverse discussions and debates on Thoreau's thought and his contributions to literature, philosophy, politics, science and environmental studies. Website: <http://llce.ens-lyon.fr/a-la-une/agenda-du-departement/section-anglais/international-symposium-thoreau-from-across-the-pond>

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