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Introduction

Emerson's Circles

"Life wears to me a visionary face." Emerson, "Experience" (*CW* 3: 48)

Encounters

In the winter and spring of 1867, Ralph Waldo Emerson travelled westward on a speaking tour across a still war-weary America. He delivered lectures at lyceums, town halls, and churches in fast-growing cities like Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis, as well as in smaller out-of-the-way towns like Battle Creek, Michigan; Lacon, Illinois; or Lawrence, Kansas. Although over sixty years old, he followed a rigorous schedule – he would deliver eighty lectures in 1867 across fourteen states – but extensive lecturing was not a new practice for Emerson.[1] Indeed, following his departure from the ministry in 1832, and notwithstanding the annual sum he was paid by his deceased first wife's estate, he had relied on lecturing as a primary means to earn his living. In so doing, he built an international reputation not only as an essayist and a poet, but as one of America's preeminent public intellectuals and literary figures, a reputation that has arguably only increased since his death in 1882.

But two stops during his winter 1867 western tour deserve special mention and can help orient this *New Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. First, across a frozen, snow-packed Midwest *en route* to St. Paul, he made a side trip to an encampment of Santee Sioux people (most likely to the Mdewakanton, a subgroup of the Isanti (Santee) Dakota (Sioux)) near Faribault, Minnesota. It is not clear whether Emerson headed there following the example of his friend and fellow Concord poet-philosopher, Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau had travelled to Minnesota in 1861 shortly before his untimely death in 1862 at forty-five years old, seeking to learn as much as he could about the local Indigenous peoples. For his part, Emerson made just a brief excursion, escorted by the grandson of the town's namesake and founder, Jean-Baptiste Faribault, whose family was of mixed French

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Canadian and Dakota descent. In a letter dated February 1, 1867, Emerson describes the visit to his daughter, Ellen, to whom he wrote regularly during his lecture tours and who handled much of the day-to-day activities of his financial affairs:

> Here in a wild piece of timber for the Aborigines The warriors, they said, had been removed to Nebraska, or elsewhere, old Chief Opie or Opequa,[2] & his family occupied one, & old women & young men & and girls (& twice I mistook girls for young men) & their dogs, the others. Led by Faribault we lifted the skin curtain, & and entered one & another. Supper was all ready on a board on the ground in one, – the family all asquat on the earth, not looking at it, what I took for young men smoking their pipe. They said nothing, but looked cheerfully enough at Faribault who spoke Indian to them. In one tent we heard singing as we approached, but were silent on our entrance. I begged him to ask them to sing again, & and the girls got their book, – Indian psalms, – & sung very sweetly. I am sorry to say the light was not birch-bark nor pine-knot, but a kerosene lamp: but the fire in the middle of the tent was Monadnoc boughs. I inquired whether I could see such another Indian picture between that spot & Boston, & was assured I could not. (*L* 5: 493)[3]

There is, quite clearly, an element of staged spectacle or cultural-anthropological tourism at play here in Emerson's visit. The Santee Sioux people are seemingly on display for the touring preeminent white intellectual. Emerson's rhetoric in the letter, what is more, repeats stereotypical ways of describing Indigenous peoples, setting the "Aborigines" in a "wild piece of timber"; he admits to mistaking their gender twice; he begs for them to perform for him; and he laments the seeming inauthenticity of the "Indian picture" insofar as they use a modern kerosene lamp and not one of more "natural" birch-bark or pine-knot to light their living spaces. Furthermore, Emerson does not indicate here the extent to which he would have known the traumatic recent history of the people he was visiting. The "Dakota Wars" raged just a few years before in 1862 and were among the bloodiest confrontations between the US Army and North America's Indigenous peoples. The wars culminated in the largest mass execution in US history, when thirty-eight of three hundred Dakota sentenced to death were hanged by the government.[4] More would have died, but President Lincoln commuted the sentences of many of them, condemning the remainder to the gallows. Alexander Faribault, the father of Emerson's guide, served as translator for the Dakota and they were currently encamped on land he claimed as his own, but his family had also gained financially when the treaties he had helped to negotiate were broken.

