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Preface:
Thoreau Symposium

These three essays on Thoreau do not represent a planned symposium. Rather, their simultaneous appearance for publication caught our attention, leading us to look for some common contemporary concerns or conversations that Thoreau might particularly enable. The essays seem to create a discussion for which Thoreau was a jumping-off point, so we are offering them here as a spontaneous symposium. A re-turn to Thoreau is hardly surprising in light of the exciting ecocritical work in which scholars are currently engaged, and indeed these essays, although not focused on ecocriticism, suggest the relevance of a writer—known for more than a century as, in part, a “nature writer”—to meditations on surfaces and depths, insides and outsides. Thoreau perhaps acts as a particularly constructive conduit for such an outer-inner discourse because, as each essay points out in a different way, he often assumes the mantle of liminality as an outsider on the threshold of contrary identities. He is the sometimes writer who is the sometimes day laborer, the philosophical saunterer who is also a savvy pencil engineer, the author who will wax transcendental amid essays geared more toward a popular audience. Indeed, this perpetual border stance and concern with surfaces and depths find expression repeatedly throughout his *Journal*, from his first month of journaling in 1837, in which he playfully coopts a superficial concern with the concept of forest succession to talk about “the soil of my future growth,” to his final journal entry before he died, in which he stays on the surface altogether, minutely describing the surface of a railway causeway after a storm.

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The first two essays, on sleep and food, feature the surfaces and depths—and mutability—of the human as an idea. For Benjamin Reiss, *Walden* registers Thoreau's engagement with somnolent disturbances as a metacommentary on capitalism and modernity's deformation of the human. Reiss describes how industrial temporality marks the human—how, that is, modern subjectivity was shaped in part as a response to a behavioral imperative that was first imprinted on human surfaces and subsequently transformed into neurological and psychological depths. Tracing the transition of Thoreau's preoccupation with metaphorical sleep into his own sleep disturbances, which eventually pushed Thoreau into “a feeling of outsidersness,” Reiss tracks how a surficial concern with sleep moves through a proto-unconscious into a critique of the (human) subject of modernity. Thoreau's constitution is also the subject through which Michelle C. Neely understands his move from bodily processes to a critique of the body politic. Reading Thoreau's account of his dietary practices in *Walden* in light of vegetarianism, and inflecting Thoreau's “deep and radical separation of the self from society” through, in part, his vegetarian diet, Neely shows how a concern with the human body's constitution becomes a concern with the limits of citizenship and the imagination of “a more radically democratic physiological constitution that . . . incorporated all . . . human bodies.”

David Faflik's choice to turn to Thoreau to explore the implications of “surface reading” provides a possible key not only to the interconnections among the essays, but also to some motivating concerns of ecocriticism itself. “Deep reading was rife among those of Thoreau's contemporaries for whom language was less an instrument of empirical observation and objective record than an imaginative means employed for the subjective end of emotional, psychological, and aesthetic prospecting,” notes Faflik. Yet, he suggests, a return to the surface may represent a return to that most fundamental of relationships: the forever in flux and deeply unstable relationship between human beings and our surroundings—a return to where the meanings are, and aren't, as when Thoreau, displaying his outsider status, subverts the traditional transcendental surface-to-depth transition by foregrounding the interpretive role of surface as sufficient in itself.

Together, these essays, in addition to offering new readings of Thoreau, register changing concerns and, consequently, reading practices within the discipline. Using sleep and food respectively, the first two

essays suggest a concern with the idea of the human as one node in a network, or environmental system. Thoreau the nature writer becomes Thoreau the barometer whose body occasions a meditation on the human as an ever-evolving concept mediated by—and mediating—the system of life itself. As the locus of the humanities, the figure of the human occasions a shift in the modes of engagement, including reading practices, through which human beings, and humanists, make sense of lived experience.

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