

**Proposal for PhD  
Comprehensive Exams**

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## Introduction

Professors Wayne Franklin, Kathleen Kelly, and Herbert Sussman have agreed to oversee my study and to serve on my examination committee in the following areas:

- Nineteenth-century American literature with a focus in nature writing: Professor Franklin
- English medieval mystical texts: Professor Kelly
- 20<sup>th</sup> century British and American Women Writers and Nature: Professor Sussman

## Statement of Focus

In looking at my three areas side by side, the common theme or issue I see uniting them is that of *home*. In each of these specific areas, writers describe literal or metaphorical places where they either do or don't feel at home; in such descriptions, these writers attempt to establish authority by striving to convince their readers (and perhaps themselves) that they are "at home" with their subject matter. Whether consciously or unconsciously obeying the dictum to "write what you know," a writer is compelling when she or he demonstrates the expertise of a native rather than the unfamiliarity of a mere visitor.

Thus, in nineteenth-century American literature—particularly nineteenth-century nature writing—writers try to demonstrate a comfortable familiarity with their subject matter. Writing as strangers in a new, not-yet-fully-explored land, Euro-American writers of the nineteenth century often stress their trustworthy abilities as careful observers—expert witnesses because of what they have seen and describe—to bolster their authority; some white writers even go so far as to invoke the image of the Indian—in nineteenth-century imagination, the only human truly "at home" in the American wilderness—to establish trustworthiness. Even when the subject matter is freakishly uncanny (the Freudian *unheimlich*, or "unhomed") as in the works of Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, there is an attempt to make the unknown more knowable by attesting to the scientific veracity of the story and to the author's unique ability to tell that story with authority.

In depictions of nature by 20<sup>th</sup> century British and American women, the theme of home—and the issue of authority—is articulated in a slightly different way. In describing the natural world, 20<sup>th</sup> century women writers often express a desire to build homes and communities in the wild; nature is alluring in part because it offers a space free from patriarchal norms and constraints. Whether through travel, homesteading, or scientific pursuits, women described in these texts seek a greater intimacy with the natural world: although women writers don't deny the dangers of living in the wild, they suggest that such challenges can be met not through manly self-reliance but through womanly community. In terms of authority, 20<sup>th</sup> century depictions of women making themselves at home in the wild raise the intriguing question of women's place in society: although some would argue that the theme of women building homes and communities in the natural world reinscribes stereotypes of a woman's "proper" place in the domestic sphere, I argue that these depictions actually revise such notions by giving women as well as men the authority to create and maintain such spaces.

Lastly, in English medieval mystical texts, the theme of home and the issue of authority is raised in yet another distinctive way. In mystical texts, the tension between “home” and “not home” is a metaphorical one: caught, as it were, between earth and heaven, writers of mystical texts are faced with the difficulty of describing an infinite God through finite language. In English medieval texts, this tension is often expressed through two images: the trope of the anchorite, which describes God as being found close to home, and the trope of the pilgrim, which describes God as being found at faraway exotic sites. Whether in literal or metaphorical terms, these tropes suggest not only how and where a believer can encounter God but also how a writer can describe such experience: anchorite-style texts generally employ earthly metaphors to describe God whereas pilgrim-style texts emphasize God’s inscrutable and hence indescribable nature. As in both 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature and 20<sup>th</sup> century writing by British and American women, English medieval mystical writers’ ability to demonstrate that they are “at home” with their subject matter affects their authority: while writers of anchorite-style texts describe experiences in terms familiar to those of their readers, writers of pilgrim-style works maintain greater authority over their readers because of the exotic, unfamiliar nature of the experiences they describe.

Although spanning a wide range of historical periods and literary genres, the areas of 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature, 20<sup>th</sup> century depictions of nature by British and American women, and English medieval mystical texts interrelate and intersect at a variety of points. In terms of my long-term academic interests, the works of such 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American nature writers as Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard embody the issues of home and writerly authority that I explore here; significantly, both Thoreau and Dillard at times employ the tropes of anchorite and pilgrim to establish and maintain their authority as what are popularly referred to as “nature mystics.” Whether writing in the Middle Ages or in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, male and female writers both British and American encounter similar problems trying to convince readers that they are able to describe in a trustworthy manner places and experiences that may be difficult to capture in language. That writers from such far-flung historical periods and backgrounds employ similar tactics to address this challenge suggests that indeed there is not much new under the literary sun.