We can only speculate on the extent to which Emerson knew of this violent context. His misrecognizing young women for young men runs against

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his awareness that many of the men had been removed to Nebraska, but he does not mention also that many had been killed in battle or later executed. But it is clear from the letter that, in the wake of these wars, on the lands of which they had been dispossessed, settler-colonial cities and towns and large-scale infrastructures – such as the railroads, communication networks, and industrial, commercial, and banking systems that made Emerson's trip possible – were being constructed rapidly. Yet there is also a tone of sadness in Emerson's muted registration of the fact that he could not see "such another Indian picture between that spot & Boston," a muted registration of forced removal and white settler-colonialist violence toward Indigenous peoples which had taken place for centuries, eradicating their presence almost completely. Emerson would have been attuned to the terminology of "removal," which he uses here in referring to the warriors having been "removed to Nebraska" as a consequence of the Dakota Wars. Thirty years before, in 1838, he had written one of the most powerful letters in American political history to President Martin Van Buren protesting the Cherokee Removal. In that letter, he calls removal "a crime" that "confounds our understandings by its magnitude, – a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country." Directly denouncing Van Buren in scathing terms, he concludes: "You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world."[5] This letter culminates Emerson's young commitment to fighting the injustice of Indigenous removal, begun as early as 1819 when as a student at Harvard he debated the question of whether "the conduct of the U.S. towards the Indians can be reconciled to the principles of justice and humanity?" – and to which he concluded it could not be.[6] Yet that the letter to Ellen Emerson in 1867 – which of course is a piece of private correspondence and not a political text – does not come close to this earlier heightened tone nonetheless points to Emerson's often contradictory politics. And what is more, as Drew Lopenzina and Laura L. Mielke have asked, to what extent did Emerson "speak for 'the Indian'" anyway, or imagine a real Indigenous presence?[7]

There is not space here to explore Emerson's complex and inconsistent relationship to US settler-colonialism and Indigenous peoples' removal and genocide in any great depth. But suffice it to say for the sake of introducing this new collection of critical texts on Emerson's life and work, that the letter raises key questions regarding how he advocated – or didn't advocate – for some of the pressing social and political causes of his day. Indeed, understanding the political dimensions of Emerson's thought in his own time – and for our time – is one of the key areas of Emerson's work that this *New*

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Cambridge Companion seeks to explore. As such, its contributors engage questions related to Emerson's writings and lectures on democracy and race, antislavery and women's rights activism, Asian American immigration, and nature and ecology, and offer trenchant reconsiderations of Emerson's complex notion of the "times" in which he lived. The enduring question regarding Emerson's political involvements, that is, is always related to what he calls the question of how to live – how to conduct one's life – in one's own historical moment. As he says in his essay "Fate," "To me, however, the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?" (*CW* 6: 1).

Before I provide a fuller overview of some of the contributors' interventions, I would like to juxtapose Emerson's visit to the Santee Sioux (and the complex political Emerson it evokes) with a second scene, and with it a different, complex philosophical Emerson that also emerges from the same tour. Across the midwestern United States, Emerson delivered lectures called "Man of the World," "Social Aims," "Resources," "Inspiration," or "Eloquence" (many of which would appear, in one form or another, in his later books *Society and Solitude* (1870) and *Letters and Social Aims* (1875)). A few weeks after visiting the Santee Sioux, and after giving further lectures in Minneapolis, Fond du Lac, Des Moines, or Chicago, Emerson stopped in St. Louis to visit a group of philosophers who had taken up the banner of G. W. F. Hegel in America and would thus become known as the "St. Louis Hegelians." Emerson had come to St. Louis at the invitation of one of their leading figures, William Torrey Harris, who had founded the influential *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in 1867 – a journal that would not only publish key translations and criticism on Hegel but also some of the early works of American pragmatist philosophers like William James and John Dewey. Emerson had also come at the urging of his friend and fellow Concord writer A. Bronson Alcott, who would later convene the Concord School of Philosophy, bringing Harris to Massachusetts in the 1870s.

