The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

School of Humanities

AMERICAN IDENTITY, AMERICAN NOSTALGIA:
USING IMAGES OF NATURE TO PERFORM AND CONNECT

A Dissertation in
American Studies
by
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2018
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ABSTRACT

The manner in which the Human-Nature relationship is enacted can reveal significant aspects about human identity and beliefs about the human place in the world. Through an analysis of American literary and visual images that engage the wilderness idea spanning nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this dissertation concludes that twenty-first century digital media transforms the American perception of the human-nature relationship. This research questions Nature-Culture Dualism, explains human identity formation through the framework of the Nature Idea, and illustrates how digital media reshapes American use of that idea. An analysis of digital media focuses on hiking blogs and locates them in the tradition of American nature writing. Simulation of nature through digital media creates a human response based on specific values associated with the nature idea and rooted in nostalgia. Ultimately, humans continue to adopt images of nature to construct personal and cultural identities, but also as a way to temper the technological sublime they experience while using emerging digital technologies.
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“We must never forget that these stories are *ours*, not nature’s.”

- *William Cronon*
INTRODUCTION

I often lightheartedly lament that I missed my calling as a National Park Service ranger. The outdoor lifestyle is immensely appealing to me and dreams of wide vistas and ancient trees extending skyward fill my mind. Life takes me in a different direction though, as I fill my home with nature books and contemplate the outdoors at the computer keyboard. Free afternoons are spent in my garden or hiking the local state and national park trails, and when the leisure time is not available I explore the landscape of the internet, seeking images, video, and stories by people who spend more of their time outdoors. It is this enthrallment with the natural world that spurred me to inquire about the origins of nature fascination in American culture.

The affinity for this subject comes to me through years of rural living combined with academic training in the fields of art history and American studies. Though I explored other options for dissertation research, it is only when I took a step back to assess the rhythm of my own interests that it became obvious a very important change was occurring in the way twenty-first century Americans were accessing and interacting with wild spaces. Namely, through the digital sphere. I saw that the two ideas popularly considered as polar opposites were converging in remarkable ways. The so-called Natural and Digital Worlds were colliding through evolving innovations in personal digital device use. From laptop computers to cell phones, GPS tracking devices to online gaming, people are able to destroy the perceived divide between culture and nature. For example, when I snap a photograph with my cell phone of a particularly interesting segment along the Appalachian Trail and post that image to the social media site Instagram, I use digital media in an area outside of traditional spaces specifically designated for technology. Or, if I wish to take a break from work at my computer to peruse a website dedicated to images of wild
terrain along the Pacific Crest Trail, I use digital technologies to enjoy a high-quality image previously limited to those who can physically get to the wild spaces.

The question at the center of this research is to interpret how the ubiquitous use of mobile digital media may influence the way Americans perceive the natural world. Scholars, such as Adriana de Souza e Silva, already established a definition for these so-called “hybrid” spaces, identifying the unique qualities that come with using mobile technologies. No longer is the internet a place “to go to,” but people are connected with one another nearly all the time through mobile digital device use. Ultimately, at the center of this research is an issue of perception: how the natural world is understood in light of digital media’s influence on the American imagination. “Perception” is tricky to define, since it includes both the action of taking images into the psyche and the assessment of that image in order to form ideas about it. Since I demonstrate different ways of seeing, the presented research is filled with images created by both authors and visual artists of previous generations to inform and support the assessment of twenty-first century digital images of nature. By looking into ways previous Americans valued and interacted with the so-called natural world and used nature as a catalyst in personal identity formation, it is evident that a change is occurring in the way nature functions as a cultural stimulus. By this I mean images on digital media of the wilderness idea serve as a message of constancy and nostalgia in a changing world.

American culture is a particularly useful arena for studying the formation of ideas about the natural world, because nature-culture dualism is imbedded in its national identity. Wilderness – the perceived opposite of civilization – was a key part of the portrayal of the north American

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1 Adriana de Souza e Silva, “From Simulations to Hybrid Space: How Nomadic Technologies Change the Real” Technoetic Arts 1, no. 3 (2004).
continent by European settlers, though the land was vibrant with indigenous culture and people. “Civilization” was defined by European settlers in essential and very visible features, many of which were not apparent to them in the new world for a myriad of ways. “Wilderness,” then, not only included flora, fauna, rock, and water, but human beings that lived on this mysterious land as well. In European images and metaphors, the new world was often personified as a woman – available and willing – ready to be “used,” even exploited. Understanding wilderness as conveniently open and waiting to be properly consumed is key to knowing the history of wilderness in the American mind.

Nature-culture dualism gives name to the “otherness” of the natural world, delineating the “natural” from the “unnatural.” Yet, the distinction between these arbitrary terms continually moves like the line of scrimmage on a football field. “Natural” only exists in human terms because of the common belief of civilization’s “unnaturalness.” In other words, humanity creates culture while nature simply exists, as-is. There are deep issues with that way of thinking, but it is not the focus of this research. It is the practice of living between the nature-culture dualism that compels the question: what happens at the point of collision between these two ideas? By bringing digital media “into” natural spaces and by interacting with, or viewing, natural spaces on digital platforms, people metaphorically walk into the gray area in between the supposed opposite poles of nature and culture. This research explores the usefulness of that hybrid space and what compels people to “go” there.

The “natural” cannot exist without the perceived “unnatural,” so the nature concept functions as a kind of support for beliefs about its opposite: civilization. At its most rudimentary classification, it is the antithesis to nature. This is a “primal” principle in modern civilization, though not prehistoric. It is primal, because its source is in the most basic beliefs about
humanity. It’s instigation, the Enlightenment Era, sought to categorize all things outside of the human body, thus taking control over the natural world. Since beliefs about nature are imbedded in the modern mind, I argue that one must seek nuanced evidence that cannot be measured in data, but found in the creative endeavors and intellectual productions. As such, this research dives into literature and visual works of art, both ways of crafting images about nature. These sources are supported by considering the lives of their creators. A distinctly intersectional lens is used to conduct literary and visual analysis, joining to ways of performing identity: through gender and a sense of place. Who we understand ourselves to be is central to the way we interact and respond to the world around us, human and non-human alike. After establishing a foundation of historical evidence, it is clear how digital media, and content on it, are descendants of more traditional forms of cultural productions. Finally, this research interprets online nature-themed blogging journals for literary similarities to canonical texts and theorizes the use of nature images as mediator to the technological sublime in digital media.

Even looking at the matter through the lens of gender reveals broad and multilayered themes, angles, and perspectives. It is impossible to cover all of them at one time. The scope of this research is limited to one particular starting point and problem: the dominant American cultural perspective that deems what is an “appropriate” response to nature, versus an “inappropriate” response. In short, it is whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, and the Christian belief system that controlled the mainstream conversation and directed the nature-culture dualism from the start in America. Initially, it is my aim to illustrate the ways the hegemonic perspective guided major decisions regarding the control of nature, and how this control of land reflected patriarchal control. After establishing this as a foundation, I work toward illustrating a second perspective – one most commonly associated with the “opposite” of patriarchy, or
maleness – the so-called feminine perspective. The intersectionalism of gender, race, class, and sexuality is of utmost importance to a cultural study and the entry into such a perspective here comes through gender identity and performance. While I cannot understate the value of indigenous and African belief systems on American nature-culture dualism, and the richness that these non-European perspectives add to national beliefs about the natural world, I must agree with Michael Kimmel’s assertion that “Only by examining this crisis…through this historical perspective can we illuminate its deep, underlying structure.” The crisis Kimmel responds to is one of American masculinity in the early 1990s, but he is concerned with locating the source of the “malaise” in order to find a solution. This is also an important position to take when confronting the relationship between mainstream American culture and the natural world. This research takes a critical eye to the white male voice that established so much of the cultural norm and uses it to show how it guides the current interaction with nature and digital culture.

First and foremost, the ideas presented here benefit from Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra and simulation, because in the process of utilizing the idea of nature for identity-making purposes the idea and image become a stand-in for “real” nature. The question of what is real and what is not real gets hidden in the process of using the nature idea for human ends. Like the Borges fable of the Empire and the territory map that Baudrillard sites at the start of his thesis, images of nature eventually overcome the real. What people think nature should be – that is, the values and the meaning humans add to nature – is the basis for the human perception of nature and sustains the human-nature interaction. It is this “hyperreal” that Baudrillard proposes.