**Living on the Edge:  
The Domestication of the Wilderness Frontier in Nineteenth-Century American Literature**

A central theme in nineteenth-century American literature is the endeavor to make oneself at home in the American landscape, a landscape often figured in terms of the liminal state known as the American frontier. During the nineteenth-century, Euro-American settlers converted large portions of the American wilderness into homey dwelling places; at the same time, many writers metaphorically “tamed” the wilderness through attempts to name and describe elements of the natural world. These acts of literal and metaphorical domestication—these attempts to convert the wild into a comfortable, familiar homeland—reflect not only the historical reality of the nineteenth-century but also the its prevailing fondness for the domestic: as Ann Douglas notes in *The Feminization of American Culture*, for example, sentimental writing focusing on domestic concerns became increasingly popular in nineteenth-century America. Read in both literal and metaphorical terms, the frontier that figures so prominently in nineteenth-century American literature is not only the physical border between settled and unsettled lands but also the epistemological boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar, the known and unknown.

One way that this interest in either finding or making a home on the frontier is expressed is through the nineteenth-century fascination with Native Americans. Biographical studies such as Benjamin Bussey Thatcher’s 1823 *Indian Biography*, Black Hawk’s 1833 *Autobiography*, and Benjamin Drake’s 1841 *Life of Tecumseh* reveal popular curiosity about the country’s previous inhabitants; publication of anthropological studies such as those by John Gottlieb Ernestus Heckewelder and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft reveal the era’s scholarly interests. In fictional treatments such as Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok* (1824), John Augustus Stone’s *Metamora, or the Last of the Wampanoags* (1829), and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), the Native American presence is a vanishing one: in Child’s story, Mary Conant’s Indian lover disappears willingly while the Indian heroes of Stone’s and Cooper’s novels die noble deaths. As scholars such as Louise K. Barnett have noted, this attention to Native Americans isn’t without racist overtones; in the nineteenth-century Euro-American mind, it seems, white settlers can’t make themselves at home in the New World until that world is cleared of its previous inhabitants. Ironically enough, however, Native customs and virtues are preserved in popular stories of “white Indians” such as the fictional Natty Bumppo and the legendary Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone.

This fascination with “white Indians”—Euro-American pioneers who take on Native American attributes and thus can replace them in the popular imagination—is also evident in nineteenth-century captivity narratives, both real and fictionalized. In some cases, Indian captivity serves as a subplot within a longer narrative—in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, Roger Chillingsworth is captive to the Indians before arriving in Boston, and in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly*, male protagonists save female captives. In other works, however, the captivity genre is more pervasive and subversive. Whereas eighteenth-century captivity narratives maintained clear distinctions between whites and Indians—women writers of early narratives, for example, insisted upon their sexual purity during captivity—nineteenth-century treatments often suggest that it is possible and not wholly undesirable to cross racial boundaries: in popular novels such as Child’s *Hobomok* and Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*, white heroines marry Native American men without undue shame. In the case of Mary Jemison, whose oral autobiography was published by James Seaver in 1824, the story of a white woman adopted by Seneca Indians who subsequently marries and bears

children within the tribe is received not with aversion and disgust but with popular curiosity and interest.

Nineteenth-century America's preoccupation with making oneself at home on the frontier is also illustrated in the travel writing of the period. Whether the trips described be adventuresome expeditions such as the one in Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* or genteel tours such as the one in Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*, travel writing figures the frontier as the boundary between "home" and "not-home"—between that which is known and familiar and that which is unknown and strange. In travel writing, tourists are necessarily ignorant whereas natives are by nature in-the-know; thus, writers of travel narratives usually try to bolster their authority by assuming some kind of identity as a "native": Parkman, for example, lives with the Sioux for several weeks and thus demonstrates that he as author is literally "at home" with his subject matter. Time and time again in nineteenth century American literature—in works such as Washington Irving's *Tour of the Prairies*, Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevadas*, and John Melish's *Travels in the United States*—readers rely upon the authoritative descriptions of acclimated travelers who claim (rightfully or not) to know strange lands almost as well as the natives do.

Whereas the frontier in travel writing is a moving one, following the traveler to each new and thus unknown and strange destination, in other works the frontier is a fixed boundary: in William Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line*, for example, the "frontier" to be explored is the surveyor's east-west line between Virginia and North Carolina. With the increasing debate over slavery—a debate fueled by the social commentary of writers such as Lydia Maria Child, Theodore Dwight Weld, and the Grimké sisters—the frontier between "free" and "slave" states and territories becomes increasingly political. This political demarcation separating North from South plays a predominant role in nineteenth-century slave narratives such as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as well as in fictionalized accounts of slave escapes such as those in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Samuel Clemens' *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Thus, Douglass's journey to Massachusetts, Eliza's flight across the frozen Ohio River, and Jim's journey up the Mississippi embody not simply the crossing of an abstract political boundary but the transversing of the literal border between captivity and freedom; whereas white settlers traveled from east to west to find free open spaces on the frontier, African-Americans traveled from south to north to find freedom from bondage.

