

AGU American Literature Lecture

"Remaking What Has Been Unmade"

Henry David Thoreau and the More-Than-Human Commons

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Across the environmental humanities, scholars recognize the need to recover or reinvent "the commons": a conception of the natural world that allows for its use without reducing it to a mere resource. But there are many types of commons, and it is important for us to understand their histories and distinctive properties. In this talk, I want to examine Henry David Thoreau's polemics against private property in his famous *Walden* and in his journals in this light. His works helped to inspire the US national park system, which constitutes a particular kind of commons. Remarkably, however, Thoreau failed to engage with the contemporaneous struggles of Native American communities in New England to preserve their own distinctive forms of communal landownership which, similar to Thoreau, recognized that the land also belongs to its non-human inhabitants. I will argue that this failure demonstrates the ways in which Thoreau's conception of a more-than-human commons remains beholden to settler-colonial thinking. This holds important lessons for our own efforts today to conceive of the Earth as a commons.