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4 Ibid., 1.
the stand-in is no longer a representation, but is the thing – that defines twenty-first century images of nature on digital media. While the theorist made his case for twentieth-century culture, politics, and war, his theory of simulacra, simulation, and the hyperreal certainly help to interpret what is going on with today’s digital media and the human-nature relationship.

There are strong, well-established voices in the fields of American studies, environmental history, gender studies, and digital humanities that focus on questions around the human-nature relationship, but rarely do they come together for one purpose, as they do here. The first American studies scholars immediately located the importance of landscape and nature in the formation of the American personality, namely Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Nash Smith, and Perry Miller. As a result, the wilderness idea is rich with analysis. In the 1890s, Turner opened the door for intellectual focus on American culture by American scholars with the delivery of his “frontier thesis.” The incentive that spurred European-American growth over the north American continent ended with settlement of the westernmost land, but the core idea did not. Though Turner exhibits this foundational principle, he is certainly not the last to write about it. Both Smith and Miller use Turner’s work to reveal important, albeit limited in scope, assessments of the American personality. Smith’s Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth exhibits the ways the culture of the west impacted political and social beliefs that created a distinct character of Americanness. The Myth and Symbol school defined the American studies field in these early years, and nature as symbol was – and continues to be – ripe for study. Miller also uses the human preoccupation on wilderness spaces to show how it motivated early Puritan settlers on the northeastern coast to establish a community that, through intense personal
scrutiny, affirmed both religious and social beliefs that would become characteristic in dominant American character.  

Some scholars take on extensive, survey-like interpretations of nature ideas in European-American culture. Roderick Fraiser Nash’s canonical Wilderness and the American Mind (1968) serves as a starting point for questioning the ways ideas about nature embedded themselves into the cultural psyche. Nash tracks the wilderness idea like a fiber weaving its way through the fabric of American culture. Similar studies emerged in the 1990s after the environmental crisis seemed to grab the attention of the public. Max Oelschlaeger gives ample support to those wanting to track the evolution of the human-nature dualism through to the various ecological movements in The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology. Simon Schama does something similar in Landscape and Memory, but instead of tracking theological and environmental concepts, he discusses the evolution of the landscape idea, broadly, in European-American culture. In a study of the origins of American environmentalism, Aaron Sachs shows how the significant impact of Alexander von Humboldt’s exploration and writing influenced the ways Americans approach the natural world. While Sachs certainly focuses on the motivating personality of the explorer whose ideas had a grand impact on American politicians and cultural leaders, it is essentially a book about the embeddedness of the nature idea in America. Sachs shows the change in American beliefs from an old-world way of thinking to ideas that inspired the movement west.  

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The psychological and internal dialogue of our humanness in relationship with the natural world is the foundation to much of the previously listed works. Such fundamental questions are sometimes elusive. The way one thinks about nature will call into question essential qualities of both what it means to be human and what it means to be natural. The following scholarship benefited greatly from postmodernism’s deconstructionism, if only peripherally, in order to get to the basics of nature-culture dualism. Subverting the traditional manner of approaching geography through historical and political events, Yi-Fu Tuan’s theoretical work on humanistic geography establishes a way to decipher the interaction between humans and nature. At the center of his model, and other humanist geographers that follow, is the human relationship with nature and how this moves people along landscapes, or human action along landscapes. Tuan’s *Topophilia* is central to this research because he attempts to show the relationship in action. He acknowledges that both parties – culture and environment – play a role in creating society’s values.7 Topophilia, the human love of place, relies on the formation of ideas about place, the subject of the work by environmental historian William Cronon, et al., in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, an interdisciplinary inquiry into the idea of wilderness. Emerging from a seminar held in 1993 at the University of California Humanities Research Institute, Irvine, the work revolved around the question, “What is the meaning of nature in the modern world?”8 Featuring a variety of voices and disciplines, the subsequent publication presents a fairly well-rounded inquiry into the ways humans internalize self-created information

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about this relationship and act on these assumptions in the relationship with one another and the natural world.

Attempting to interpret the human-nature relationship can be like trying to swallow the ocean, but scholars are finding success in measured, deliberate studies. American literature historian Lawrence Buell sees key aspects of American culture appearing in the work Henry David Thoreau, but it is also because of Thoreau’s cultural impact that specific beliefs become a national feature. In *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* Buell argues that much of the way twentieth century Americans understand their relationship to the natural world, and even environmentalist pursuits, originates in Thoreau’s “ecocentric” view of the world. Additionally, Buell takes on the idea of Thoreau as representative of more than just the man, but a specific way in which to approach the human-nature relationship. Landscape scholar Alexander Wilson takes a broad look into how human actions upon the landscape reveal new meanings about humanity and its ideas about the natural world. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez* is useful because of Wilson’s consideration of popular culture, but his analysis is set firmly in the twentieth-century and his conclusions do not always apply to the digital age.

What is needed now is a new inquiry into twenty-first century forms of popular culture. There are some scholars doing this very thing, with a distinctly global perspective, since the twenty-first century comes with more complex human connection through digital platforms. Recent studies like Robert Fletcher’s ethnographic work *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*, and the collections of essays including *Green Consumption: The Global Rise of Eco-Chic*, edited by Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe, and *New Natures: Joining Environmental History with Science and Technology Studies*, edited by Dolly Jørgensen, Finn
Arne Jørgensen, and Sara B. Pritchard, consider the global dimensions of the nature-culture dualism. Though each use different types of evidence – ethnography, consumer culture, and technology, respectively – to approach the subject, these works use as their base assumption that humans place meaning and enact identity performance along the landscape, natural spaces, and with more “natural” aspects of the world.⁹

Some historical grounded is necessary in order to unravel and understand the profound change that occurs with the use of digital technologies and come to the conclusions that are outlined above. Therefore, the first half of this research focuses on the dominant character of the human-nature relationship in America. Chapter one explores the relationship as defined by conventionally masculine gender performance, concentrating on two primary occurrences: photographer William Henry Jackson’s work with the United States Geological Survey of the early 1870s documenting the Yellowstone wilderness, and Theodore Roosevelt’s cultivation of personal and public identity through his association with the natural world. Both stories show how the mode of dominance in a patriarchal system extended beyond human relationships between men and women, whiteness and non-whiteness, to an exertion of control over the land and nature. Significantly, it is the idea of masculine identity that informed the way the United States government sequestered and “protected” natural landscapes, and thus ownership of the natural world was in service of supporting this gendered performance. In chapter two, the focus

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turns to the perceived opposite of the gender binary, the feminine perspective, by highlighting the work of specific writers and artists who are women. Though the delineation is on gender, racial dominance continues to be a factor since all analysis maintains intersectional qualities. White women sought a different kind of relationship with the natural world in response to the ways white men normalized the relationship of power over nature. As such, the European-American approach continued to maintain cultural dominance over the attitudes of Americans from non-European heritage. The examples provided in chapter two show how the nature idea continued to function as an identity-creating tool, though in service of more feminine perspectives. Chapter three turns to the heart of this research by interpreting content from a twenty-first century form of nature writing through online blogging and images of nature on the digital screen. By connecting the work to the history of American nature writing, the chapter shows how Americans are utilizing images of nature and experiences in the wilderness to form their identities in the digital sphere. Chapter four presents a theoretical analysis of the current use of nature images on digital platforms to show that the natural world not only functions as a way to establish one’s personal identity, but also to cultivate a sense of place and safety in a quickly, and drastically, changing world. In fact, images of the natural world that were once sublime and thought to be dangerous, are now nostalgic to the American viewer and draw attention away from the technological sublime at hand.