Nineteenth-century nonfiction writing about nature offers yet another way in which this interest in becoming familiar with the American landscape is explored and expressed. In works by writers such as John James Audubon and John Muir, travel writing and the language of natural history serve as models of how to explore, understand, and describe the wilderness and its wild inhabitants: whether observing the birds of America or the mountains of California, Audubon and Muir use the language of natural history to name and describe their subject matter while maintaining the authoritative pose of travelers who nevertheless know nearly as much as the natives. Following the tradition of early explorers such as Lewis and Clark and natural historians such as William Bartram, writers such as Audubon and Muir tame the American wilderness through language: if the landscape and its wild inhabitants can be named and described, they are no longer utterly strange and threatening. In nature writing, the traveling scientist—ornithologist, botanist, or general naturalist—claims the landscape and its inhabitants through observation, knowledge, and naming.

Authors such as John Burroughs, Susan Fenimore Cooper, and Celia Thaxter, on the other hand, write from an inside rather than outside perspective: observing and describing natural

phenomena around their native haunts, these writers needn't prove their authority in the ways that writers such as Audubon and Muir do. Whereas the writings of Audubon and Muir impress readers as having an epic scope, Burroughs, Cooper, and Thaxter are known for their attention to minute natural detail; such writers' authority is based upon both their status as native dwellers and their skills of close observation. At times, however—particularly in the work of women writers such as Cooper, Thaxter, and, at the turn of the twentieth century, Mary Austin—this attention to detail is cited as a weakness rather than a strength: the preface to Cooper's 1887 revision of *Rural Hours*, for example, humbly admits that the book is merely a “simple record of...little events” and “trifling incidents.” Such a self-effacing tone is not typical of either Audubon's or Muir's writing; it is, however, characteristic of much of the writing produced by nineteenth century women.

Like the nature writing of nineteenth century women writers such as Susan Fenimore Cooper and Celia Thaxter, the so-called “regional literature” of writers such as Kate Chopin, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Sarah Orne Jewett is characterized by close observations of the narrator's environs. Offering what might be called a natural history of place—observations and descriptions of local settings and of the customs, attitudes, and dialects of those places' inhabitants—such writings emphasize homely places, human communities, and the natural settings surrounding them. As such, literature of this sort can be seen as a bridge between nature writing (with its emphasis on natural communities) and the popular sentimental fiction of women writers such as Maria Susanna Cummins, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Susan Warner (with such writings' emphasis on human interactions and communities). Thus, a work such as Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* offers a description of both the Michigan frontier wilderness and the pioneer community springing up there; by describing both natural wilderness and growing human society, Kirkland offers a regional snapshot of the process by which wilderness landscapes all over America were converted into homes and homelands.

These various issues involving the domestication of the nineteenth-century American frontier landscape—fascination with Native Americans and “white Indians,” interest in the art of travel writing, attention to boundaries both literal and abstract, and observation of detail in nature writing and regional literature—are all embodied in the work of Henry David Thoreau. In his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau and his brother “play Indian” as they canoe and camp from Concord, Massachusetts to the White Mountains of New Hampshire and back; in this travel narrative, Thoreau's interest in nature is apparent in his descriptions of the natural history of the Concord and Merrimack River ecosystems, and his fascination with Indians is apparent in his re-telling of the captivity of Hannah Dustan. This fascination with the natural world, with Indians, and with making a home—albeit a temporary one—in the wild is repeatedly expressed throughout Thoreau's writings: in the “Allegash and East Branch” section of *The Maine Woods*, for example, Thoreau produces yet another travel narrative focusing on both the Maine wilderness and the Indian guide Joe Pollis; the narrative climax occurs when Thoreau “becomes” an Indian upon being re-named by Pollis.

In *Walden*, Thoreau poses as both native and tourist, claiming that he has “travelled a good deal in Concord.” Although *Walden* mirrors the seasonal structure and attention to natural detail of a work such as Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours*, it also strives toward philosophical abstraction: the line that Thoreau wants to toe, for example, isn't the literal frontier but the line between past and future, the “meeting of two eternities.” Although filled with deceptively practical tidbits about how Thoreau homesteaded on the outskirts of Concord, *Walden* is more than a simple how-to guide: the book is as much about managing your soul or psyche as it is about managing your household, with the beanfield

that Thoreau hoes being indeed himself. Whereas the farmers of Concord strive for literal ownership of farms and their yield, Thoreau sees observation as ownership: it is through the cataloguing of details—with “cataloguing” itself being an economic term—that a writer such as Thoreau (or for that matter Whitman) takes ownership of the landscape. It is fitting, then, that Thoreau begins his book with a chapter on “Economy”; derived from the Greek word for “home,” economy (like its etymological relative “ecology”) is the art and science of housekeeping. Both literal and metaphorical, the “home economics” course that Thoreau offers in *Walden* talks about keeping both an external house—a cabin by a pond—and an internal one—one’s self.

