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—Proposed Dissertation—

**“Lying between the earth and the heavens”:  
 Spirituality of Place in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century  
 American Nature Writing**

“All sites of pilgrimage have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again.”

—Victor & Edith Turner,  
*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*

In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Victor and Edith Turner discuss the manner in which Christian pilgrimage is rooted in place and time. Sites such as Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Knock presumably point to the historicity of God, the fact that the infinite, ineffable Absolute is found in particular places at particular times by particular people. In her reflections on “The Present,” Annie Dillard concurs with this notion, calling it a “scandal of particularity” that events such as Christ’s birth “occurred improbably, ridiculously, at such-and-such a time, into such-and-such a place” (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* 80). In suggesting that natural landscapes can be the site of spiritual power, revelation, and enlightenment, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American nature writers subscribe to what I call a “spirituality of place,” a belief that Divinity is made manifest at particular times in particular natural places. Henry David Thoreau points to such a spirituality when he notes in *Walden* that “God himself culminates in the present moment” (399) and that “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads” (547).

The Turners note the liminal nature of pilgrimage: similar to tribal initiation rituals in which youngsters are isolated in an enclosure representing the threshold between adolescence and adulthood, Christian pilgrims reenact the *via crucis*—the way of Christ’s cross—as a way of “crossing” the divide between the secular and the spiritual. In describing Walden Pond as “Lying between the earth and the heavens,” Thoreau likewise points to the liminal nature of his natural sojourn: isolated from society in the sacred space around Walden Pond, Thoreau is able to cross the threshold between heaven and earth via the pond which “partakes of the color of both” (*Walden* 463). Spiritually-minded nature writers such as Thoreau consistently describe religious experience as transpiring not merely in the wild but in nature’s liminal spaces, on the edges between land and water or on the summits which separate land and sky. In defining his quest as being an attempt “to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line,” Thoreau describes spiritual awakening as occurring in a liminal space temporally between past and future and physically between land and water (*Walden* 336).

In discussing spirituality of place in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American nature writing, I will explore such liminal images in texts by writers such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Annie Dillard. In describing sojourns into nature’s liminal places—watery shores and rocky summits—such writers suggest that in such places the sacred is made manifest in the mundane and the eternal culminates in time. Far from being an abstract theological ideal, the boundary between nature’s here-and-now and the supernatural realm of the Hereafter is described in tangible spatial terms: in this particular

natural place, heaven and earth become one, time blends with eternity, and the individual finds her or his place within the larger ecological community.

In discussing the notion of spirituality of place, I also plan to focus on three inter-related sub-topics. First, I plan to examine the “who” of spiritual landscapes: that is, the figure of the pilgrim-hermit. Traditionally, the vocation of the pilgrim and that of the hermit have been separate and distinct: an individual seeker either travels abroad or stays at home. In the Christian tradition, there are various kinds of pilgrims: for example, pilgrims such as the narrator in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, who along with a group of other believers journeys toward a specific sacred site, or pilgrims such as the protagonist in the anonymously-authored Russian classic *The Way of the Pilgrim*, who wanders alone in search of spiritual truth wherever it may be found. Likewise, in Christian theology there are several kinds of hermits: anchorites such as the medieval English mystic Julian of Norwich, who spent her life meditating (and writing) in a tiny cell attached to her parish church, or ascetics such as the pillar-perching devotee whose body-breaking mortifications are recounted in Alfred Tennyson’s “St. Simeon Stylites.”

Rather than focusing on these different brands or flavors of spiritual expression, however, and rather than treating the pilgrim and the hermit as separate and distinct modes of spiritual experience, I am interested in the range or continuum of spiritual practice represented by these diametrically opposite modes. Strictly speaking, a pilgrim travels abroad and a hermit stays at home; what they share, however, is an intrinsic insistence on the spatial manner in which humans relate to the divine: both the pilgrim and the hermit insist that the spiritual isn’t placeless or timeless but, like natural phenomena, transpires within the world’s spatial, temporal realm. In 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century popular and literary imagination, the pilgrim and the hermit are inseparably linked, especially as they relate to the natural world: the pilgrim-hermit invoked in works such as Thoreau’s *Walden*, for example, is characterized by the solitude of the hermit, the restlessness of the pilgrim, and the spatial, temporal specificity of both. The figure I plan to explore in my dissertation, then, is one who chooses to remove him- or herself from the values and expectations of conventional society and instead finds spiritual meaning and fulfillment through one or more sojourns in the natural world.

Second, in my dissertation I intend to explore the “where” of spiritual places: that is, the notion that nature’s liminal zones are especially conducive to meditative experience. In examining the writings of various 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American writers, I find that there are two specific kinds of liminal spaces—shorelines and summits—that are particularly evocative. Although Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famed dictum “Nature is the symbol of spirit” is notoriously vague, I intend to explore the relationship between nature and spirit in more specific terms; rather than generalizing about the influence of “the wild” on the human soul, I want to explore how human attitudes and feelings toward themselves and toward spiritual reality are influenced by the landscape itself, the individual’s relative place in the landscape, and literary depictions of the landscape. Places such as shorelines and summits offer different raw materials, as it were, for religious meditation, and although these categories are not ecologically specific—both rivers and oceans have shores, and both mountains and hills have summits—the habitats in each of these categories tend to evoke similar liminal feelings in individual human observers: shorelines evoke the sensation of being between time and eternity whereas summits evoke the sensation of being both apart from and a part of creation.