The significance of the nature image in American culture cannot be understated. It is found in popular culture, highbrow works of art, technological innovations, everyday language, and most importantly, the way Americans think about themselves. The relationship that humans have with nature is self-defined and humans establish the conceptual role of each player in that relationship. Starting with the dominant social structure in American culture, chapter one
explores the ways masculine identity impacted that relationship in the nineteenth century, setting the stage for later departures in the way the human-nature relationship functions. The study of gender in previous decades sought to highlight the veiled culture of female and non-gender conforming people in a masculine dominated society, but in order to tell the story of change, one must start at a discernable beginning.
Chapter 1: CULTURE IN THE SAVAGE PLACE: THE CONTROL OF UNTAMED LANDS

Wilderness is more than a place. It is a collection of ideas that represent people’s hopes and dreams because it exists in relationship to the perceived opposite: civilization. The wilderness is a place that has been used by humans to affirm identities, enact spiritual rites, and work out psychological problems. Because of the deep and intertwining relationship that humans have with the natural world, the wilderness, the most extreme state of the natural world, is used as a canvas on which to paint a myriad of meaning. Because of these reasons, scholars have been engrossed by their attitude on the subject and there is no evidence of it subsiding. Rather, with every new technological development that supports a perceived “advance” in civilization, there is a renewed interest in the aesthetics of, even symbolism in, the biosphere. Instead of thinking about this fascination as an anomaly, it is helpful to think of the human mind as always in dialogue with the natural world. For instance, the way one thinks about nature will highlight essential assumptions about civilization and within it, human identity, specifically addressing ideas about gender. This chapter considers the manner in which masculinity is performed in the relationship between humanity and nature through a gendered interpretation of the visual art of the nineteenth-century government-sponsored geological surveys of Yellowstone and the later actions of the self-proclaimed naturalist president, Theodore Roosevelt. This analysis demonstrates one specific and culturally dominant manner of identity formation that utilized ideologies rooted in the way Americans perceive the natural world. It was national in scale, influencing the arts and politics, and assisting to determine the regulation of land in the United States.

My intention is to show the great shift that occurred in the American relationship to the natural world with the advent of digital media. In order to make this case, it is important to
clarify why this the change is distinctive. The United States government was formed during a time of specific ideas about the natural world, based in European Enlightenment philosophies and the radical notion of human identity and agency in the world. The grappling for a collective national character was a part of this process, with the goal of distinguishing America from the “old” European ways. American studies scholars located present- and future-mindedness of the young nation and its fascination with abundance as unique elements in the national character. Both are the psychological result of facing a broad, expansive, and “undeveloped” landscape. Therefore, since the beginning of the conscious effort to form national identity, the landscape in both wilderness and cultivated forms was deeply intertwined with this process. As the decades pass, technological inventions and scientific discoveries impact the ways Americans interact with the world, thus coming into relationship with the ways Americans play out personal and national identity – always in dialogue with what it means to be human and a part of the planet. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the initial process of dominant American identity formation was distinctly masculine in character and performed in conjunction with ideas about the natural world.

This relationship is clearly an intersectional one because gender identity is central to its function. The way a human mind comprehends the world is filtered through ideas about themselves and their views of others, always underscored by the social labels one carries. Race and class are also central to this understanding, though will maintain a more peripheral role in this research. By this I mean white identity and middle-class economic status are important distinctions that guide the narrative, simply because of the consequential decisions made by people in these social categories, and are intertwined with the dominant masculine performance of identity. However, this study does not disregard as insignificant the abundant and varied
understandings of the natural world that are often found in the cultural borderlands. Black Americans give American culture a rich history of relating to the natural world, sometimes distinctly different from the white American view, but had less of an impact upon public policy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries simply because of their forced disconnection to the government machine. Additionally, access to the natural world for leisure, a major aspect of the narratives presented here, was and is limited to those who have the financial means to take off work and gather the supplies necessary to travel. To tackle the wide-ranging understanding of the human-nature relationship in America is a larger task than what is available to this dissertation. Gender is the primary signifier of difference here, but both race and class are still evident through many angles.

In contrast to the cultivated-in-comparison European landscape, Puritan William Bradford declared his new home across the ocean “a hideous and desolate wilderness,” in which “wild beasts and wild men” roam and threaten the settlers’ existence. Bradford’s reaction to the North American landscape is a result of the meaning he places on the world from the perspective of a seventieth-century European: cultivation through civilization is based in godly morality. The Puritans were attempting to establish a perfect society in which to showcase that cultivation through morality. Landing in the winter, Bradford lamented, “For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a weatherbeaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, presented a wild and savage hue. If they [the settlers] looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they had passed and was now as a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the

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civil parts of the world." Their imaginations were translating what they perceived to be wilderness, though there were tens of thousands of indigenous people living on the continent, as a desolate landscape while they attempted to stave off fear and anguish. I imagine it was quite a moment of reckoning for the puritan settlers, pushing on to a new land with dreams of establishing their own Garden of Eden. They sought Paradise, but paradise did not come in the form in which they expected it.

Wilderness was a force that required new manners of interpretation and consideration for European Americans. They settled themselves in places not yet firmly under their control, wished to survive. Today, books upon books line library shelves, dealing with various answers to the problem of nature-as-threat and humanity’s proper reaction to it and place within it. Though it is not actually a binary situation, humans imagine themselves as standing between two poles: pure wilderness and cultivated civilization. As a result, ideas about nature – or civilization, technology, and science for that matter – are reactions to the constant pull of both concepts. To fully understand Americans’ preoccupation with either nature or technology, one must understand the constant oscillation between the two and how cultural forces affect this movement. Like the feminine object that exists to please male viewers, an idea presented as the Gaze Theory formed by feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, nature becomes a passive recipient and template for the values and beliefs of a human culture. Since Western culture is defined by its patriarchal system, establishing the masculine as the ideal and measure of textbook civilization, it is important to start with the performance of masculinity in cultural context. This chapter explores some of the ways the natural world was and is understood to be in service to masculine ideals.

\[11\] Ibid., 25.
It is important to point out that the terms “masculine” and “feminine” are not to imply biological maleness of femaleness. Rather, they connote ideas related to the socially constructed make-up of masculinity and femininity. Historian Gail Bederman details the difference between “manhood” and “masculinity” as the ideas shifted into the twentieth-century. Regarding social performance, gender roles are constantly negotiated through interpersonal relationships, thus gender is a “historical, ideological process”\(^\text{12}\) that is dynamic. For men in the first decades of the nineteenth century, masculinity was a term to suggest, in the words of Gail Bederman, ideals of aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality.\(^\text{13}\) It also aligned with the “rough working class” and undergirded the establishment of men-only organizations, and solidarity of class and power. Masculinity existed in opposition to the passive feminine. Since these ideas are fundamentally based in an outward performance of the body, it is possible to apply them to the oppositional sex: a “too-feminine” male or a “too-masculine” female. Thus, because of the disconnection of the ideas to the physicality of human bodies, it is possible to apply “masculinity” and “femininity” to concepts beyond the human body. “Masculine” in this chapter is used to relay the same ideas as noted earlier: aggressiveness, force, and ruggedness, along with power, and even violence. However, the ideas must be conceptually separate from the physical human experience. Here any attribute of “masculinity” that is either positive or negative does not apply to the male population, but the ideas that support the performance of masculinity. It is the same for the later discussion of femininity.


\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 19.
Nature as Defining Feature in American Culture

During the first half of the nineteenth century, many Americans understood Nature as a resource divinely bestowed upon them for individual and national prosperity. Romantic pastoralism infiltrated American culture of the federal and antebellum periods, helping to provide a common language with which to talk about the mysterious landscape. However, the first wave of colonial era New England Puritans fearfully regarded the wilderness as a place to avoid, lest a weak soul be drawn back into his natural, sinful state. At the same time, they deliberately sought out the new land because it could also represent the holy land they were seeking. They held an ambivalence about the role of nature in their physical and spiritual lives. Biblical metaphors penetrated the Puritans’ language and texts, since they perceived their travels and travails as parallel to the Israelites’ journey to the Holy Land. As such, the wilderness was a place where one was susceptible to a reversion to unholy habits. Israelites were – much to the dismay of Moses – wont to backslide, such as when they erected and worshipped the Golden Calf. In like manner, New England Puritans worried about their own religious punctiliousness perched on the edge of what they called the howling wilderness. In this way, uncontrolled land – very much including its animal and human inhabitants – was dangerous to, if not downright inimical, to holy rectitude. It was necessary to control the land in order to reveal its true purpose: a land flowing with milk and honey to be exploited by the Puritans for the purpose of building their City on a Hill. It was to be a religious utopia, according to John Winthrop’s interpretation of Matthew 5:14, and an example-in-action for the purposes of world-wide evangelism. A century and a half later, with the emergence of rational Enlightenment thinking and the birth of

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the industrial revolution, European-influenced culture outlined a new way of looking at the world through the beautiful and the sublime. A cultivated, pastoral land was the pinnacle of beauty.