Understanding Emerson's relation to Hegel – and his stop to visit the St. Louis Hegelians – can help give a sense of Emerson's relation to philosophy and his intellectual historical milieu more generally. To begin with, Emerson had encountered German philosophy through a variety of sources, and German Idealism, in particular, had played a profound, if understated, role in shaping the intellectual agenda of Emerson's nineteenth-century milieu. German Idealism was part of a larger American transformation of Anglo-European Romantic philosophies, and some of its central questions found sympathetic reformulations in Emerson's philosophy. In brief, these questions are centered on the problems of how to

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unify mind and nature, faith and knowledge, fate and freedom, and the conduct of life and the moral sentiment. Through his engagement with these questions, Emerson responded to the transcendental idealism of Immanuel Kant and to the "identity philosophy" of Friedrich Schelling, which he had absorbed from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and the French eclectic philosopher Victor Cousin. And, as was the case with his close friend, editor, translator, writer, and intellectual Margaret Fuller, Emerson had strong affinities with the novelist, poet, and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (affinities expressed in his essay devoted to Goethe in his book *Representative Men* (1850)). Like that of Goethe, the keynote of Emerson's philosophy is, arguably, metamorphosis. To a large extent, Emerson's work could be said to be devoted to bearing witness to and celebrating nature's fluxes, transformations, and transitions; or, as he writes in his essay "Poetry and Imagination," the "endless passing of one element into new forms, the incessant metamorphosis" (*CW* 8: 7–8). In its totalizing claims, Hegel's Absolute Idealism purported to overcome the Cartesian and Kantian dualisms of mind and matter and the noumenal and phenomenal and thus to culminate German Idealism. Hegel's philosophy of nature, deemed "monstrous" by Goethe, offered a rigid conceptual system for thinking of metamorphosis as the rhythmic unfolding of nature and the passage of subjective spirit into objective spirit.[8]

In a journal passage dated 1866, the year before he visited St. Louis, Emerson noted the power of Hegel's thought:

> Hegel seems to say, "Look, I have sat long gazing at the all but imperceptible transitions of thought to thought, until I have seen with eyes the true boundary. I know what is this, and that. I know it, and have recorded it. It can never be seen but by a patience like mine added to a perception like mine. I know the subtile boundary, as surely as the mineralogist Hauy knows the normal lines of his crystal, and where the cleavage must begin. I know that all observation will justify me, and to the future metaphysician I say, that he may measure the power of his perception by the degree of his accord with mine." (*JMN* 10: 143)

Despite his recognition of Hegel's importance, Emerson was by no means an adherent of his philosophy. Indeed, his self-reliant thinking is marked by its aversiveness to philosophical systems or settled doctrines. And Emerson's knowledge of Hegel was for the most part gleaned from Hegel's commentators and summarizers rather than from direct and rigorous study of his texts and tenets. Emerson relied on conversations with his Concord contemporaries Emmanuel V. Scherb, Frederic Henry Hedge, James Elliot Cabot, and, indeed, W. T. Harris, and on philosophical compendia like J. B. Stallo's *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature* (1848), Jean Chrétien

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Ferdinand Hoefer's *Biographie universelle* (1852), and James Hutchinson Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* (1865).[9] It was in this context, then, that, later in 1867, Emerson wrote to Harris requesting that he might teach him "the true value & performance of Hegel, who, at first sight is not engaging nor at second sight satisfying. But his immense fame cannot be mistaken and I shall read & wait" (*L* 5: 521).