If my dissertation were to focus only on nature pilgrims and spiritualized landscapes, however, it would hardly be original; works such as John O’Grady’s *Pilgrims to the Wild* and Belden Lane’s *Landscapes of the Sacred* explore similar issues. To differentiate myself from—and offer a corrective

to—such previous scholarship, then, I plan to explore a third important notion: that of human community. In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Victor and Edith Turner use the term *communitas* to refer to the sense of oneness that pilgrims feel upon reaching their destination and encountering like-minded pilgrims from various socio-economic and political backgrounds. Although the myth of the “nature hermit” suggests that an individual seeker must shun human society to find God in the wilderness, a thoughtful reading of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American nature writing reveals that even the most ruggedly individualistic narrators invariably allude to and rely upon human communities. Time and time again, these texts describe individuals coming to terms with the reality of human mortality; time and time again, it is remembrance of and reliance upon human community that gives lasting meaning in the face of such fragility. Ultimately, the process of writing these works is an intrinsically social act: in various ways, these writers discover that immortality comes not from leaving society to embark on a solitary spiritual quest but from the process of sharing (through writing and publication) one’s description of this endeavor.

Thus, my dissertation will argue the social nature of seemingly solitary religious quests into the wild. Although invariably beginning as a solitary journey, the pilgrim-hermit’s sojourn into the natural world in search of spiritual experience ultimately becomes a social endeavor: sooner or later and to varying degrees, these individual seekers discover that the individual cannot be saved apart from his or her larger community. Because the natural world inevitably favors community—the welfare of entire species and ecosystems—over individuals, solitary seekers can never become “one with nature” apart from their fellow creatures, human and otherwise. Although various critics note the cyclic pattern of religious jaunts into the wilderness—the seeker flees society, has some sort of awakening in the wild, then returns a changed person—what these critics invariably ignore is the way that these seekers have to surrender their thoughts of themselves as lone, self-reliant individuals in order to attain the lesson sought after in the wild. These pilgrim-hermits are reborn in the wild because their notion of their place in the world is dramatically changed: instead of being discrete, self-willed individuals in charge of their own destinies, these figures discover that they are dependent upon—and thus responsible to—those around them.

In discussing these themes, my dissertation will use the term “nature writing” loosely. As Don Scheese notes in *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*, nature writing is usually defined as “a first-person, nonfiction account of an exploration, both physical (outward) and mental (inward), of a predominantly nonhuman environment”; as such, Scheese argues, nature writing typically reflects the influence of genres such as natural history, spiritual autobiography, and travel writing (6). In “A Taxonomy of Nature Writing,” Thomas J. Lyon outlines a spectrum of writing types in which texts such as field guides focus primarily on natural history information whereas more philosophical works focus on mankind’s role in nature. In Lyon’s taxonomy, “nature writing” such as natural history essays, literary rambles, and personal narratives describing individual experiences in nature fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, offering a blend of scientific fact and personal subjectivism (278).

Both Scheese and Lyons thus acknowledge the interdisciplinary aspects of nature writing; they both, however, remain faithful to the notion that nature writing is typically and even necessarily a nonfiction genre. In tracing the ways in which 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century American writers describe the relationship between nature and spirit, my dissertation will expand this definition of nature writing to include a mix of nonfiction narratives, novels, short stories, and poems. My justification for such a broad-based classification is twofold. First, many of the “nonfiction” works typically considered as canonical examples of nature writing are not without fictional elements: in *Walden*, for example,

Thoreau employs more than a bit of poetic license in presenting two-years' experience living near Walden Pond as a single cycle of seasons. In shaping his personal experience and his natural history observations to a literary format which is not literally accurate but which is true to his artistic vision, Thoreau presents in *Walden* a work that is as much a work of autobiographical fiction as it is a strictly nonfiction narrative.

Second, in choosing works to include within my broad-based notion of "nature writing," I have employed the four criteria Lawrence Buell uses to define what he in *The Environmental Imagination* calls "environmental texts": an emphasis on the natural environment as a force which both shapes and is shaped by human history, attention to nonhuman as well as human concerns, a sense that both individuals and societies are responsible for and accountable to the natural environment, and an understanding of the natural environment as an evolving phenomenon (7-8). In outlining these criteria, Buell uses examples from a variety of literary genres, not simply nonfiction first-person narratives: in his exploration of the "environmental imagination," Buell is interested (as am I) in the way that landscape shapes literary vision and vice versa.

Going a step beyond Buell, I would argue that the chief generic distinction between fiction and nonfiction—the issue of *plot*, of what did or did not "really" happen to human characters in the text—is less important in nature writing than issues of *setting*: does the text accurately evoke the spirit of a particular place? Thus, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is fictive in that there is not an actual person named Tayo who experiences the specific events depicted in the novel; Silko's evocation of the New Mexican landscape, however, and her depiction of the environmental degradation wrought on that landscape, is as "true" as any of Thoreau's philosophical ideas in *Walden*. Although works such as Silko's *Ceremony* are indeed fiction, they are imbued with mythic veracity: the characters and stories are believable, the settings are true to the spirit of the places they describe, and the resultant texts point to larger, deeper issues. Like Thoreau, writers such as Silko employ literary devices to shape their observations of actual places according to the generic forms that best allow them to express their artistic (and spiritual) vision.