Thus, “frontier” for Thoreau isn’t only a physical place or boundary; indeed, it exists wherever one faces or fronts a fact. The value of the frontier for Thoreau, then, is epistemological: exploring literal and metaphorical frontiers is important because of the reality one encounters there. Thoreau best expresses this outlook in his essay “Walking,” with its meditation on the value of the wild. Thoreau advocates going West, but he wishes to go West not in order to tame the wild but in order to make tame mundane life more vigorous and hardy: “in Wildness,” he claims, “is the preservation of the World.” Thus, while Thoreau is repeating a theme of other nineteenth-century American literature—the desire to make oneself at home in the wilderness or on the frontier—he at the same time reverses the motivation fueling this desire. Whereas many nineteenth-century American writers sought to know and understand the unfamiliar, Thoreau expresses a desire to leave some things—the unfathomable depths of Walden Pond, for example, or the indescribable summit of Mount Katahdin—unexplained. The unresolvable irony, of course, is that the very act of writing of these phenomena requires both Thoreau and his contemporaries to contain their subject matter in the confines of language. Whether at home in the wild or not, nineteenth-century authors writing of the American wilderness and the human communities it contained needed to tame that wilderness and its inhabitants in order to capture it in language.

**A Space of One's Own:  
20<sup>th</sup> Century British and American Women Writers and Nature**

Ever since Virginia Woolf claimed that to develop her voice, a woman writer needs the independence and privacy afforded by a steady income and a room of her own, physical space has been associated with female autonomy. Although few have argued with Woolf's thesis, even before *A Room of One's Own* was published in 1929, its central idea had been problematized: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" suggests that even a room of one's own can be stiflingly oppressive if a woman is forced to stay there. What the heroine of "The Yellow Wallpaper" needs, it seems, isn't merely her own room but a place or space where she can be free from the dictates of husbands and male "experts."

In *The Land Before Her*, Annette Kolodny argues that the American frontier offered nineteenth century women such a fantasy of space: whereas men fantasized a wilderness they could conquer through sheer strength of will, nineteenth century women viewed the American landscape as a potential woman-cultivated garden, a land they could nurture in a particularly feminine fashion. Whereas patriarchal society offered women the confinement of kitchen, bedroom, and nursery, nineteenth century women dreamed of larger, more liberating spaces: instead of merely a house, the American wilderness offered a homeland. In place of the merely domestic—the constraints of household "women's work"—wilderness offered a space where women's and men's roles were open to revision and where women could lend their hands alongside those of men and other women to help create a nurturing home.

Thus, although Kolodny doesn't differentiate between the two, I use the terms "domestic" and "domesticated"—both derived from *domus*, the Latin for "home"—to refer to significantly different things: I use "domestic" to refer to the realm of patriarchally-defined gender roles, the constraints of conventional household duty, whereas I use "domesticated" to refer to homely spaces and communities that women themselves have created and defined. The "fantasy" that Kolodny speaks of, then, is that of domestication: the writing of nineteenth century women suggests that they saw the American wilderness as a place where they—and not simply men—could craft not just homes but communities. The problem of realizing this fantasy of the domesticated wilderness, however, lay in the harsh realities of nineteenth century frontier life: Kolodny notes that life in the uncivilized western wilderness was much more difficult than life in the urbane eastern settlements, a fact often lamented by wives who had been coerced into moving west by their adventuresome husbands. Thus, although the fantasy of wilderness-turned-homeland persisted in the minds and writings of nineteenth century American women, theirs was a fantasy that necessarily remained unfulfilled.

The writings of twentieth century British and American women offer an intriguing version of this nineteenth century fantasy. In much of the writing by twentieth century women, whether that writing be poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction, the fantasy of escape to the wilderness remains: nature beckons with the alluring possibility of life outside patriarchal convention and constraint, of life outside the domestic spheres of kitchen, bedroom, and nursery. Whereas male fantasy (discussed in Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* as well as in Leslie Fiedler's *The American Adam*) likewise sees wilderness as a seductive escape from societal conventions—particularly from the constraining presence of woman, marriage, and family—female fantasies of natural escape differ from men's in several important ways: women's fantasies of wilderness spaces typically describe domestication rather than conquest of wildness, encourage the establishment of family-centered



communities rather than self-reliant autocracies, and admit rather than deny the vulnerability of the human body.