His spring 1867 lecture to the St. Louis Hegelians differed from his other lecture stops on the tour, then, insofar as he came to St. Louis to learn from his auditors as much as to share his own philosophy with them. In a letter to his close friend Henry James Sr., Emerson remarked that it was a "true gratification to see Harris at St. Louis among the German Atheists." However, as he quickly added, "They did not wish to see or hear me at all, but that I should see and hear them" (*L* 5: 514). Emerson seemed more amused than offended, and, for his part, Henry James Sr. quipped that "It was very nice of you to cohabit with those St. Louis chickens."[10] As Emerson's twentieth-century biographer Ralph L. Rusk summarizes the visit in his *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*:

> Emerson had a warm reception among the members of the Saint Louis Philosophical Society, founded little more than a year earlier and already the chief American center of Hegelian thought. He could only admire, not understand, the tireless talk of William Harris and his nineteen or so philosophers and propagandists. Harris and his men were glad enough to have him as their guest lecturer but were bursting with their own version of the gospel according to Hegel. His curiosity was deeply stirred again when, a little later, he received the opening numbers of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the Saint Louis society's remarkable publication that seemed to make the Missouri town for the moment the capital of all American philosophical studies. (Rusk 433)

Emerson's visit is noteworthy not merely as evidence of his continued status as a revered public intellectual in the postbellum period. It also shows him to be a lifelong student of the "transition of thought to thought" (*JMN* 10: 143) – and one who sought to be attuned to the emergence of new philosophies that might speak to new times. Emerson was never a static thinker. He was one ready to leave behind his previous suppositions, to shift his epistemological bases, to have his curiosity stirred. "Leave your theory," he urges us in "Self-Reliance" (*CW* 2: 33). "Who leaves all receives more," he advises in "Intellect":

> A new doctrine seems at first a subversion of all our opinions, tastes, and manner of living. Such has Swedenborg, such has Kant, such has Coleridge, such has Hegel or his interpreter Cousin seemed to many young men in this

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> country. Take thankfully and heartily all they can give. Exhaust them, wrestle with them, let them not go until their blessing be won, and after a short season the dismay will be overpast, the excess of influence withdrawn, and they will be no longer an alarming meteor, but one more bright star shining serenely in your heaven and blending its light with all your day. (*CW* 2: 203)

As such, his living mind is a leaving mind marked by such departures. He wrestles with Plato and Neoplatonism, Swedenborg and Kant, Coleridge and Cousin, and, finally, Hegel, and he lets them go.

So, despite a broad appreciation for Hegel, Emerson found Hegel's philosophical terminology largely "unintelligible" (see Wellek 55). And as one who claims he "reads for the lustres" (as he reminds us in his essay "Nominalist and Realist" (*CW* 3: 137)), Emerson characteristically devoted himself less to understanding the details of Hegel's system than to letting Hegel stir the fires of his imagination. So if Emerson was receptive to Hegel's thought, and if he indirectly contributed to his nineteenth-century Anglo-American reception, he would likewise leave Hegel behind in the name of finding his own thinking. As he writes in his journal:

> The reason of a new philosophy or philosopher is ever that a man of thought finds he cannot read in the old books. I can't read Hegel, or Schelling, or find interest in what is told me from them, so I persist in my own idle & easy way, & write down my thoughts, & find presently that there are congenial persons who like them, so I persist, until some sort of outline or system grows. 'Tis the common course: ever a new bias. It happened to each of these, Heraclitus, or Hegel, or whosoever. (*JMN* 14: 189)