Likewise, in using terms such as "spiritual" and "sacred," I do not refer to a single monolithic notion of religious experience; instead, the works which I explore refer to a continuum of experience ranging from a pantheistic apprehension of the numinous to a monotheistic perception of divine transcendence. In referring to such a variety of spiritual experiences, I do not intend to suggest that these experiences are identical or even intrinsically connected: it is absurd to suggest, for example, that Henry David Thoreau's 19<sup>th</sup> century understanding of a handful of Hindu texts was the same as that of a 20<sup>th</sup> century practicing Buddhist such as Gary Snyder. However, in looking at a selection of works from a variety of authors from a range of historical periods, I want to suggest that despite undeniable theological, cultural, and historical differences, some basic archetypal experiences (for example, the realization of one's own mortality and the passage of time, or the feeling of awe evoked by a sublime natural vista) occur time and time again across historical and cultural boundaries.

Similarly, it is impossible to talk about the spiritual quest without discussing its object: the goal the pilgrim-hermit expects to attain in nature. It would be naive to suggest that all the works I discuss define the goal of spiritual practice in an identical manner: terms such as "salvation" and "enlightenment" are notoriously slippery. Again, it is helpful to think in terms of a continuum: on the one hand, a work such as Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* at times suggests that the goal of pilgrimage is individual enlightenment, the cessation of personal suffering and desire; a work such as

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, on the other hand, suggests that the goal of spiritual practice is nothing less than saving the natural world from environmental apocalypse.

Such a generalized dichotomy between the “personal” and the “political” is simplistic, however, for notions of the goals of spiritual practice vary not only from text to text but even within individual works. In *The Snow Leopard*, for example, Matthiessen gradually comes to realize that his notions of individual attainment have been misguided: after failing to achieve the two secret desires fueling his quest—a sighting of a rare snow leopard and an experience of sudden enlightenment upon meeting a revered Tibetan holy man—Matthiessen realizes that the spiritual high point of his trek has been the unspoken bond—an experience of *communitas*—he feels between himself and members of his expedition team. Although the question of what is at stake in these works is complex, typically the pilgrim-hermits I will consider set out into the natural landscape in search of individual spiritual healing and gradually come to realize to varying degrees that such healing is ultimately a social and even ecological endeavor that is rooted in both place and time.

In eschewing society to seek spiritual healing in nature, the pilgrim-hermits I discuss discover that nature does not and indeed cannot heal: rather than being an agent of spiritual healing, the natural world is itself in need of salvation. As these pilgrim-hermits realize that they are connected to other humans and to the natural world, they likewise realize that the root of both personal and ecological problems is the individual human notion of a separate, superior self which exists apart from nature and apart from other humans. Since environmental degradation stems from humanity's mistaken notions about itself, solitary sojourns in the natural world can heal that world by forcing human individuals to modify their notions of themselves as self-contained and self-reliant: when lone humans come to see themselves and the natural world as being both dependent and interconnected, personal change becomes the means of ecological change.

In dividing my dissertation and the texts it discusses into two sections—shorelines and summits—I wish to suggest that this personal and ecological change is effected in different ways depending upon the specific kind of liminal space the seeker enters. As I suggest above, individuals contemplating reality from a watery shore experience an intense awareness of being between two worlds whereas individuals contemplating reality on summits struggle with the contradiction of being both apart from and a part of the created universe. Each of these experiences points to community as the factor which can save the individual from isolation: persons on the edge of land and water look to their fellows for assistance, and persons contemplating nature's high places discover that they most naturally belong in the lowlands with their fellows. Venturing into the liminal space of a shoreline or summit can be a life-altering experience because it questions the boundaries between time and eternity, self and society, and earth and heaven.

## Proposed Chapters: Skeletal Outline

### Section I: Introduction

Chapter 1: The Writer as Pilgrim: Henry David Thoreau's "Walking" and Mary Austin's "Walking Woman"

Additional texts: John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*; Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*; William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* and selected poems; Susan Fennimore Cooper, *Rural Hours*; John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*

**Section II: Shorelines.** Section Introduction: Thoreau, *Walden*; Melville, *Moby-Dick* (i.e. "Loomings," "The Masthead"); Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; Margaret Fuller, *Summer on the Lakes*; Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*; Flannery O'Connor, "The River"

**Chapter 2:** "The Stream I Go A-Fishing In": Time, Friendship, and Art in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*

Additional texts: Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler*; Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Ernest Hemingway, "Big Two-Hearted River"

**Chapter 3:** Writing on the Edge of Time: Suffering, Eternity, and the Body of Fellowship in Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, and Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*

Additional texts: Walt Whitman, section 3 of "The Sleepers"; Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*; Robert Frost, "Once By the Pacific"

**Section III: Summits.** Section Introduction: Isabella Bird, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*; Clarence King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevadas*; William Cullen Bryant, "Monument Mountain"

**Chapter 4:** "The Remembered Earth": History, Myth, and Conversion in Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*, and N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

Additional texts: Muir, *The Mountains of California*; Emerson, "Monadnock"; Marianne Moore, "An Octopus"; Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain* and "Firewatch"

**Chapter 5:** "Expect Nothing": Renunciation, Failure, and the Present Moment in Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, and Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

Additional texts: Gary Snyder, “The Circumambulation of Mt. Tamalpais”; Allen Ginsberg, “Sakyamuni Coming Out From the Mountain”; Gretel Ehrlich, *Questions of Heaven: The Chinese Journeys of an American Buddhist*

## Section IV: Conclusion

**Chapter 6:** Water and Mountain are One: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*

Additional texts: Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*; Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge*; Gary Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*

## Proposed Chapters: Annotated Outline

### Section I: Introduction

To introduce the scope, method and aims of my dissertation, I will begin with a brief overview of the image of the solitary walker in English literature and with a subsequent analysis of two relevant American texts: Henry David Thoreau’s “Walking” and Mary Austin’s “The Walking Woman.”