In addition to differing from male wilderness fantasies, twentieth century women's visions of natural spaces revise those of their nineteenth century female counterparts. Thus, the difficulty that Kolodny notes in many nineteenth century American women's experience of wildness—the simple fact that many of these women had been taken west unwillingly by their husbands or fathers—is altered in many twentieth century texts: these women typically go into the wilderness willingly, often without governing male companions. Once in nature, the female subjects of twentieth century women's writing not only fantasize about female autonomy but take real steps toward it: the female citizenry of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1915 feminist Utopian novel *Herland*, for example, design and maintain within an unnamed wilderness a society of their own that puts to shame the twentieth century American civilization of the male explorers who “discover” them.

In looking at texts by twentieth century British and American women, I see several categories of writing dealing with women's place in nature. The most obvious is “nature writing,” nonfiction prose that describes the natural world—plants, animals, and the places they inhabit—from the perspective of an observing narrator, generally assumed to be the author herself. Works in this category would include writings by Mary Austin, Annie Dillard, and Ann Zwinger—significantly, all Americans. While Zwinger's work could fall into the category of “travel writing”—she typically describes the natural history of places she knows as visitor rather than resident—the texts for which Austin and Dillard are best known represent “inhabitation” texts: descriptions of nature as observed from home over a period of time. What makes works such as Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* and *Stories from the Country of Lost Borders* different from male-authored inhabitation texts is their greater attention to human communities in nature: the western desert described by Edward Abbey, for instance, is much more *deserted* than Austin's landscapes.

A category more popular with twentieth century British women writers (perhaps because of Britain's relative lack of “wilderness” and perhaps because of her history of imperialistic presence in exotic lands) is that of travel writing, a category I use to include both nonfiction prose accounts of actual journeys and novels about female characters who travel. Travel writing by twentieth century writers such as Fleur Adcock, Sybille Bedford, and Isak Dinesen continues the tradition of women's travel writing started by nineteenth century figures such as Lady Florence Dixie, Mary H. Kingsley, and Isabella Bird and discusses the liberating effect travel has on women accustomed to patriarchal conventions; fictional treatments of travel such as Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and Rachel Ingalls' *Binstead's Safari*, on the other hand, focus not only on travel's liberating effects but also on its dangers. In writing about heroines who die after having tasted the freedoms of the wild, Woolf and Ingalls revise but do not erase their literary precursors: although a woman traveler can temporarily elude the ambiguous “happy ending” of the conventional marriage plot, the only way such a character can remain perpetually free from male constraint is through death.

Another way that women, real or fictional, can turn to nature to evade patriarchal control—at least temporarily—is by pursuing a profession in the biological sciences. In some ways, twentieth century women scientists such as Rachel Carson, Jane Goodall, and Dian Fossey challenge cultural assumptions of masculine and feminine behavior: Vera Norwood, for example, notes that Carson's *Silent Spring* was dismissed by many as the work of a “hysterical woman” despite its painstaking scientific documentation. In other ways, however, such scientists often re-inscribe cultural conventions of “appropriate” masculine and feminine behavior: Donna Haraway, for example,

suggests that mainstream acceptance of female primatologists such as Goodall and Fossey stems from popular images of nurturance between these human women and their child-like ape subjects. So-called appropriate and inappropriate gendered behaviors aside, feminist discussions of women natural scientists often note their emphasis on interconnected communities: nonfiction writers such as Rachel Carson and Terry Tempest Williams, for example, and novelists such as Leslie Marmon Silko decry chemical pesticides and nuclear testing because such technological “advances” contaminate and threaten human as well as animal homes. At its most radical, such science can seek to overthrow patriarchal technologies: Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Sexing the Cherry*, for example, ends as a female ecologist decides to burn down a factory to prevent further water pollution.

A seemingly less subversive way in which twentieth century women writers describe the shaping of female-friendly spaces in nature is through texts on gardening and agriculture. In works by writers such as Gertrude Jekyll and Vita Sackville-West, gardening involves the literal cultivation of domesticated spaces within nature; instead of encouraging a conventionally masculine conquest of nature, such works describe the relationship between humans and nature as ongoing and intimate. Whereas gardening, unlike science, is typically seen as a leisurely and therefore non-threatening pastime, professional agriculture is a different case. Alexandra Bergson, heroine of Willa Cather’s 1913 novel *O Pioneers!*, for example, challenges gender conventions not only in that she plows and cultivates a willingly fertile earth (a revision of the standard “rape of the earth” motif), but also in that she is economically successful in doing so: in converting the Nebraskan prairie to farmland, Alexandra succeeds in a natural environment where many men fail. Similarly subversive are tales of women shepherders such as Gretel Ehrlich and cattle ranchers such as Linda Hasselstrom: such accounts challenge cultural notions of “women’s work” while raising the bothersome question of what one should call a woman husbandman.