One clear example of this is through the writings of Washington Irving. His perspective on the rich New York landscape is evident in short stories, particularly “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” of 1819. Importantly, Irving’s landscape affirmed contemporary understandings of the “beautiful.”\(^{15}\) Introducing the Sleepy Hollow landscape, he writes, “Not far from [Tarry Town], perhaps two miles, there is a little valley, or rather a lap of land, among high hills, which is one of the quietest places in the whole world. A small brook glides through it, with just a murmur enough to lull one to repose; and the occasional whistle of a quail, or tapping of a woodpecker, is almost the only sound that ever breaks upon its uniform tranquility.”\(^{16}\) The land was maintained by human culture through organized farming and thus appealing to the eye because of its order, and it is clear through Irving’s description of the material success of the local farmers, not necessarily because of a description of the land. The pastoral is pleasing because it is situated in between the wilderness and civilization, partially untamed but controlled when necessary.\(^{17}\) A creative human hand altered the land like a painter would work pigment on a canvas.

Theologian and one of the founders of the Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) wrote eloquently on the subject of nature during the antebellum years. He

\(^{15}\) Notably, the later Walt Disney film adaptation of *Sleepy Hollow* in 1949 places more emphasis on the production capabilities of the farm land as a source of wealth. The broader societal values of what is important about the natural landscape are illuminated when one compares the short story and the short film: early American values lie tranquility of the pastoral landscape in juxtaposition to the growing urban community, while post-WWII Americans are finding economic success in the exploitation in farming and natural resources.


was thoroughly captured by the natural sublime, an idea distinctly different than “beautiful” in that the sublime excites feelings of grandeur and pleasure through intense sensation.

Enlightenment philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant previously outlined its characteristics. Burke defined the sublime in polar opposition to the beautiful. Where beauty lies in soft, curvaceous, pleasant images and sensations, the sublime is found in bigness and overwhelming sensations of repetition, magnitude, or severe depth. The source of all this was found outside of the mind. On the other hand, Kant believed that the sublime existed as a reaction of the mind to the outside world. It is a reaction of judgment and perception. It is Kant who influenced the Transcendentalists the most, and one can see a direct correlation between his work and Emerson’s “Transparent Eyeball.” When Emerson expressed that he was “glad to the brink of fear,” he found the sublime in the internal sensation. American writers settled into the concept with familiarity and adjusted it to meet their needs. The “beautiful” pastoralism seeped into the sublime through religious association, specifically in American transcendentalism.

Emerson viewed nature as something bigger than himself, an entity he could not control, but one that was necessary for the perfectibility of the human soul. His sublime nature controls the human experience, writing, “In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, - he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.” It is not the other way around. One of the best examples of this idea comes across in the work of English gothic novelist Mary Shelley, who sought to expose the stimulus of sublime experiences in print. Vicktor Frankenstein’s creation represents an inverted

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and disastrous relationship to nature, warning what can happen when man attempts too much control over it – the sublime emerges.

It is significant that Emerson’s ideas existed alongside very specific beliefs about gender and control during the antebellum era. Historian Ann Douglas revealed that at this time women were expected to be the spiritual centers of the home, whether as mother or daughter or sister. A crucial part of the restriction was that it was supposedly woman’s inherent nature to be pious. Domestic piety was held up as the ultimate and best femininity. As such, women should have a positive influence upon the men in her life, pointing to the higher components of human spirituality, as Emerson’s Nature positively manipulates the mind and soul. This was what Catharine Beecher advocated as the best way for women to influence culture: by dint of their superior example, to sway the men in their lives, who would then go out into the external world, presumably inspired by the female example. In the antebellum era, the ideals of women and nature were deeply connected and important tools to be used for the constant betterment of maleness.

The changes in how the natural world was viewed and understood by white Americans in the late nineteenth century were not just a result of the influx of technology or increased urbanism. The way people “handled” nature parallels the way they considered themselves a part of a broader community: where they found a place to fulfill their duties and how they wished for others to perceive them. While Euro-American culture has always been thoroughly patriarchal, the ways in which traditional gender roles are performed constantly fluctuate. Whereas men like Emerson sought personal betterment through a spiritual connection to the natural sublime in the antebellum years, the emergence of professionalism after the Civil War altered that relationship.

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slightly. No longer was it enough to simply “be” in nature, though the famous naturalist John Muir tried to convince audiences of the merits of such a lifestyle. Instead, scientific analysis and regulation of the natural world was necessary. As historian William H. Goetzmann notes, much of American westward expansion and exploration was not only pursued by the “rugged independent frontiersman” but through many federally-sponsored excursions to document the landscape. These efforts not only brought people west, but instigated a rise in scientific advancements.  

Additionally, the consequences of these federal actions not only commenced the establishment of the National Park System, but inspired a new generation of Americans to pursue the wilderness on their own terms and for new purposes.

The circumstances of the Gilded Age greatly influenced this pursuit of wild nature. Frederick Jackson Turner’s farewell to the frontier in 1893 signaled an academic acknowledgement of the limitations of free space into which Americans could extend themselves, a concept usually associated with “wilderness.” Simultaneously, the professionalization of American life emerged at the center of the economic system, realized in the increased higher education attendance for men and women, the changing definition of “career,” leisure time, and the rise of the middle class. The most obvious factors that influenced a turn toward nature conservancy is the rise of urbanism and industrialization. Both Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot epitomize the Progressive era idea of wild space management, which occurred concurrently with urban growth. Engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor, one of the leaders of the efficiency management, saw the organization of human effort emerging out of

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Roosevelt’s call to conserve natural resources. Taylor’s argument that the “best management is true science” holds firm to the idea that the organization of nature – whether human or wilderness – materializes from human hands. At the center of this need to organize and establish efficiency, found particularly in the regulation of education, time, and production lines, is the idea of dominance. The beginnings of the National Park System are a product of this sensibility, and is a sibling to other institutional establishments of the Gilded Age and early Progressive Era. From art museums to higher regulation of the public-school system, ordering, normalizing, and establishing policy for wide aspects of the social structure was a principal characteristic of the era. Regulating the land in service of science and for the benefit of the public resulted in the firm establishment of the National Park System.

The nation’s impressions of the West intensified in the national imagination with the American discovery of the Yosemite Valley. Though the first settlers of European descent laid eyes on the magnificent groves of prodigious old-growth forest in the 1850s, only during the Civil War would the general American population begin to recognize the importance of the “discovery” of this land. As cultural historian Simon Schama notes, “The Big Trees were thus seen as the botanical correlate of America’s heroic nationalism at a time when the Republic was suffering its most divisive crisis since the Revolution.” To war-ravaged Americans, the ancient vegetation directly connected the nation to the Biblical era, reinforcing a narrative of a holy mission that began with the Puritans and found its way to the concepts behind Manifest Destiny.

At this same time Americans were engaging with the world in a new way. At midcentury, P.T. Barnum’s blockbuster national tour and promotion of European singer Jenny Lind, the

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strengthening of advertising campaigns in newspapers across the country, and a growing consumer culture of ready-made goods all trained the population to handle a burgeoning flow of information and images. Within a few years of the original Yosemite trip, advertising schemes for getting tourists to the California site were the beginnings of a westerly travel industry. In the midst of the civil war, Congress sought to sequester and protect this portion of land that resonated with the people – and connected the nation to holy virtue and purpose. “Suddenly Yosemite became a symbol of a landscape that was beyond the reach of sectional conflict, a primordial place of such transcendent beauty that it proclaimed the gift of the creator to his new Chosen People,” Schama explains. In 1864, Congress granted control of the Yosemite Valley to the state of California. Although this is the first establishment of a government controlled park for the “public use, resort, and recreation” of the people, many years would pass before the list would substantially grow. The question that is most important here, however, is the reason for the establishment of the first park. Even though many years passed between the founding of Yosemite Park (1864) and the founding of the National Park Service (1916), the arrival of the first park as a cultural and institutional form speaks volumes to the nature of American ideas about wilderness – and the roles humans play in relationship to that idea.