The literary pilgrim—and the concomitant trope of walking as a metaphor for the spiritual journey—is by no means an American invention. In the Old English poem “The Wanderer,” for example, the protagonist’s fruitless search for a new lord and homeland is a symbol of mankind’s spiritual condition; as the “earth-walker” laments his fallen comrades, he meditates on the impermanence of life and takes ultimate consolation in religious faith. The pilgrim reappears (to humorous effect) in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, in which the journey to Canterbury becomes vehicle for rambunctious story-telling among a rag-tag crew of believers; here, pilgrimage is an equalizing force, bringing together individuals from a wide range of socio-economic and temperamental backgrounds. By far the most famous pilgrim in English literature, however, is the protagonist of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*; traversing an allegorical landscape on his way from this world to the next, Christian encounters a series of trials and temptations figured as symbolic locales such as the Slough of Despond and Vanity Fair.

With the onset of Romanticism, the pilgrim (and his fellow, the hermit) become symbolic representatives of the poet and his lonely vocation. In William Wordsworth’s *The Excursion*, for example, the Wanderer is a truth-seeking peddler; his friend, the care-laden Solitary. In *The Excursion* (as in “The Wanderer”), hope lies in religious faith as preached by the Pastor. Wordsworth’s poem figures the poet’s vocation as having three complementary elements: the restlessness of the Wanderer, the loneliness of the Solitary, and the faithfulness of the Pastor. Like much of Wordsworth’s writing, *The Excursion* highlights the English countryside, suggesting that the poet’s life and vocation are inextricably linked to his natural surroundings.

Both William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy enjoyed rural walks in the English countryside, a fondness which Dorothy Wordsworth chronicled in her *Grasmere Journals*. Walking and writing at the same time as the Wordsworths was Gilbert White, the English curate whose 1789 *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* popularized the genre of the natural history ramble. In his attention to natural detail and his insistence that natural history is not the exclusive domain of professional naturalists, White blazed a trail for later nature writers; Susan Fenimore Cooper’s 1850 *Rural Hours*,

for example, uses a similar journal format to chronicle the seasonal changes observed around her home in Cooperstown, New York.

In his essay “Walking,” then, Henry David Thoreau follows in the (literal) footsteps of writers such as William Wordsworth and Gilbert White by reaffirming the link between the nature walk and pilgrimage. Offering a fanciful etymology of the verb “to saunter,” Thoreau suggests that the word derives from the nickname given to pilgrims on the road to the Holy Land (*Sainte-Terrer*) or from the word used to describe landless, homeless wanderers (*sans terre*). Thoreau suggests that walking is an explicitly spiritual and implicitly social discipline; although the walker walks alone, he does so through and among other human beings, belonging to a select community “not [of] Equestrians or Chevaliers, not Ritters or Riders, but Walkers” (*Selected Works* 660).

Despite this mystical community of walkers, however, Thoreau in the second half of his essay eschews human society, focusing instead on “the wild” and arguing that “in Wildness is the preservation of the World” (672). The format of Thoreau’s essay retraces the route he describes himself as taking at the opening of the essay, leaving the human society of Concord in favor of the solitude found in “wilderness.” Despite his writerly attempts to leave society behind, however, Thoreau’s literary excursion is like his actual ones, inevitably returning to where it began: Thoreau’s closing image of a beautiful sunset returns to the notion of the Holy Land with which the essay began, and in this passage, Thoreau as narrator writes in the first person plural, suggesting that he as walker indeed does not walk alone.

Mary Austin’s “The Walking Woman” offers a slightly different kind of pilgrimage. Although Austin’s narrator, like Thoreau’s, walks alone, Austin’s account of the walking woman’s story is inherently social. Venturing into the desert in search of the woman known only as “Mrs. Walker,” Austin’s narrator has to ask and interview various members of the local community in order to succeed in her quest. In doing so, she accumulates a trove of stories with which she is able to find Mrs. Walker and weave together a narrative. Whereas Thoreau’s “Wildness” is holy insofar as it is uninhabited, Austin’s desert landscape is imbued with meaning because it is the site of female bonding: apart from the expectations and conventions of human society, Austin’s narrator and Mrs. Walker are able to connect through shared stories. Whereas Thoreau’s “Walking” is as much philosophical treatise as it is natural history essay, Austin’s “Walking Woman,” like the other sketches which make up *The Land of Little Rain* and *Lost Borders*, is anthropological in scope: the story of the land and the stories of the people who live there cannot be separated.

Although both Austin’s narrator and Mrs. Walker herself are exceptional for their solitariness, the moral of “The Walking Woman” is expressed in social terms: the three most important things in life, Mrs. Walker claims, are “To work and to love and to bear children” (*Lost Borders* 262). For both the narrator and the Walking Woman, salvation comes not from Thoreau’s “wildness” but through moments of human connection: the connection the Walking Woman felt with the father of her child, for example, or the connection the narrator feels with the Walking Woman upon hearing her story. In describing the desert landscape as being the site of interpersonal connection, Austin’s “The Walking Woman” differs from Thoreau’s “Walking”: while Thoreau’s “Wildness” is something with which to save society, Austin’s natural landscape is society, a place of human bonding and connection.