This theme of cultivating a domesticated space within nature is developed in slightly different ways in works describing various forms of country housekeeping. The most conventional of these texts feature women who keep house within a natural setting and describe such living: works such as the journals of May Sarton or Maxine Kumin’s “Country Essays” differ from inhabitation-style nature writing in that they focus more on the details of human habitation and community than on the facts and details of natural history. More radical examples of country housekeeping feature “pioneering” women such as Anne LaBastille, who in several of her books describes building and living in a remote cabin in New York’s Adirondack wilderness. In building her own cabin, LaBastille creates a space where she can live and support herself without male assistance; unlike male solitaries such as Thoreau or Edward Abbey, however, LaBastille acknowledges her need for companionship, noting that she made her cabin large enough to allow a male companion, and admits her own physical vulnerability by describing various accidents and injuries she incurred while making her living in the wilderness. LaBastille’s work embodies a central paradox of nature writing: while admiring her Adirondack home for its wildness and inaccessibility, LaBastille at the same time wants her home to be accessible to herself and to the close-knit community of people she relies upon. The act of building a home and then writing about that home, ironically, makes LaBastille’s environment less “wild” and inaccessible.

That such “pioneering” women—women who create and shape their own space within the natural world—are often misunderstood and even vilified is evident in the final work I’d like to discuss here: Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping*. When Ruth’s and Lucille’s Aunt Sylvie comes to Fingerbone, Idaho to care for them after their mother’s suicide, she reveals herself to be an unconventional housekeeper. Instead of “setting up house,” she does the opposite, gradually

deconstructing the house—built, significantly enough, by an absent male character, the children’s grandfather—by erasing the boundary between “inside” and “outside”: Sylvie likes, for example, to leave doors and windows open so the house fills with windblown leaves and stray cats. Sylvie’s name, of course, is reminiscent of the forest, and she feels most at home not in- but *outside*: a transient, she likes to sleep on park benches, hop rides on freight trains, and slip away into the woods in a stolen rowboat. In the eyes of the town’s home economics teacher, sheriff, and citizenry, Sylvie is unfit to raise her nieces; that a lasting bond has been forged between Sylvie and her niece Ruth is apparent, though, by novel’s end when aunt and niece burn down their house and escape society and its rules by hopping a westbound train.

Donald J. Greiner argues in his book *Women without Men* that this pattern of leaving male-dominated society in order to create female-centered communities in the wilderness is a common theme in American fiction of the 1980s; I’d like to suggest that it is an element of much twentieth century writing by women both British and American. Continuing, updating, and revising nineteenth century fantasies of female escape from patriarchal constraint and convention, many twentieth century British and American women writers describe females who create nurturing communities away and apart from male-dominated society, the paradox of such writing being that such domestication potentially lessens the “wildness” that made these places desirable in the first place. Rather than seeing women’s connections to nature as being oppressive, many 20<sup>th</sup> century women writers emphasize the liberating effect wilderness can have on women, thereby corroborating Virginia Woolf’s claim that female autonomy is inextricably linked to having a space of one’s own.

**In the World or Not of It:  
The Trope of the Anchorite and the Trope of the Pilgrim in Medieval English Mystical  
Texts**

Medieval Christianity's outlook on the concept of home is complicated. On the one hand, in the Scriptures Jesus describes himself as homeless and urges his disciples to be in the world but not of it, leaving his followers in the precarious position of trying to make themselves at home in this world while simultaneously trying to strive beyond to the next. Although Jesus' self-described homeless status led many to lead ascetic and monastic vocations in which they renounced the family life of married householders, medieval Christianity also offered believers pious meditations on the household life of the infant Jesus and Holy Family: although born out of wedlock and without a household roof over his head, Jesus did grow up in a home, a fact which medieval meditations on the Virgin Mary and Holy Family necessarily make evident.

This tension between the homeless and the homely life is evidenced in a particular form in the writings of medieval English mystics: in many of these works, the conflict between the homeless and the homely is expressed in terms of the bipolar vocations of pilgrim and anchorite. Pilgrims, of course, leave home to seek spiritual attainment either at or en route to faraway religious sites; pilgrim texts therefore utilize the motif of the religious quest as journey. Anchorites, on the other hand, seek God by staying close to home and turning within; anchorite texts therefore typically utilize the motif of God as a dwelling place or shelter. Although the literal vocations of pilgrim and anchorite are diametrically opposed—one cannot both stay at home and travel abroad at the same time—the metaphorical tropes of pilgrim and anchorite are often used side by side in medieval mystical texts: a spiritual seeker might describe him- or herself as wandering in search of rest in God, or a religious anchorite might describe him- or herself as turning within in order to leave the world and thereby journey to God.