The formation of middle class culture during the Gilded Age had a sizeable impact upon the relationship between mainstream society and nature by way of new technologies. In describing the alteration of both matters, one area in which Americanist Alan Trachtenberg finds deep significance is with the national railroad system. Not only did it bring a revolution to travel,

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25 Ibid., 191.
thus amending ideas of space, it also connected cities by increasing commerce and tourism between them. For travelers, it created a “provisional” space that was neither “habitation [nor] places of continuous labor but sites of comings and goings,” and brought regulated timekeeping for the majority of the nation. Trachtenberg interprets the terminal clock as representing “regulation, system, [and] obedience to schedule.”

Mechanization of work moved beyond machines to standardize the lives of human beings. Of course, if this systematization affected travel for both work and leisure, it also affected other aspects of American life, particularly as urbanization was on the rise. Trachtenberg explains that through technology, urban transformation affected not only traditional city centers, but the whole nation through greater access to the marketplace.

As mentioned, advertising was gaining power with newspapers and magazines at midcentury, and into the last decades of the nineteenth century Americans became more fascinated and dependent upon ready-made goods. The new middle-class lifestyle left little time (or desire) for making one’s own domestic necessities, so clothing, food, and household goods were purchased. Americans, particularly those in cities, worked for wages and used those wages to buy goods made by others who worked for wages to buy goods. The American culture of consumption was born.

As seen in Theodore Dreiser’s novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) and other naturalistic fiction of the period, there were great anxieties about the moral and social implications of this obsession with consumerism. Throughout the story, greed for material items that are believed to bring greater social status destroys all those involved. Even the reader feels ambivalent toward the

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27 Alan Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 120.
28 Ibid., 121.
29 Ibid., 121.
heroine, who succeeds only on the backs of men who think they can buy her affection, finding fame in the end. Though Dreiser is not a moralist, it is a warning in the service of dangerous materialism, urbanism, and the restrictions of a fast-passed age. It is ultimately a glimpse into turn-of-the-century anxieties, particularly stemming from an established patriarchal system. Trachtenberg writes, “In its very success, middle-class culture had come to seem stifling, enervating, effeminate, devoid of opportunities for manly heroism.”\textsuperscript{30} Dreiser’s “Carrie” dominates the weak men who find her naïveté irresistible at the beginning of the novel. Eventually, Carrie learns modern worldliness through materialism that allows her to flourish in an urban environment. Modernism has toppled traditional gender roles and this was not only happening through the dangerous “Sister Carries” of the world. Between 1870 and 1930, the female workforce increased from 16 to 40 percent of all workers.\textsuperscript{31} The drastic escalation was a result of a push for women’s education in the late nineteenth century, which only grew as the decades passed. For instance, during the academic year 1869-70, 11,000 women attended an institute of higher education. By 1910, the attendance jumped to 140,000 women, distributed between single-sex and coeducational institutions.\textsuperscript{32}

It is not enough to consider how women’s lives changed during the Gilded and Progressive Eras to fully understand the implications the figures mentioned above had on gender relations. Acknowledging the dominance of white Anglo-Saxon masculinity upon American culture requires people to check in with the ways gender hegemony transformed in order to maintain authority. The changes that occurred as a result of the Civil War, increased westward

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{31} Kimmel, 87.
expansion, the close of the frontier, intensified urbanism and consumer culture, regulation of
time and travel, immigration from European countries, and the influx of women’s culture into the
public sphere all required an answer from hegemonic masculinity. A masculine nostalgia for the
days of the Leatherstocking appeared, itself a product of eighteenth-century reminiscence created
by Cooper melded with antebellum myths of the frontier. Memories of openness and freedom of
spirit connected the Gilded Age with the past through a thread of nature-based longing that might
free them from modern problems. For the majority of the century the frontier offered space –
physical, mental, and emotional space that seemed to be the antidote to urban growth and
societal constraints. Over time, wide, natural space represented the catalyst where men could
fully form into the ideal citizen: independent, hard-working, and resourceful. By 1900, this
understanding of human perfection – the ideal man at the center of it all – paralleled with the
increased control and management of wilderness land. The associations between the cultivation
of masculinity, the control of the spaces in which he lives for most efficient use, and the
preservation of wilderness cannot be ignored.

“Capturing” Western Vistas

William Henry Jackson is one of the most notable photographers of the nineteenth-
century, publishing images of the Yellowstone wilderness as a member of the government-
sponsored Hayden Survey before it was a national park and documenting the White City during
the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition for tourists and posterity. He became a legendary figure
in the narrative of National Park history, and living to almost one hundred years, served as a link
between the twentieth-century obsession with the west and the myth of the frontier. It is not my

33 Kimmel, 88.
intention to argue that Jackson was a patriarchal photographer, but to illustrate his role in establishing the starting point for patriarchal control over the land through the images he created.

Smith shows that through the antebellum era there was a widespread assumption that the West was uninhabitable for “civilized men.” It was too desert-like to be worthwhile. Eventually, this belief gave way to a large-scale welcoming of frontier expansion by the general population for Euro-American settlers as a result of conclusions derived under the directorship of Ferdinand V. Hayden (1829-1887) during the U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories. These surveys helped to “[destroy] the myth of the desert and legislat[e] the myth of the garden in its stead.” Hayden approached Jackson in the spring of 1870 to become the official photographer for a large information-gathering survey that would cover parts of Colorado and Utah, and would span the full Wyoming Territory. Interest in the natural landscape transformed from the Emersonian pastoral to an organized documentation and cataloging of the sublime.

The connection between wilderness and masculinity did not find its way only through the myth of the frontier, but with the apparatuses used to document the frontier. Jackson’s role as photographer of these areas positions him at the center of technology, wilderness, and masculinity. Early outdoor photography operated as a contrasting practice to nineteenth century feminine sentimentalism, exemplified by Douglas through the iconic Little Eva of Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin: the embodiment of worshipful religious piety and wisdom, sweetness, and was generously maternal. Additionally, Americanist Lois Banner defines the physical

34 Ibid., 176.
35 Ibid., 181.
37 Douglas, 2.
characteristics of the ideal woman under the image of “the Steel Engraved Lady.” Found in antebellum fashion magazines and widely seen lithographs, this “Lady” is definitively passive. Aside from her delicate facial features, she was “short and slight, rounded and curved. Her shoulders slope; her arms are rounded; a small waist lies between a rounded bosom and a bell-shaped lower torso, covered by voluminous clothing. Her hands are small, her fingers tapering. Her feet, when they protrude, are tiny and delicate.”

It was not the expected character of the ideal woman to lug heavy equipment over the bounds of the earth. Though women did participate in the photographic process and certainly contributed to the cultural works of the century that incorporated themes of nature through writing or painting, the arduous task of towing hundreds of pounds of gear and dangerous materials outdoors during government surveys or professional exploratory excursions was bestowed upon male photographers. In his autobiography Jackson remembers, “Going at it in the open meant labor, patience, and the moral stamina – or, perhaps, sheer phlegmatism – to keep on day after day, in spite of the overexposed and underdeveloped negatives, and without regard to the accidents to cameras and chemicals.”

Living the frontier life was also a marker of manliness. Since women were expected to be the moral center of the home, and ultimately one of the pillars of a republican nation, there was

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little room for them on the edge of society." Jackson, like many of his male peers, "seemed the perfect marginal man for the marginality of this actual frontier."

As photography grew in popularity, the public assumed that there was an inherent truthfulness to the camera lens. Instead of having a creative mediator, such as the painter with canvas and brush in hand, a camera "captures" a scenario like a hunter captures game. Literary scholar Philip Fisher, in explaining the elements that formed the democratization of American culture, explores the effect of the camera lens on other cultural productions, namely Walt Whitman’s egalitarian writing. Whitman’s style “is the world of the camera rather than the painting, because the camera will equally snap anything and make it count as picture. The camera can be held in any hand while the paintbrush cannot. Pointed to the sky, the camera ‘takes’ the sky…The camera abolishes the narrow entrance ways of painting…Pointed at anything, by anybody, the camera notes it as a picture.” While, of course, there is a human hand in the process of taking a photograph, it was thought to be more objective than the hand of a painter. As the industrial age moved along, the application of photographic technology created new ways of seeing that shattered the old assumptions and created different expectations. This would result in the rise of modernism for painters and sculptors, attempting to do something different that the camera could not do. One can also notice a turn from sentimentalism to organized control that is evident through the use of a camera. A public role for nature images

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41 William Henry Jackson writes extensively in his autobiography about whole communities of Mormon believers moving to the frontier. Women and children were certainly a part of this experience. Additionally, it cannot be assumed that there were no women on the frontier, but the point here is that the ideal of the Steel Engraved Lady resisted the necessary skills that one needed to live in such a community.
42 Hales, Jackson, 25.
materialized through photographic technology that resisted romantic ideals in lieu of structured, institutional documentation. There were heightened expectations on the creator and creation coming out of a progressively growing audience who identified specific uses for those images, most notably documentation of reality.