One can convincingly argue that these differences between Thoreau’s and Austin’s texts are gender-influenced: Thoreau follows the conventions of masculine quest narratives such as John Muir’s

*Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* whereas Austin follows the conventions of feminine local color sketches such as Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*. Although both Thoreau's and Austin's walkers seek—and find—healing in the natural landscape, one senses that they each took to the wilderness with different expectations in mind: Thoreau, with the desire to escape society; Austin, with the desire to find it. These basic tendencies, however, are not absolute, nor are they mutually exclusive: Thoreau's oft-quoted dictum “In Wildness is the preservation of the World,” for example, points to an underlying concern for the fate of human society, while the manner in which Austin's narrator sets out to find Mrs. Walker demonstrates more than a touch of manly self-reliance. In my analysis of texts about shorelines and summits, then, I will explore the ways in which various 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century writers of both genders emphasize to various degrees the social nature of the individual's quest for spiritual attainment in the natural world.

## Section II: Shorelines

As Herman Melville notes in the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, “meditation and water are wedded for ever”; in rivers and oceans, Melville states, humanity sees itself reflected in “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life” (13-14). Like the Heraclitan fire evoked by Annie Dillard's epigraph to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, water is an apt metaphor for life and spirit in that it is both ever changing and ever constant, “in measures being kindled and in measures going out.” In Section II of my dissertation, I will explore how texts about riverbanks and ocean beaches describe the relationship between time and eternity: although humans can experience moments of fluid oneness with the eternal, ultimately each individual must set foot on the *terra firma* of historical, mortal existence.

Like the notion of the literary pilgrim discussed in Section I, the depictions of ocean, pond, and river I will discuss in Section II have roots in classic literature. The trope of the ocean journey, for example, is a recurrent one; in texts as diverse as the Old English poem “The Seafarer” and Homer's *The Odyssey*, for example, the act of wandering the seas in search of one's home is a metaphor for the human condition. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge uses the image of a sea journey gone bad to comment on man's alienation from both nature and its creator; the doomed mariner is saved, both physically and spiritually, only after he learns to bless rather than curse the creatures of the deep.

Although novels such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* continue this tradition of seafaring narratives, in my dissertation I concentrate on shorelines, the boundaries between land and water. There is a world of difference, of course, between riverbanks, the edges of ponds, and the sea shore; each is a unique habitat supporting distinct life forms. I group them together here, however, because each points to the linear, liminal nature of the water's edge: authors as diverse as Thoreau, Maclean, Dillard, and Beston each describe the act of “toeing the line” between two land and water, past and present, time and eternity. Although in works such as Chopin's *The Awakening* and O'Connor's “The River,” water represents death and self-surrender, figures such as Ishmael in the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick* still find the edge of land and sea to be irresistibly attractive. Ultimately, it is this edgy polarity between death and rebirth, repulsion and attraction that I wish to consider in Section II.

By way of introduction to Section II, I will discuss Melville's remarks about water as they relate to two well-known texts about shorelines: Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Both Thoreau and Dillard see the time they spend living on the edge of water as a kind of religious experience: Thoreau humorously refers to himself as a hermit and spends time meditating on spiritual texts while Dillard calls herself an anchorite and seeks the divine in both

natural phenomena and books. Situated on water's edge and on the fringes of society, both Thoreau and Dillard are liminal figures, pointing toward the tenuous place humanity occupies on the edge of this world and the next. In articulating the "edginess" of human existence, both Thoreau and Dillard illustrate the kinds of issues texts about shorelines inevitably grapple with.

In the first of two chapters on shorelines, I will examine two elegiac river narratives—Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and Norman Maclean's "A River Runs Through It"—and analyze how these texts use the metaphor of flowing water to explore the ways that individuals caught in the flow of time struggle to connect with nature, with one another, and with God. Like their literary progenitor, Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, Thoreau's *Week* and Maclean's "River" operate on the notion that recreation is re-creation; for Thoreau and Maclean, the experience of being on a river is one of spiritual simplicity and renewal, a chance to re-connect with the past, with loved ones, and with God. Because the river of time does not flow backward, only in memory (and through art) can time stand still and the beloved dead be resurrected; for Thoreau and Maclean, therefore, art is redemptive, a method for crossing the shore between time and eternity, this world and the next.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the ways in which three seashore narratives—Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*, and Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*—explore issues of time and eternity. Whereas river texts such as Thoreau's *Week* and Maclean's "River" struggle against the incessant flow of time, seashore narratives grapple with the utter changelessness of eternity. Time is tragic because like a river it flows constantly; the tragedy of eternity, on the other hand, is the utter absence of change. Against the vast depths of eternity, the comings and goings of human life are small and insignificant; as Thoreau's and Beston's stories of shipwreck illustrate, nature is utterly insensitive to human suffering. Rather than trying to stop the flow of time, then, Thoreau, Beston, and Dillard try to magnify human existence in an attempt to make a mark on eternity: in both Beston's and Dillard's texts, for example, idealized human figures—for Beston, a lone athletic swimmer; for Dillard, a muscular "god" and a later vision of Christ being baptized in the surf—symbolize the amphibious nature of human existence, caught between this terrestrial world and the oceanic oneness of the next. Like the image of the surf-battered swimmer in Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers," these images of shipwrecks and swimmers point to human vulnerability; for Thoreau, Beston, and Dillard, human communities such as the Coast Guard and religious congregations offer solace in the face of nature's indifference.

