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**François Specq, Laura Dassow, Julien Nègre (Eds.),
*Thoreau beyond Borders: New International Essays on
America's Most Famous Nature Writer***

University of Massachusetts Press

Sara Watson

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- 1 “(...) reimagining how borders produce as well as limit possibilities”: such is the thesis running through this collection of fourteen chapters on Henry David Thoreau’s work both inside and across boundaries. *Thoreau beyond Borders* offers contributions by a transatlantic roster of scholars on three connected yet separate themes: Thoreau’s reflections on territorial appropriation and domination (“Contact Zones”), the interdisciplinarity of Thoreau’s works (“Crossing Boundaries”), and finally his explorations of universalist thought (“Widening Circles”). In their stimulating introduction, editors François Specq, Laura Dassow Walls and Julien Nègre acknowledge the daunting breadth of current Thoreauvian research, which has both contextualized and modernized our reading of his work. In *Thoreau at 200* (2016), particular attention was given to the new relevance of Thoreau in the context of ecological disaster and the success of Bruno Latour’s work on Gaia. In France, Julien Nègre’s beautifully researched *L’Arpenteur vagabond: cartes et cartographies dans l’oeuvre de Henry David Thoreau* (2019) focused on the importance of mapping as a material but also theoretical practice. The bicentennial celebrations of the author of *Walden* have created seemingly endless

material in the past few years, from documentaries to graphic novels, and it surely cannot be long before some Concord soap opera graces a streaming platform. The aspiring tricentennial readers wittily conjured up by Daniel S. Malachuk in his essay “Wider than our views of it: Thoreau’s Universalism” will have to grapple with this bountiful content. In the meantime, *Thoreau beyond Borders* enters the fray with refreshing enthusiasm and originality.

- 2 Any collection on such a broad topic runs the risk of having its readers strive to find connections between seemingly haphazard chapters and sections; in *Thoreau beyond Borders*, this is a notable feature rather than a flaw. Rather than focusing on a single disciplinary approach, a single work or even a single period in Thoreau’s career, or even attempting to summarize the various evolutions of Thoreauvian scholarship, the collection encourages the reader to sample from this herbarium.
- 3 The first five chapters in “Contact Zones” focus on Thoreau the historian, the mapmaker, the essayist; all reflect on Thoreau’s attempts to create what François Specq in his contribution on “Walking” calls the “denarrativization of space” through a more specific approach of the poetics of place. Notably, in “*Cape Cod’s* Transnational Bodies,” Christa Holm Vogelius traces how Cape Cod as reframed by Thoreau becomes a portal to an ahistorical ocean, but also a discussion on the catastrophic nature of the shipwreck that claimed the life of the Transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller, whose body Thoreau tried to find on the beach. Julien Nègre’s chapter on “Making the Invisible Visible” also focuses on “spatial reordering” and on ghostly presences enshrined by Thoreau’s mapping as a memorial practice.
- 4 The seemingly paradoxical nature of such ahistorical spaces being defined by material markings is a theme continued in the second part of the collection, “Crossing Boundaries.” Danielle Follett’s persuasive study on Thoreau and dissonance broadens the typical reflection of Thoreau as a peace-loving, tree-hugging proto-ecowarrior by underlining the importance of cacophony in his work. The link between some of his writings and the evolution of nineteenth-century music towards an uneasy compromise between naturalistic motifs and abstraction jumps to mind, and could be interestingly explored, as the link between improvisation and composition. In the same way, the idea of mapping time, weather, and nature through the Kalendar charts explored by Kristen Case in “Beyond Temporal Borders” is a fascinating counterpoint to some of the ideas presented in “Contact Zones.” Thoreau’s classification paradoxically evades categorization: his attempts to understand and describe natural phenomena, even in the context of growing positivist influence, seem only to blur the lines between poetry and naturalism, to crib from William Ellery Channing’s 1873 biography.
- 5 In the final section “Widening sections,” as Sandra Harbert Petrulionis writes in her analysis of Thoreau’s “dialectic of reform,” “[...] the subversive Thoreau is frequently quoted, often misunderstood, and far too little read”: the close readings of *Cape Cod* as the pursuit of “an open associative hybridity,” as Benjamin Pickford has it, or the fascinating reshuffling of the categories of ordinary and sacred presented by David M. Robinson, certainly go against this trend.
- 6 The contrapuntal system underlying this collection of essays is particularly satisfying: while each section offers its own line of thought, it is in constant echo with the other essays of the book. The sharp editing, beautiful illustrations and index makes navigating the somewhat opaque waters of Transcendentalism feel smooth. This

volume offers a variety of stimulating ideas, but its greatest contribution to current scholarship is the thought-provoking portrait it weaves using such disparate threads, making a wonderful argument for a new way to read and study Thoreau.

- 7 As Laura Dassow Walls concludes in the final essay of the collection “Counter Frictions”: “For Thoreau to survive to his tricentennial, we need to redraw the borders.” It is not the lesser of the pleasures of *Thoreau beyond Borders* that this directive feels so invigorating: Thoreauvian beginners or experts alike will close the book with renewed enthusiasm for the ever fascinating figure of the solitary surveyor, who beyond the borders of time and space brings us back to a sense of our own connection to the world.
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Sara Watson holds a PhD from the Ecole Normale de Lyon. Her research interests are the history of American New Religious Movements, the Transcendentalists, and the practice of religious memoir writing. She is currently adapting her dissertation *De Milton à Emerson: trajectoires du dissent de l'époque coloniale à la période antebellum (1640-1860)* into a book. She is an assistant professor at Aix-Marseille University in France, where she teaches American literature and history of religion.