Across the last decades of his working life – and in his own "idle & easy" way – Emerson sought to outline his own system: what he called his "Natural History of the Intellect" project, a project that was ultimately unfinished. It would have been the culminating statement of the self-reliant, aversive thinking that Emerson had long celebrated, a nonsystematic poetic thinking of a wholly different philosophical character than Hegel's speculative system. So even if the idealist idea of the power of life is supposed to have found its fullest articulation in Hegel's Absolute Idealism, Emerson resists such a complete ordering of life as understood through the Idea (*der Begriff* – also "concept" or "notion"). Likewise, Hegel's formulations of questions of matter and mind, faith and knowledge, fate and freedom, and history and the evolution of natural forms would remain dissatisfying to Emerson. In his late lecture "Powers of the Mind," he declares that he hates "dialectics and logomachies" and seeks instead a metaphysics "perpetually reinforced by life" (*SL* 237). His living thinking is a thinking in transit and transition, a thinking of metamorphosis and change. Emerson thus prefigures later

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process philosophers who would likewise resist Hegel: his intellectual (and actual) godson William James, his great German reader Friedrich Nietzsche (who found in Emerson a "brother soul"[11]), as well as John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze. As a philosophical, religious, poetic, aesthetic, or political thinker, Emerson refused to synthesize his thought into digestible axiomatic formulas. Rather, it is in the ensemble of pulsating words that form into paratactic sentences, and in paratactic sentences that form into fluid essays, that Emerson's beauty and power lie.

Transitional, Transnational Emerson

These were just two stops on a busy lecture tour. But his visits to the Santee Sioux and to the St. Louis Hegelians in 1867 nonetheless signal several important and complex aspects of Emerson's writing and reputation that this *New Cambridge Companion* seeks to capture and to explore further – aspects that set it apart from the earlier and still relevant *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* edited by Joel Porte and Saundra Morris in 1999. First, while the center of gravity of interest in Emerson's work remains his early lectures like "The American Scholar," his first book *Nature*, and seminal essays such as "Self-Reliance," "The Poet," "Experience," or "Fate," the *New Cambridge Companion* registers how critical attention to his work has expanded to include the whole of Emerson's lecturing and writing life, including his final phase of work. Critical attention to his later lectures and writings – nominally those following the publication of his 1860 *The Conduct of Life* – has been greatly facilitated by the publication of newly edited volumes in the Harvard Belknap's *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, namely *Society and Solitude* (2008; first published 1870), *Letters and Social Aims* (2010, first published 1875), as well as his *Poems: A Variorum Edition* (2011) and *Uncollected Prose Writings* (2013). And, thanks to the assiduous and dedicated editorial work of Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, we now have to hand curated collections of his later lectures, providing a more complete picture of how Emerson used the spoken forum to develop his thinking.[12] With this in mind, Christopher Hanlon's *Emerson's Memory Loss* (Oxford 2018) rereads Emerson's work retrospectively; he offers fresh interpretations of how Emerson's later texts, affected by his incipient dementia, were collaboratively curated (and even coauthored) – with figures like Emerson's daughter Ellen Emerson central and not incidental to their textual production.

So in addition to rethinking the first half of Emerson's career, this *New Cambridge Companion* seeks to put it into relief by engaging the full span of Emerson's work. This invites us to consider Emerson not only as the

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antebellum icon of the "American Renaissance" but, as his tireless schedule of speaking events in 1867 attests, also as a public intellectual active into the postbellum period and a transitional figure who maintained a finger on the pulse of American intellectual and political developments through the 1860s and 1870s. His westward travel, it is important to note, was facilitated by the contemporaneous development of American settler-colonial infrastructural networks. As the railroads pushed west and new cities emerged from the prairies, Emerson traveled to these places to lecture and to meet with groups like the Santee Sioux and the St. Louis Hegelians. Considering his relationship to the "times," then, as Jeffrey Insko argues in his chapter that opens the volume, is both to situate Emerson in intellectual and socio-political milieus in which he found himself and also to register the multiple and often conflicting ways of experiencing time that such new technologies and infrastructures in the nineteenth century brought to bear. Sean Ross Meehan's chapter, "Emerson's Late Styles," adds to this picture of the intellectual vitality of late Emerson. Meehan explores how Emerson's central rhetorical figurations of metonymy, analogy, and translation evidence his continued engagement in aesthetic, cultural, and philosophical matters beyond the 1850s, in works such as "Eloquence," "Poetry and Imagination," "Quotation and Originality," and his unfinished "Natural History of Intellect."