### Section III: Summits

In comparing the spiritual effect of water to that of mountains, Annie Dillard writes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: "You can heave your spirit into a mountain and the mountain will keep it, folded, and not throw it back as some creeks will. The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty; I live there. But the mountains are home" (3). In Section III of my dissertation, I discuss the ways in which mountains are figured as a kind of spiritual homeland: a place that, while different from the lowland world "with all its stimulus and beauty," is nevertheless a spiritual sanctuary.

The notion of the "holy mountain" is common to Judeo-Christian, Buddhist, and Native American spiritualities. Although Western literature has vacillated in its attitudes toward mountains, seeing them as both fearful irregularities in the created landscape and as sublime sites of Romantic revelation, the Judeo-Christian tradition has consistently described the holy mountain as a site where God himself is revealed. Texts such as the Purgatory section of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for example,

figure the spiritual journey as being a trek up a mountain, with the believer gradually approaching paradise; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American Trappist monk Thomas Merton used Dante's image of the "seven storey mountain" as the title of his spiritual autobiography. For Buddhists, animist notions of sacred landscapes underlie the practice of pilgrimage and of circumambulation, the practice of walking around holy peaks; as Gary Snyder observes in "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking" (in his collection of essays *The Practice of the Wild*), itinerant Chinese and Japanese monks traditionally walk from one mountain monastery to another, visiting remote shrines and hermitages along the way. For Native Americans, specific mountains such as Mt. Rainier in Washington and Mt. Taylor in New Mexico are considered sacred; as Belden Lane notes in *Landscapes of the Sacred*, for example, the Native American name for Mt. Rainier, Tahoma, translates as "the mountain that was god" (68).

To open Section III, I will discuss several 19<sup>th</sup> century depictions of mountain landscapes: Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevadas*, Isabella Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, and William Cullen Bryant's "Monument Mountain." Although both King and Bird describe the nitty-gritty details of mountain-climbing, their texts are significantly different: King, for example, boasts of his mountain-climbing prowess while Bird describes herself being dragged up Long's Peak by a rope-wielding fellow named Mountain Jim. All three texts emphasize the mountain's grandeur and sublime scenery; in Bryant's "Monument Mountain," for example, the speaker claims that the view from the summit causes climbers to feel "a kindred with that loftier world" and to experience an "enlargement of...vision" (283). These works point toward the phenomenon of natural conversion: by striving for heights visited by few people, these climbers realize themselves as different and apart from their fellows; the feeling of vulnerability humans inevitably experience on exposed peaks, however, suggests that such isolation is in fact unnatural and that humans more naturally belong in the lowlands, amongst and amidst their own kind.

In the first of two chapters on summits, I will look at three mountain pilgrimages: Henry David Thoreau's "Ktaadn" portion of *The Maine Woods*, John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*, and N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Whereas both Thoreau and Muir try to imagine a mythic past before the mountains of Maine and California were touched by civilization, Momaday returns to Rainy Mountain as a way of re-connecting to his Native American heritage, seeing human history and natural history as intrinsically (and naturally) linked. Because both Thoreau and Muir venture into the mountains as a way of fleeing human society, each of their narratives (unlike Momaday's) is ultimately anticlimactic, revealing how high places are inevitably lonely and inhospitable, places that offer a tangible reminder that solitary humans are vulnerable and out-of-place when isolated from their more communally-minded peers.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss three Buddhist-influenced accounts of mountain expeditions: Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, and Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*. Whereas for Thoreau, Muir, and Momaday, mountains are physical representations of the past—of personal, communal, and geological history—for American writers influenced by Eastern philosophies, mountains carry a different symbolic import. For writers such as Pirsig, Kerouac, and Matthiessen, mountains are tangible embodiments not of the past or future, but of the present moment. Although beckoning hikers with the allure of a distant goal—the summit above—mountains as seen from a Zen Buddhist perspective ultimately present hikers with a concrete example of in-the-moment living: unless you take care with your present step, the mountaintop you seek will remain nothing more than a dream. The goal of Zen mountaineering, these writers suggest, is not the summit ahead but precisely the ground underfoot: the secret to climbing a mountain is to renounce all attempts to climb it.

## Section V: Conclusion

Of course, shorelines and summits do not exist in isolation, but side by side. To conclude my dissertation, then, I will discuss Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, which depicts a spiritual landscape containing various kinds of liminal spaces. Like Henry David Thoreau's "Walking" and Mary Austin's "The Walking Woman," Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is the story of one person's journey into the natural world in search of spiritual healing. Unlike the individuals in Thoreau's and Austin's texts, however, Silko's protagonist is representative of his larger community: ultimately, *Ceremony* isn't merely the story of how one young man finds healing in nature but of how society as a whole can find salvation there.

Tayo is a young Native American World War II veteran just returned from the jungles of the Philippines, where he watched his cousin Rocky die at the hands of Japanese soldiers. While fighting in the jungle, Tayo prayed for the incessant rain to stop; when he returns to his home on the Laguna Pueblo Indian reservation in New Mexico, he finds that his homeland has been plagued by drought. Tormented by battle fatigue, grief and guilt over the drought he feels he has caused, Tayo undergoes a traditional Native American healing ceremony which involves an excursion to Mount Taylor and a riverside encounter with a mysterious blue-eyed woman.