Concern for a broad intended audience was not a phenomenon limited to photography. French Impressionist painters, who pushed the strict boundaries set by institutional salon judges, wished to get their artworks in front of the general public – including the working class. American painter Mary Cassatt, very much a part of the French movement, stated, “I believe [nothing] will inspire a taste for art more than the possibility of having it in the home. I should like to feel that amateurs in America could have an example of my work, a print or an etching, for a few dollars. That is what they do in France. It is not left to the rich alone to buy art; the people—even the poor—have taste and buy according to their means, and here they can always find something they can afford.” Creators of images, whether of so-called fine art or photographs for documentation, were beginning to understand with greater clarity the role of the general public in the reception of those works.

Mid-nineteenth century romantic sentimentality was greatly challenged by late-century developments in industry because this technology permeated nearly every aspect of modern life, instigating deep changes in the way people interact with each other and the natural world. Technology in transportation, production, and the resulting regulation of time turned the public mind to a more systematic focus. But mid-century sentimentality had its roots in “philosophy the passions,” explains Fisher, and “have traditionally been important precisely in their status as the

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one part of inner life that is transparent” and have “as its enemy privacy and individuality.
[emphasis added].”45 One could see a person’s true nature through the emotions that one wore on his or her sleeve. Additionally, works of art served as tools to pull out these emotions in order to put them on display. Painted landscapes of the early nineteenth century, thoroughly immersed in sentimentalism through the pastoral and the sublime, were created for the singular purpose exploiting these emotions. Works by American artists Frederic Church (1826-1900) and Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) were meant to move the viewer to great emotion and enthrallment.

Photographic technology advanced alongside the popularity of landscape painting, but its reason for existence was drastically different. At the start, photography was primarily intended for those dedicated to the new technology and utilized standard methods of exhibiting landscape, formed by established painterly standards.46 Jackson’s primary audience was the United States government, but there is evidence for a wider intention. As a result, he found it immensely important to capture a pleasing image.47 Hayden provided Jackson with an irresistible offer: that Jackson would retain the negatives of the photographs captured on the survey and the government would pay him for the prints they needed.48 While it is unknown what Jackson’s initial thoughts were on the future of those images, evident is his primary purpose to maintain a documentary composition in his work. Heightening the emotional reaction of the viewer was not the chief concern and his primary audience was the government agency who may need them.

This dichotomy is seen between the images made by Jackson and the landscape artist also hired by the survey, Thomas Moran (1837-1926). They worked closely together during the

45 Fisher, 95.
47 Hales, 72-73.
48 Ibid., 71.
weeks in Yellowstone, Jackson writing “Moran became greatly interested in photography, and it was my good fortune to have him at my side during all that season to help me solve many problems of composition. While learning a little from me, he was constantly putting in far more than he took out.” Both the photographer and the painter created images of what Jackson called “the climax of the expedition:” the Yellowstone Falls and Grand Canyon. They are, however, significantly different types of images. It was Jackson’s primary task to document the area for congress, posterity, and on a secondary level, for the possible purchase of prints by patrons. In his memoir, Jackson explains his role in the expedition,

If taxpayers and Congressmen alike wanted more evidence, none of them wanted it half so much as Dr. Hayden. He had a double motive. The abstract scientist in him wanted more facts to work with, while the practical planner in the man at once saw how a widespread public interest could keep his Survey alive permanently. Hayden knew Congress would keep on with its annual appropriations exactly as long as the people were ready to foot the bill, and he was determined to make them keep on wanting to. That was where I came in. No photographs had as yet been published, and Dr. Hayden was determined that the first ones should be good. A series of fine pictures would not only supplement his final report but tell the story to thousands who might never read it. Photo-engraving and ten-cent picture magazines were still unknown; but an astonishing number of people bought finished photographs to hang on their walls, or to view through stereoscopes.50

Hayden understood the importance of an effective image in convincing the public to support the mission westward. The expedition was at the mercy of lawmakers in the nation’s capital, who funded the excursion and, ideally, made decisions based on the public’s desires. Hayden must make the landscape popular in the American imagination, and ultimately present it as a desirable

49 Jackson, 201.
50 Ibid., 196.
space for collective, national interest. This would happen by getting photographs of the remarkable landscape into the hands of the public. Through photographs, the landscape is no longer solely situated as a beautiful or sublime image, found in popular American landscape painting, but also comprises a documentary element that could inspire actual aspirations and recognition of realness in the viewer. If the public wished to purchase images of the Yellowstone exploration, it would not only be for artistic merit, but also, and most extraordinarily, for the documentation the event and location: collective westward expansion and possession.

Jackson created thousands of photographs during his time with the survey, but the photographs of the Grand Canyon are certainly breathtaking. One in particular, titled “Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, From the East Bank” (1871) relies on the optics of texture to provide depth of perception. The Yellowstone River weaves its way through the center of the picture plane, cutting between rock and cliff, framed by forests of pine. The horizon is high above in the background, with a pale sky looming above. Close to the viewer are ancient pines and as they recede toward the Lower Falls, one gets a sense of the steep degree of the sharp descent below. Faint lines interlace over the rock walls around the falls and large faces of earth, rock, and trees protrude over the threadlike river. The photograph is indeed magnificent because the scenery is magnificent.

Jackson’s photography is notable not only for its visual impact, but because of the significant role photography held in the information-gathering process of the west in the second half of the nineteenth century. As the United States government sent geological surveys west, the Hayden Survey only one of many leading to the official establishment of the United States Geological Survey in 1879, there was a boom in advertising that infiltrated the public with written and visual information about the West. Newspapers published writings by journalists, boosters, and businessmen. Tourists returned to the east with personal accounts and sketches. As historian Valerie Fifer notes, the visual arts were “indispensable” to the growing excitement about the accessible West. The twin goals that seemed at odds with each other – economic development of the frontier and tourism of vanishing wilderness – were parallel reasons for drawing people away from the East to return with personal accounts and descriptions of epic landscapes. Photographers like Jackson, working for the federal government, sometimes had dual
motives for capturing images of the west: partially in service to their employer, documenting the landscape, and partially out of unease of the “fast disappearing ‘Old’ West.”

The expectations for Moran’s paintings were slightly different, based upon sentiment of feeling and reality. The challenge that the painter could conquer that Jackson could not is the replication of color along the ravine. Yellowstone’s Grand Canyon has unique hues from mineral stains of hot springs and steam vents and, in his later years, Jackson remembers the painting’s “accuracy.” “So far as I am concerned, the great picture of the 1871 expedition was no photograph, but a painting by Moran of Yellowstone Falls. It captured, more than any other painting I know, the color and the atmosphere of spectacular nature.” This requires us to ask what a “real” picture of nature might contain. Is it the topography, as seen in Jackson’s photograph – though, only partially because he did not have access to color imaging – or is it the creation of “atmosphere of spectacular nature?” A similar painting by Moran titled The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone (1872) provides an almost equal perspective to that of Jackson’s photograph. The landscape is an immense 84 x 144 1/4 in. and like other nineteenth century works of the same genre, allows the viewer to “step into” the scene. Moran’s perspective is comparable to Jackson’s, but more painterly qualities are employed. As mentioned, the rich use of color is stunning and he shows the gradients of pale yellow to deep sienna along the walls of the canyon. At the center of the picture plane in the distance is a perfect view of the Upper Falls, consumed by sublime visuals. Instead of a pale sky in stark contrast to the texture of the land, Moran reworks the scene with deep gray sky and an abundant mist floating from the falls to the heavens. The Yellowstone River weaves brightly in blue between craggy walls of yellow and

brown. Rich green pines are artistically placed in contrast to the rock and earth, less uniform but with more sentiment of feeling. Moran even provides rugged trees reminiscent of Thomas Cole’s (1801-1848) signature dramatic foliage in the foreground to frame the image, but only a few and on the left side of the picture. Balance is the enemy of the sublime feeling. Finally, four individuals and two horses are added at the edge of the cliff at the bottom of the landscape, for both scale and to draw the viewer in to a more contemplative engagement with the scene. Consider the men taking in the vast expanse of the Yellowstone – Moran insists that you should do the same.