These two tropes are nicely illustrated in the works of two English medieval women mystics, Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. On the one hand, Julian's *Showings* represents a classic anchorite text: a literal anchorite by vocation, Julian receives divine revelation while confined to a sickbed at home. In true anchorite form, Julian is visited by God rather than vice versa, and the means through which God is revealed to Julian are homely indeed: through its emphasis on bodily affliction—Julian is seemingly near death when she views a bloody vision of the crucified Christ—the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich suggests that God is made manifest not at faraway religious sites but within the believer's own body. In the *Showings*, God's homeliness is exemplified in the mystery of the incarnation: just as God was embodied in Jesus, and just as the relationship between divine Father and divine-yet-human Son can be expressed in Julian's domestic parable of the Master and the Servant, Julian's visions (as well as her telling of them) suggest that God is continually made manifest within believers' bodies.

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, on the other hand, is a model pilgrim text. Although Kempe likewise depicts God through the medium of her body, as I shall discuss in a moment, *The Book of Margery Kempe* is most striking for its chronicle of Kempe's literal pilgrimages. A spiritual travel narrative, Kempe's *Book* tells of journeys to and from the Holy Land and other religious sites. Not finding God in twenty years of marriage and motherhood, Kempe renounces home and husband alike to become a religious seeker, and in recounting the hardships she encounters during her pilgrimages—the difficulties of traveling alone through strange lands, the insensitivity of foreigners, clergy, and fellow pilgrims alike—Kempe emphasizes the travails both of travel and of the spiritual

life. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the world is not a homely, comforting place; instead, it is a trying vale of tears that must be traversed before a pious believer can find God's comforting presence. In Kempe's pilgrim-style theology, God is made known only to believers who take the initiative to search actively for spiritual truths.

These paired tropes of pilgrim and anchorite can also be considered more broadly as epistemological categories—complementary ways of attempting to know an unknowable God. Thus, the anchorite seeks to know God through focus on the homely or familiar—keeping close to home and to what is known is the anchorite's preferred *modus operandi*. The pilgrim, on the other hand, subscribes to the belief that the unknowable God can be “found” only by journeying into the unfamiliar or exotic—the Freudian *unheimlich*, that which is unknown and even uncannily disturbing. Considered as epistemological categories, then, the trope of anchorite can be loosely associated with cataphatic theology (the attempt to understand divinity through consideration of God's knowable attributes) whereas the trope of the pilgrim would fit with apophatic theology (the attempt to understand God through meditation on divine inscrutability). In other words, anchorite-style mystics enlisting cataphatic theology try to approach and describe God through earthly attributes—the characteristics that God shares with godly people in this world—while pilgrim-style mystics writing from an apophatic theology worship and speak of a God who is entirely Other, an unknowable being not at all of this world.

Thus, whereas the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich and *The Book of Margery Kempe* are illustrative of the categories of “anchorite” and “pilgrim” as literal modes, other English medieval texts exhibit these tropes as implicit epistemological categories. Richard Rolle, for example, uses anchorite-style imagery to describe mystical union in homely terms (the fire of love burning inside one's heart, the believer dwelling in Christ's wounds); presumably this approach was more fitting for Rolle's audience, which consisted largely of cloistered nuns. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, on the other hand, exhibits a pilgrim-style theology in urging readers to leave behind earthly images in order to travel “up” to God; although the work's anonymous author uses metaphors such as the “cloud” of forgetting and the “arrows” of love, he urges readers to abandon such earthly images. Similarly, Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection* offers an interesting blend of tropes: addressed to an anchoress, *The Scale of Perfection* nevertheless employs a pilgrim-style approach, stressing the steps or stages of the soul's journey toward perfection.

Thus, while the trope of the anchorite and the trope of the pilgrim are suggestively different, they are not always clearly distinct: English medieval mystics often mix the two within single texts. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, for example, blurs boundaries: although Kempe was a pilgrim by avocation, and although her book relies upon the “spiritual life as journey” motif, Kempe discusses God in cataphatic terms—in terms of knowable attributes such as love and mercy—and uses “homely” images such as God as husband and lover. As with Julian of Norwich, God is revealed to Kempe through her body: some of the most striking passages in Kempe's *Book* are her descriptions of her mystical marriage with an almost embarrassingly earthly Christ. Although leading the lifestyle of a pilgrim, Kempe at times relied upon anchorite images: having heard passages from Rolle's writings, for example, and having sought spiritual counsel from Julian of Norwich, Kempe at times writes like an anchorite, describing a God made manifest within the homely confines of earthly images and the believer's body.