In the course of his healing, Tayo learns the importance of union, a practical experience of *communitas*. While fighting the Japanese in the Philippines, Tayo had a vision of his grandfather Josiah in which the faces of his Asian "enemies" fused with the faces of his Native American kin. After coming home and being reminded of his family's shame over his mixed-blood status, Tayo gradually learns to reject the racial bigotry that fueled American anti-Japanese hatred as well as his family's fervent anti-white and anti-Mexican prejudices. Through his affair with the mixed-blood Ts'eh Montañño (whose name literally means "water mountain") and his encounters with the mixed-blood healer Betonie, Tayo learns that wholeness comes not from rejecting other people and races but through becoming one with them. Through his mixed-blood heritage and his sexual union with Ts'eh, Tayo embodies in his flesh both liminality and *communitas*.

Tayo also comes to realize the need for union not simply with other people but also with the natural world. In his search for his grandfather's hybrid cattle, creatures born through the intermingling of purebred beef cattle with wild Mexican stock, Tayo journeys across a river and to a mountain, coming home to the story-laden landscapes of his tribal upbringing. Embracing again the stories and rituals of his Native American heritage, Tayo finds healing by finding his place in the natural world among his human and non-human fellows. In doing so, however, Tayo also encounters the evils of what Betonie calls witchery: the divisive spirit which destroys rather than creates, the malevolent spirit made manifest in, among other things, the nuclear testing begun in New Mexico and culminating in the human and environmental holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In this insistence that individual sin and sickness is intrinsically connected to larger environmental concerns, *Ceremony* shares elements of the "land ethic" espoused by Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* and implied in works such as Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*. Just as Tayo comes to realize that his own sickness and dis-ease are mirrored in the drought and degradation of the bomb-blasted desert, both Leopold and Williams gradually realize the connection between personal and environmental wellness: whereas the experience of shooting and then watching a wolf die teaches Leopold that a mountain needs a balanced ecosystem of both wolves and deer to be healthy, the

experience of watching her female relatives succumb to breast cancer teaches Williams that the toxins polluting Utah's Great Salt Lake are likewise threatening human existence. These three diverse texts, then, illustrate one way in which the notion of "salvation" can and has been politicized: each the narrator, by taking to heart and then acting upon a realization of mortality experienced in nature's liminal spaces, makes an implicit connection between individual wellbeing and that of the larger community and environment.

Lastly, like N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Silko's *Ceremony* is the story of a spiritual homecoming: in order to find wholeness and healing, the protagonist of each text must navigate his way through a natural landscape imbued with cultural meaning. At the same time, however, each individual's story has universal, communal significance: through the journey of one, all of society can be saved. In both texts, then, the opposing concepts often highlighted in American nature writing—the tensions between individual and society, nature and culture, man and nature—are blurred: the hybridizing typified in Josiah's cattle (as well as in Silko's novel itself, which blends the generic elements of prose and poetry, folklore and fiction) suggests a larger, more pervasive approach to human survival and redemption.

### Existing Research

As mentioned above, Don Scheese in his book *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America* notes that nature writing typically consists of both an outward (physical) and inward (mental) exploration of the natural landscape (6). Although I do not strictly adhere to Scheese's definition of nature writing as being limited to nonfiction autobiographical accounts, my research will necessarily cover a wide range of fields in an attempt to comprehend both the "outward" and the "inward" character of spiritual landscapes.

Regarding the "inward" aspects of spiritual landscapes, the work of William James, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade offer a theological groundwork. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James explores the psychological nature of spiritual consciousness, analyzing phenomena such as religious conversion and mystical union. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* and Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* likewise discuss the nature of religious experience, articulating what might be called a theology of the sacred. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto explores the nonrational character of spiritual experience and the uncanny, awe-inspiring nature of the divine. Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, on the other hand, points to the importance of place in defining the sacred: in discussing the concept of the *axis mundi*, for example, Eliade notes the way in which religions around the world have pointed to specific holy sites as being the center of the universe and hence places of profound spiritual power.

In terms of how interior religious feelings become externalized through the act of pilgrimage, several texts offer relevant insights. From an anthropological perspective, Victor and Edith Turner's *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* and Alan Morinis' *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* discuss the ways that various cultures have used the ritual of travel to unlock the spiritual energy of sacred sites. As noted above, the Turners' text is particularly relevant to my project because of their emphasis on liminality and their discussion of *communitas*, the communal nature of pilgrimage. Other works such as *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (edited by Jamie Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley) and George H. Williams' *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* trace the importance of place in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Likewise, Peter Bishop's *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing, and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* and

John Sears' *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* each offer a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion of the relationship between travel writing and the sacred, while Jeffrey C. Robinson's *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image*, Anne D. Wallace's *Walking, Literature, and English Culture*, and Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* trace the trope of the walker in English and American literature.

Several relevant overviews of American spirituality demonstrate the role religion has played in the development of American literature. Perry Miller's *Nature's Nation* and David Lyttle's *Studies in Religion in Early American Literature*, for example, discuss the ways in which canonical American authors such as Edwards, Emerson, and Poe incorporate religious ideas in their work; Vine Deloria's *God is Red* and Arthur Versluis' *Sacred Earth: The Spiritual Landscape of Native America*, on the other hand, offer overviews of Native American spirituality, paying particular attention to the differences between Native and Euro-American sensibilities. In *Nature Religion in America*, Catherine Albanese offers a historic overview of both Native and Euro-American nature religion by tracing the importance of natural healing "[f]rom the Algonkian Indians to the New Age."

