

International Symposium

American Writers in the Pacific

From Melville to Adams and La Farge



University of French Polynesia
Research Center, Auditorium
November 6, 2025
4:30 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.

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American Writers in the Pacific *From Melville to Adams and La Farge*

À partir des œuvres, de la correspondance et des autres écrits de Herman Melville, Henry Adams ou encore John La Farge, ce premier volet du symposium international intitulé « American Writers in the Pacific: From Melville to Adams and La Farge » entend poser les jalons d'une réflexion centrée sur les dimensions historique et littéraire mais aussi symbolique, voire idéologique, de la narration des odyssées trans-pacifiques menées par ces illustres hommes de lettres et artistes originaires du continent nord-américain. L'événement fera converger approches civilisationnelles, perspectives anthropologiques et observations stylistiques, afin d'interroger la posture qui a pu être celle de ces observateurs extérieurs, entre regard analytique et démarche testimoniale. Le nouveau cadre insulaire dans lequel ils évoluent à leur époque, aux confins des mers du Sud, par-delà les barrières culturelles et ethniques, fera aussi l'objet de la réflexion conjointe menée par les intervenants. Avec William Merrill Decker (Oklahoma State University) et John C. Orr (University of Portland), Professeurs de littérature américaine, ainsi que Florent Atem, Maître de conférences en langues et littératures anglaises et anglo-saxonnes à l'Université de la Polynésie française, également organisateur de l'événement.

Cover illustration: Diadem Mountain at Sunset, Tahiti, by John La Farge, 1891.

Florent Atem

Associate Professor, University of French Polynesia

Across the Pacific, Among the Tevas: Henry Adams, John La Farge and Ariitaimai, from the Transcultural Experience to the Personal Epiphany

Upon embarking on the journey that would take him—along with painter and dear friend, John La Farge—across the Pacific in August 1890, little did Henry Adams know he was entering the initial stages of a long-overdue healing process. Still deeply wounded by the tragic loss of his wife and the equally heart-wrenching demise of his elder sister, the American historian was emotionally distressed, all the more as the colossal writing effort which had led to the recent completion of his nine-volume *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* appeared to finally be taking its toll. In leaving San Francisco on August 23rd, 1890, he was following in the footsteps of some of his illustrious contemporaries, who had preceded him in answering the call of the mighty ocean. But after a stay in Hawaii and a Samoan episode, it was on the distant island of Tahiti that a somewhat unexpected encounter with another of his contemporaries, indigenous chiefess Ariitaimai of the powerful Teva clan, would prove to be an essential milestone for the Massachusetts scholar.

William Merrill Decker

Regents Professor Emeritus, Oklahoma State University

Herman Melville's Polynesian Travelogues: Dualities of "Before" and "After"

This talk addresses Herman Melville's Polynesian travel narratives, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), as works that present pre- and post-conquest portraits of life in the Pacific Islands. Focusing on the "before" and "after" of the European arrival in Tahiti and the Marquesas, Melville highlights the catastrophic consequences of British and French incursions, and his contrast of an innocent if "savage" prehistory with a disease-ridden, morally vitiated afterlife would prove highly influential to readers such as Henry Adams and John La Farge as they sought evidence of a pre-colonial Polynesia amid its late nineteenth-century Europeanization. Accordingly, the discussion will engage the following questions: As a nineteenth-century Westerner, how does Melville's first-person narrator frame the otherness of Society Island natives? In the context of "before" and "after," to what degree does he succeed in establishing intersubjective relations with the natives he represents? In what ways does his critique of European colonialism prompt a genuine advocacy of indigenous peoples? And finally: what, in a post- and neocolonial world order, can we learn from these nearly two-hundred-year-old travelogues?

John C. Orr

Emeritus Professor, University of Portland

The Evolving Transpacific Imagination of Henry Adams

The concept of transpacific imagination forces us to recognize that aesthetic and spiritual longing cannot be separated from geo-political machinations in the Pacific region. Henry Adams was uniquely situated in that sense because of his extensive experience sojourning in the Pacific as well as his covert involvement in American political engagements. While he initially exhibited many of the racist received notions regarding the nature of people living in Pacific cultures, his contact with those cultures forced him to reorganize, however subtly, his perspective. Beginning in 1886, Adams's experiences demonstrate that the praxis of living among other peoples and cultures impacted the theory that he initially brought to those places and people.



Florent Atem is an Associate Professor at the University of French Polynesia, where he teaches American civilization and English linguistics. Holder of the agrégation in English and winner of the 2016 Aix-Marseille University Thesis Prize, he specializes in the Lewis and Clark expedition and the young North American republic. He is the author of several articles and the co-author of a comparative study of the Tahitian, French and English languages. He currently conducts research on Henry Adams, particularly focusing on the intercultural aspects of the American historian's Pacific journey.



*William Merrill Decker is Regents Professor Emeritus of English at Oklahoma State University. He has held visiting positions at the Université Catholique de Louvain (Fulbright) and Universität Paderborn (DAAD). His books on Henry Adams include *The Literary Vocation of Henry Adams* (1990) and *Henry Adams and the Need to Know* (2005), coedited with Earl N. Harbert. He is also the author of *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (1998), *Kodak Elegy: A Cold War Childhood* (2012), *Geographies of Flight: Phillis Wheatley to Octavia Butler* (2020), and *Writing Distance: Genres of Travel and Separation* (forthcoming).*



John C. Orr is an Emeritus Professor at University of Portland, where he taught American Literature. In addition, he served as Assistant Provost for Scholarly Engagement and Career Readiness for many years. Beyond multiple articles on Henry Adams, he has published on regional American women writers, particularly those experiencing life in the American West.