From these observations, it is tempting to make claims about the gendered nature of such images: one could argue that male authors are more likely to describe God as being far away, the

object of masculine quest, whereas female authors stress how God can be found close to home and even within one's own body. Although there is some truth to such a generalization—studies such as Elizabeth Petroff's *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*, for example, and Frances Beer's *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* suggest the strikingly bodily nature of medieval women's spirituality—essentialist claims about men's and women's devotional writing can be dangerously reductive. Thus, although Caroline Walker Bynum doesn't deny the prevalence of bodily imagery in the writings of women medieval mystics—in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, for example, she agrees at least in part with a gendered reading of medieval mystical texts—she rightfully observes that the relationship between gender and religious imagery in medieval texts is complex: in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Bynum notes that male monastics were as fond of imagery of the motherhood of God as were their female counterparts.

Once again, the example of Margery Kempe is illustrative: although conventionally feminine in her reliance upon marital imagery to describe her intimacy with God, Kempe at the same time defies convention by leaving home and husband, questioning and even rebuking male clergy, and at times donning masculine dress to travel unaccompanied through unfamiliar lands. In writing both with and against gendered expectations, Kempe suggests that if medieval women mystics do indeed share patterns of experience and expression, these patterns result not necessarily from essential gender characteristics but instead from social expectation and conditioning. Thus, whereas male writers such as the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, presumably an educated cleric, had an abundance of literary models at their disposal, medieval women often had substantially fewer choices. In claiming to be uneducated and illiterate, for example, Margery Kempe depicts herself as having fewer vocational choices and literary models than did her male contemporaries; if her claim is an attempt toward self-effacing humility, as Lynn Staley Johnson suggests, it perhaps says even more about medieval attitudes toward women. That women medieval authors felt it necessary to submit to societal expectations that women be less visibly intellectual than men is apparent in the insistence of Julian of Norwich in the Short Text version of the *Showings* that she is not a teacher and instead relates her mystical experiences only because God prompts her to.

This emphasis on finding one's spiritual home—whether that home be near or far, in this world or not of it—is not unique to medieval mystical texts: in early English texts such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the individual's search for a place to call home, and the difficulties in ever succeeding, is a central theme. The question arises, then, of why writers of English medieval mystical texts employ such tropes—is there a way in which these images and their theological implications establish or maintain authorial subjectivity? The anchorite motif, for example, in its stress upon the homely, almost mundane nature of God—in implying, for example, that God can be found close to home and that divinity can be described in simple metaphors—lessens the gap between writer and reader. Anchorite-style texts suggest that mystical experience is not far removed from readers' lives and that this experience can be described through simple, unlearned language; in such texts, striving for a distant, possibly unattainable experience isn't necessarily as important as simply being faithful, persistent, and devout.

In pilgrim-style texts, on the other hand, the gap—often, the literal traveled distance—between writer and reader is much more apparent. In texts that recount actual pilgrimages, there is an implicit difference between the writer, who has traveled to exotic places, and the reader, who in most cases has not. In texts employing the pilgrim motif, the important issue is one of attainment: authority comes from having been places and seen things that others have not or in having

progressed through various steps or stages of spiritual accomplishment. In pilgrim-style works which emphasize an apophatic theology, even language distances writer from reader; texts which insist that God cannot be comprehended or described in earthly images take words right out of readers' mouths by suggesting that language is spiritually ineffective. Just when readers of an apophatic, pilgrim-style text such as *The Cloud of Unknowing* feel as though they have begun to grasp that text's meaning, for example, they must admit that such understanding is incomplete.

A survey of these works suggests that this is indeed the case. Writers of anchorite-style texts—the *Showings* of Julian of Norwich, for example, and Rolle's *The Fire of Love*—seem less concerned about establishing and maintaining authority and instead are concerned with describing religious experiences that, while extraordinary, are within the scope of their readers' lives: rather than stressing the difference between themselves and their readers, these writers offer their experiences as a model to emulate. On the other hand, writers of pilgrim-style texts—*The Book of Margery Kempe*, for example, and the anonymous-authored *Cloud of Unknowing*—emphasize their expert status by stressing that which distinguishes them from their readers: significantly, many texts employing the pilgrim trope, either by describing the religious life as a journey or in outlining the steps or stages of spiritual attainment, were intended as instructional works. Thus, while a text such as the *Ancrene Wisse*, a guidebook for anchoresses, employs homely images that its readers can easily understand, it also—like Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*—emphasizes the stages of anchoritic spiritual progress. Such a work implies that although spiritual experience is within reach, it isn't easily attained: although anchoresses can find God close to home, they mustn't think that they have reached or surpassed the accomplished levels of their spiritual advisors and confessors. The different but complementary tropes of anchorite and pilgrim, then, seem to suggest as much about the relationship between authors and readers as they do about the relationship between humanity and God.

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature with a Focus in Nature Writing

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