In relation to the "external" element of sacred landscapes, the burgeoning field of ecocritical scholarship has directed attention to nature writing as a distinct literary genre. Both Philip Marshal Hicks' *The Development of the Natural History Essay in American Literature* and Frank Stewart's *A Natural History of Nature Writing* offer a historical overview of the genre while Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* and Peter Fritzell's *Nature Writing and America: Essays Upon a Cultural Type* discuss the role nature writing has played in American culture. Interest in American nature writing has resulted in a concomitant interest in American landscape, with texts such as Alfred Kazin's *A Writer's America: Landscape in Literature* and Frederick Turner's *Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape* offering overviews of the importance of landscape and place in American literature; Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*, on the other hand, explores similar issues and attitudes as they relate to the visual arts.

Much critical attention has likewise been paid to the question of humanity's place in the natural landscape. Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* and Paul Shepherd's *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* discuss mankind's place in nature as well as nature's place in human consciousness; in *Wilderness as Sacred Space*, Linda Graber explores similar issues in more explicitly spiritual terms. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence*, and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* analyze in various ways the symbolic import of wilderness, outlining the ways in which pastoral and pragmatic attitudes toward the wild have influenced the mythology of the so-called "American mind." One pervasive image in this mythology is that of the lone white man in the wilderness, a trope explored in R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* and Wilson Clough's *The Necessary Earth*; the issue of Native Americans' place in the natural landscape, on the other hand, is explored in Leslie Marmon Silko's essay "Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination."

At the opposite extreme from such general overviews of literary landscapes are analyses of the psychological and philosophical import of specific habitats. T.R. Herzog, for example, explores the psychological reasons behind the appeal of certain natural habitats in his article "A Cognitive Analysis of Preference for Natural Environments: Mountains, Canyons, and Deserts." Similarly, David Miller's *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth Century American Culture*, Marjorie Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* and W.H.

Auden's *The Enchafed Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea* discuss evolving cultural attitudes toward and literary depictions of swamps, mountains, and the sea.

Of all the texts I have surveyed, the two works which are most similar to my proposed project are Belden C. Lane's *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* and John P. O'Grady's *Pilgrims to the Wild: Everett Ruess, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Clarence King, Mary Austin*. While both works overlap with my intended project and offer helpful insights to aid in my research, ultimately my dissertation will not share their scope, methods, or conclusions.

Lane's book offers an overview of the significance of place in American spirituality, exploring how particular places are invested with spiritual meaning. Lane's discussion of Native American spirituality (including a chapter on Tahoma, a mountain considered sacred by Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest) is particularly relevant to my intended project; apart, however, from an isolated chapter on Edward Abbey's "desert imagination," Lane's book all but ignores literary depictions of sacred landscapes. Focusing on communities such as the Shakers, the Catholic Worker Movement, and the town of Galesville, Wisconsin, *Landscapes of the Sacred* favors actual historical people and places over literary depictions of such. Because of this emphasis, perhaps, Lane avoids the nature-pilgrim-as-hermit trope that recurs time and time again in literary depictions of sacred places: Lane focuses on religious communities, not lone individuals, who have infused particular places with spiritual meaning. Thus Lane views an evangelical revival tent, for example, as a sacred "liminal place" not because of any individual author's description of it but because of the countless number of people who have experienced spiritual power there.

O'Grady's *Pilgrims to the Wild*, on the other hand, focuses primarily on interpretations of literary works. Like my proposed project, O'Grady's book includes discussions of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Mary Austin; O'Grady, however, analyzes each of these and other authors individually in separate chapters rather than comparatively. Whereas I propose to explore literary depictions of specific liminal spaces, O'Grady's notion of "the wild" is reductive: rather than looking at the way that specific kinds of landscapes evoke specific kinds of religious experience, O'Grady paints "the wild" with a broad brush, envisioning it simply as a natural place without people. Unlike Lane's *Landscapes of the Sacred*, O'Grady's *Pilgrims to the Wild* all but ignores the issue of human community in works of American nature writing, briefly mentioning but ultimately glossing over the Turners' notion of *communitas*. By ignoring the social nature of the wilderness quest, O'Grady reinscribes the myth of the nature hermit who goes alone into "the wild" to escape the demands of social contact while searching individually for spiritual truth.

Although the notion of the nature pilgrim-hermit persists—and although the writers I plan to discuss in my dissertation often play upon this notion in their texts—I intend to argue that the trope of the lone seeker in the wilderness is, ultimately, misleading: the spiritual quest is actually a social quest, a search for communion with nature and with other humans that is rooted in both space and time. Writers such as Thoreau, Muir, and Austin are, I believe, aware of this: although they are often accused of being reclusive or antisocial, their texts are remarkably interactive, filled with accounts of companions, visitors, and remembered acquaintances. Unlike Lane, who ignores the literary trope of the nature pilgrim-hermit, or O'Grady, who glamorizes it, I intend to dissect this recurrent image by analyzing the way that literary depictions of spiritual landscapes are both solitary and social. In my dissertation, I plan to argue that the social element of the individual religious quest is what transforms particular landscapes into spiritual *habitats*, environments that maintain, sustain, and nurture interconnected lives and Life.

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