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LSU DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS

Thoreau's Melancholia, Walden's Friendship, and Queer Agency

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[Julia Morgan Leslie, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College](#)

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Abstract

Walden queers its readers. While many have investigated Thoreau's queerness, there has been little notice of *Walden's* queerness. This project begins with a situational analysis that identifies the melancholic antecedents of *Walden* in Thoreau's life and his choices that led to the illumination of his melancholia. Thoreau had already been experimenting with what Branka Arsić identified as "literalization." Nevertheless, a period of crisis, detailed by Robert Milder, made him aware of what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have referred to as the melancholic's blind skill of "demetaphorization." I suggest that Thoreau exploited this skill to produce *Walden's* unique ability to feed on and, as Henry Abelove and Henry Golemba have suggested, awaken its reader's desires. I combine a close reading of *Walden* with selective study of the text's reception. *Walden* delivers on Thoreau's theory of friendship from his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. *Walden's* friendship with its reader is the agency that accomplishes what Henry Golemba and Lawrence Buell have noted as a blurring of the boundary between reader and text. To investigate this friendship and *Walden's* accommodations of faux friendship, I construct a Burkean perspective by incongruity using research in the nature-writing and rhetoric disciplines that intersect with Thoreauvian studies. This incongruity is analyzed using not only Burke's theories of literary form and literature as equipment for living, but also Deleuze's process philosophy and Deleuze and Guattari's analyses of the war machine and their spatial analysis. This project complexifies Erin Rand's research on polemics, using Deleuze's multiplicity not only to explain why polemics are unpredictable, but also to address what Sarah Hallenbeck has referred to as "the crisis of agency." I suggest an expansion of José Esteban Muñoz's research. The question of how one actually transitions from melancholia to disidentification cannot be adequately answered with terms like Stuart Hall's 'oppositional reading' or Deleuze and Guattari's 'de/reterritorialization.' I also suggest that queer utopian thinking and poststructuralism are more compatible than previously argued. This dissertation is itself a polemic, straining the possibilities of friendship in the service of queerness.

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Crick, Nathan

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Henry David Thoreau challenged popular thinking about life and society in works such as his book *Walden* and essay *Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau became very friendly with Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the influence of Emerson on Thoreau's life was enormous. Emerson encouraged Thoreau, who kept a daily journal, to devote himself to writing. Emerson found Thoreau employment, at times hiring him as the live-in handyman and gardener at his own home. And at times Thoreau worked in his family's pencil factory. In 1843, Emerson helped Thoreau obtain a teaching position on Staten Island, in New York City. The apparent plan was for Thoreau to be able to introduce himself to publishers and editors in the city. Sure, Thoreau declares that his sole purpose is to relate the discoveries and success of his personal experiment living for two years alone by Walden Pond – a pretty simple life. But what we actually get in *Walden* is a portrait of a man who is caught up in his own contradictions. There's nothing simplified about Thoreau's character. Actually, that's what makes *Walden* fun to read. It's written in the voice of someone who is fully aware that he's got a pretentious, elitist streak. Because of this, contradictions abound, but they're incredibly rich, and worth taking