Fig. 2, Thomas Moran, “The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone,” oil on canvas mounted on aluminum, 1872, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Lent by the Department of the Interior Museum, L.1968.84.1.

One can gain a greater understanding of Moran’s goals through his correspondence with Hayden after the expedition. In the spring of 1872, he wrote the geologist about the work in progress.

I have been intending to write to you for some months past but I have been so very busy with Yellowstone drawings, and absorbed in designing and painting my picture of the Great Canôn [sic] that I could not find the time to write to anybody. The picture
is now more than half finished and I feel confident that it will produce a most decided sensation in Art Circles. By all Artists, it has heretofore been deemed next to impossible to make good pictures of strange and wonderful scenes in nature; and that the most that could be done with such material was to give topographical or Geological characteristics. But I have always held that the Grandest, most beautiful, or wonderful in nature, would, in capable hands, make the grandest, most beautiful, or wonderful pictures; and that the business of a great painter, would be the representation of great scenes in nature. All the above characteristics attach to the Yellowstone region, and if I fail to prove this, I fail to prove myself worthy the name of Painter. Of great concern in this passage is the potential “sensation” the painting could provoke in the viewer. Moran would be familiar with the work of Frederic Church, who, inspired by the explorer Alexander von Humboldt, traveled to South America in search of the wonders of the world. In a modification of the antebellum sublime to a Humboldtian philosophy, “Church’s vegetation, like Humboldt’s stood primarily for itself rather than for any divine blessing or reprimand.” Now, as Moran realizes this potential for nature paintings, he desires to prompt the feelings one would have when looking at a grand landscape in person.

Hayden hired Jackson after the geologist viewed the photographer’s work his Omaha studio, specifically “studying [Jackson’s] Union Pacific pictures and the Indian groups [he] had photographed near Omaha.” After some time, Hayden simply replied, “This is what I need.” Thus, Jackson was hired on to the survey expedition. What Hayden was looking for was drastically different than the work of a traditional painter. Jackson’s photographs of the Union Pacific railroad developments were technical, thorough, and showed the conversion of

55 Jackson, 187.
civilization and nature as Euro-Americans marched through the western frontier. As a result, the entire message conveyed by Jackson is different from paintings created by Northeastern American artists of the changing landscape in previous decades. Thomas Cole’s epic five painting series *The Course of Empire* (ca. 1834) provides an effective contrast to Jackson’s landscape photography of the West.

Cole’s vision for the series was to illustrate the rise and fall of a civilization. Through the five paintings, the viewer sees a transition from "The Savage State," "The Arcadian or Pastoral State," "The Consummation of Empire," "Destruction," and "Desolation." Previous scholars note that Cole’s ideas about the evolution of civilization went against popular notions about progress during the Early Republic and Antebellum eras. However, a contrasting anxiety existed in parallel to technological change that provided tension that produced concepts expressed by Cole and others during this time. In a letter to his patron in 1833, Cole describes the work as a series that shows the “natural changes” that occur when nations pursue “civilization,” drawing on historic rises and falls of previous empires.56 It is cyclical. Cole expresses these ideas at the height of Andrew Jackson’s term as president, when the nation was experiencing a slew of ideological, social, and technological changes. According to Americanist John William Ward, the country was moving from views that “Americans were to save the world through example” in 1825 to “Americans were to save the world by absorbing it” in 1845.57 Manifest Destiny was the idea that would take the country to the next level of political and cultural influence. Though this

desire to “absorb” the world might have started with Jackson, it would continue to grow through the twentieth century. Jackson’s cult of personality inspired many followers who were excited about the prospect of technological improvements for society led by a man who was just like them. It was a time of visible changes in the landscape, of an environment ‘improved’ by technological advances such as canals and railroads. At the same time, Jackson’s political coalition drew much of its strength from the pioneering folks who moved through the Cumberland Gap to fill up the continental interior, regardless of whatever arrangements the federal government had made with the native peoples there. The denizens of George Caleb Bingham’s paintings typify this group, as he was one of the first to visually represent the frontier in his art, portraying riverboat men, fur traders, and political events. The rough and tumble Jackson embodied the new American spirit that was thoroughly different from the snobbish European and educated New England elite, but not all found this new direction inspiring. Cole’s anxieties about civilization combatting Nature are revealed in Course of Empire, which was readily accepted by the public. In 1836 the New-York Mirror wrote, “The painter has given sublimity to nature by representing her unmoved and the same during all the changes of man’s progress. His conception is beautiful and poetick. He has accomplished his object, which was to show what has been the history of empires and of man. Will it always be so?” During a time of great change, the painter wondered if the result would be as promised: success for civilization. Cole’s series also references several philosophical views popular at the time with emerging sentimentalism, including Lord Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (1812-1818), which introduced the fabled “Byronic Hero” to readers and was immensely popular. Americanist Karen

Halttunen identifies one reason for the move toward sincerity as the fear of hypocrisy.\(^{59}\) Byron, and often his poetry, though romantic in nature, also exhibited a cult of personality that lured youth into a world of immorality. A great fear developed for this type, but the solution was even greater sincerity. If one is true and sincere in emotion, there is no room for duplicity. Thus, it was the mark of good character.

Emerson and Cole’s understanding of nature was that of a force which could not be controlled through human power. Though people try to combat it, they will fail. Emerson’s nature dominated and manipulated the mind and emotions to bring one’s being closer to the godhead, or Oversoul. Cole’s nature would not be suppressed through best devices human culture could create. Jackson’s nature was of an entirely different type. His photographs of the Union Pacific inserted humanity directly into the sublime wilderness of the frontier. “What we see is a vast, ancient, hostile region surmounted, reordered by man, yet not diminished by the process,” writes Hales of the 1869 image *Devils Gate Bridge [Utah Territory]* (Fig. 3).\(^{60}\) Here one sees the progress of technology forcing its way into the natural landscape. A wooden bridge stretches over a ravine as white waters rush beneath. The workman’s train sits precariously along the construction while workers pose for the camera, taking a short break in between arduous hours of labor. Looming above is a craggy mountain that passively looks on as if it cannot do much about the invasion. Jackson takes an artistic approach to the image, making sure to capture both the technology and the wild terrain. The train and the mountain slope meet to the left of the picture plane, signaling the inevitable unification of the two.


\(^{60}\) Hales, 43.

Developments in the far West were unequivocally a part of the transition to a new way of understanding nature and, thus, engaging with it through human culture. The creation of the transcontinental railroad connected two sides of the continent with each other for the exchange of goods, information, and promotion of travel and leisure. The hammering home of the Golden Spike at Promontory Point in 1869 provided a not-very-subtle symbol for the continental traverse. More than ever, land became the thing that humans travel along to get from one point to the other as well as the platform which American’s consumer goods moved. It had always been a conduit, but the hugely increased speed of the train made the West, in all its vastness, much less impenetrable. Yet, the West continued to be a symbol of redemption and connection to the human mission on earth, but now humanity had the tools to rework and reform it to fulfill its divine purpose.

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61 Ibid., 46.
Important to this research is how Americans “see” the wilderness. Each artist discussed thus far directed ideological beliefs about nature into the visual works that would eventually reach the public. Whether that art was commissioned for a particular patron or by the federal government, the public eventually had access to the images. Cole’s *Course of Empire* was big news at the time of its creation, Moran’s paintings for the Geological Survey filtered through government agencies to make their way to the interested public, and Jackson retained the rights to his photographic negatives for potential buyers beyond the federal government. The precise audience for each is very different, but the broad reach is comparable. Eventually, photography won out as the popular visual medium because of its portability – both as a technique and as a product. Perhaps the audience also felt a more intimate connection to photographic images. Not only could a “big” scene be reproduced in a very small frame, but the viewer could hold it in her hand or keep it in her home, bringing in the wide open space to her personal space. Eventually, as Hales observes, photography surpassed painting, lithographs and other popular prints, and popular literature of all forms.\(^62\) It would be decades before America became a “visually-oriented” culture through the influence of television,\(^63\) but society slowly inched toward this twentieth-century shift as photography became more widely used and consumed. In fact, the consumption of images boiled the wilderness down to a pocket-sized – or at least parlor-sized – object, one that consumers could look at in the comfort of their own home, it altered the observation, engagement, and meaning of the natural world.