Reimagining Emerson as a tirelessly travelling lecturer crossing a still-fragmented post-Civil War America, and crossing new philosophical, intellectual, and political topographies, complicates the prevailing picture of him as a genius but aloof "Sage of Concord" busy penning odes to the powers of the intellect. That picture of Emerson has been caricatured by C. P. Cranch as a "transparent eyeball" or by Nathaniel Hawthorne as a "beacon [of intellectual fire] burning on a hill-top."[13] It is not just that Emerson channels the "vast flowing vigor" (*CW* 3: 42) of the universe he celebrates in his essay "Experience" into written literary form. Instead, it paints him as one who evolved his ideas in dialogue with public audiences across the US and abroad and endeavored to make a living by doing so. Orality and exchange also mark the form and content of his essays, which Tom F. Wright cannily explores in his contribution in this volume in terms of the concept of the "voiced essay." To be sure, one could catalogue the instances of reported speech in his essays, themselves a concert of quotations, a concert of consonant and dissonant voices. Often, too, we can note how Emerson was essaying (literally "trying out") his essays as lectures, a compositional practice that forms part of a larger organic process with his journal, notebook, and letter writing. One could certainly trace how ideas and phrases emerge in his notebooks and journals, find utterance in his

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sermons and lectures, and then achieve something of a finished form in his published essays and poems. Yet this was by no means an exclusively linear process. And even Emerson's published writing invariably retains a sense of dynamic irresolution, of process, of collaboration, of life. What he says of Montaigne's essays is true of his own living language: "Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive" (*CW* 4: 95).

This expanded sense of the span and geography of Emerson's work has us broaden his place in American literary and intellectual history. Of course, he is rightfully considered to be one of the lodestars of Transcendentalism, even as that moniker arguably obscures the diversity of literary, theological, philosophical, and political positions of its practitioners. Any sense of Transcendentalism as an exclusively autochthonous American movement – even given Emerson's own occasional literary nationalist pronouncements – likewise risks submerging its transnational dialogues with British and German Romanticisms.[14] But as Jennifer J. Baker explores here in Chapter 3, Emerson's calls for American literary or cultural independence were not in fact contrary to his pronounced admiration for (and adaptations of) the writing and thinking of Anglo-European Romantics like Goethe, Coleridge, Carlyle, or Wordsworth, but rather deepened and empowered the notions of genius and originality that underwrote the type of transnational "mode of perception" his work sought to inaugurate. As Devin Zuber's chapter examines, Emerson's lifelong sense of spirituality as living, felt, and guided by the moral sentiment was inflected by German theologians and philosophers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, or Ludwig Feuerbach (and, indeed, his brother William Emerson, who had encountered the German "Higher Criticism" while studying in Göttingen) – as well as by his eclectic readings in religious anthropology, Vedantic philosophy, Buddhism, or mystical Sufism. While David LaRocca critically examines transatlantic concepts of race and nationality in Emerson's 1856 book *English Traits*, Spencer Tricker, in his chapter "Emerson, Asia, and the 'Progress of Culture,'" looks the other direction to explore the complexities of Emerson's depictions of transpacific exchange. On the one hand, not unlike Zuber, Tricker argues that Emerson's cosmopolitan and universalist conceptions of Asian religion, art, and philosophy reinforce his Transcendentalist sense of morality. But at the same time, Emerson's geographical and historical representations of Asian cultures and peoples also complexly approach prevailing nationalist, imperialist, historically determinist, and racist views of Asian cultures and people. Nonetheless, as Tricker shows, Emerson's stylistic and epistemological inconsistency in representing Asia does not neatly reproduce the two sides of the stereotypical Orientalist coin. Rather, it

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