The way one looks at an image is an outcome of the manner in which one values an entity, or at least are familiar with it according to one’s own identity. This idea is historically

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\(^62\) Ibid., 48.

analyzed through gender, specifically with the concept of the gaze, as defined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Identifying the male/active and female/passive roles, she writes, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.” Little agency is given to the woman on the screen or in the image because her job is to stimulate pleasure in the viewer. The visuals of her form, and less so the content of the image, project signs and symbols that the viewer takes as his own possession, for the sole purpose of his use. With this in mind, it is easy to see how language used to describe the female form is also used when describing images of the natural landscape. Considering Mulvey’s analysis of the male gaze on the female form, it is evident that a similar action occurred with the exploration and image-making of the nineteenth-century western landscape.

The precedent for this type of anthropomorphism of the landscape is well-established, and the American male gaze on western vistas settled into a firm European-formed belief about nature and visual forms. Art historian Steven Adams shows that nineteenth-century French landscape artists redefined concepts of manhood in their works during a time of political and social transition. The association of rebellion in fine art tradition (always a marker of landscape painters) and “robust” physicality transformed in the second half of the century to embody a type of masculinity that was beginning to be desired. Essentially, “male psychic and physical resolve were seen as essential qualities for authorial affirmation.” As a result, landscape painting’s

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64 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 11.
popularity amplified in France by the end of the century because of this masculine overtone, embodying “ideals of personal freedom rather than institutional constraint, creative intuition rather than academic dogma, mental and physical health rather than neurosis and disease.” In a focused study, art historian Paul Smith identifies Cézanne’s “masculine” mode of vision, specifically attached to nature-as-maternal symbolism, that creates pleasure in looking at and dominance over the subject. Both scholars reveal the hierarchy of culture/masculinity over nature/femininity that existed in a post-Enlightenment era in Europe and how this materialized in works of fine art.

The idea that nature and the feminine are deeply connected in culture is not new, but the ways these ideas are expressed constantly change, thus providing signs that point toward answers to key questions about what makes cultures function as they do. As historian and gender scholar Virginia J. Scharff writes, “gendered ideas and actions respond to all the things we see and feel and hear and smell and taste, what we do with the world around us, and how we think about it.” Gender is deeply ingrained in all aspects of human life, since it is one of the crucial systems that individuals relate to one another. Gender is a performance. It is both intentional and cultivated, and is evident in all the ways people present themselves to the world, including the way individuals talk about the natural world. As a result, ideas that associate the feminine with nature will change as ideas about femininity change.

66 Ibid., 13.
When deciphering American interaction with the natural world, variations are evident in these expressive forms and explanations of the world. There are changes in the ways people speak about nature and humanity’s place in it. With the turn of the century a new mode of thinking about masculinity surfaced that connected manhood as rugged individualism to nature, and manhood to civilization, that continued to utilize technological and scientific developments. Men in positions of power controlled the ways a patriarchal system would establish dominance over the land, in the name of protection and conservation that exhibit eerie similarities to dominance of power over women and non-Anglo communities. Theodore Roosevelt was the first United States president to utilize his executive power to establish a significant body of federal lands for conservation and protection. He also promoted a concept he referred to as “the strenuous life”\(^70\) for the protection and conservation of the highest form of civilization. For many white Americans, and Roosevelt as a top advocate, this was distinctly associated with the “Anglo-Saxon race.” – and to safeguard this group against “race suicide” impacted whites and groups marked as the deviant Other. White Americans were implored to sustain healthy bodies and procreate (some even viewed college education for women as a barrier.) The Other – Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans and immigrants, for instance – were told to assimilate, like in the case of the Carlisle Indian School, or were definitively disenfranchised from broad political and social institutions. The president’s views on the proper roles of men and women within a civilized society strictly adhered to beliefs of masculinity’s bond with the natural world and expressed dominance over the feminine, non-Anglos, and ultimately articulated a protective control of the natural world through the “proper” role of men in society.

Indeed, Roosevelt approached the protection of flora, fauna, and land in the same way he approached the manly protection of women: loathing of brutality, but establishing order and control.\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{Roosevelt, Masculinity, and Wilderness}

Theodore Roosevelt is still known as the “naturalist president” in popular national memory. He made a conscious decision to curate his public image around popular ideas of rugged wilderness that emerged during the Gilded Age. It was an effort to dissociate his civic persona from insults by his adversaries in the New York general assembly and politically motivated state newspapers.\textsuperscript{72} Though, to think of this identity curation as simply a political stunt would be a mistake. Since childhood, “Teedie” sought out the curiosities and surprises in nature with an obsessive drive, collecting and preserving artifacts through his teenage years. The meticulous collection, christened “The Roosevelt Museum of Natural History” by Roosevelt himself\textsuperscript{73}, would find its way in his lifetime to both the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Natural History, New York City.\textsuperscript{74} Additionally, his first trip to the Dakota Badlands in 1883 solidified a preoccupation with the wilderness that would last a lifetime, after being mesmerized by the landscape’s “original state” before the thrust of frontier settlement.\textsuperscript{75} Significantly, his journey to the West was more flight than mission, at least at first, since he moved there to recover from the simultaneous deaths of his wife and mother. It was in the

\textsuperscript{71} Doris Groshen Daniels, “Theodore Roosevelt and Gender Roles,” \textit{Presidential Studies Quarterly} 26, no 3 (Summer 1996), 652.
\textsuperscript{72} Bederman, 170.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.,135-140.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 145.
Badlands that he reoriented his morale and persona, adopting the cowboy motif and recovering sufficiently to re-enter eastern society at its highest level. When the American wilderness was challenged by industry, capitalism, tourism, and settlement, Roosevelt reached into these memories and pastimes for the motivation to establish five national parks, an expansion of Yosemite National Park, and eighteen national monuments during his time in office. Roosevelt was not isolated in his interest in the natural landscape. He was a part of a larger movement of attraction to wilderness that found its way into leisure, social life, literature, and fine art. He was also the co-founder of the Boone and Crocket Club in 1887, which brought together big game hunters whose focus was on the protection of wild game animals. This lure was also deeply entwined with gender performance, allowing men to enact manliness that also proclaimed patriotism, independence, protection, modernity, and power. As a result, the interest in wilderness is not simply a fascination with the natural landscape. Social pressures encouraged a worldview change in white, heterosexual American males that drove them to look toward the west for solutions to their growing anxieties and resulted in a type of conservation based on control and regulation of the spaces they found so inspiring.

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77 Cutright, 168-69.
78 Carolyn Saari calls the construction of identity the personal development of “a picture of the world in which we live, and only after we have done so, can we create a sense of who we are within that world.” (228) While Saari is certainly focusing on the general environment, not exclusively the natural world, it is useful to recognize this social relationship when looking at the ways humans live on the land and use natural resources. In this way, ideas about the natural landscape are not only influenced by the natural world, but ideas about human identity are enacted upon the natural world. The relationship between the two are strongly tethered together. Carolyn Saari, “The Role of the Environment in Psychoanalytic Theory,” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 78, 2-3 (2008), 228, 241.
At the center of this change are the shifting definitions of “civilization” and “savagery.” Gender studies scholar Gail Bederman argues that political and social rhetoric at the turn-of-the-century utilized the concept of “civilization” to meet the needs of the spokesperson’s argument, specifically in service of racial and gender relations.\(^79\) Civilization embodies a very distinct idea, if one is to argue for a particular explanation, but there is something that it very clearly does not represent as well. That opposing idea is “savagery.” Civilization indicates order, rationality, intelligence, and success, as presented in Cole’s *Course of Empire: The Consummation of Empire* (1834) with architectural symbols like white Greco-Roman pillars, political ceremony, and economic strength. In 1893, Americans could experience their own self-congratulations of civilization success with the White City and the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition, which not only thrust these symbols into the forefront of the American psyche, but architects and builders reordered “useless” swamplands off the coast of Lake Michigan for this performance.\(^80\) The savage landscape was conquered for the purpose of showcasing civilization’s advancements. Savagery, on the other hand, was metaphorically and symbolically associated with nature and embodied by those outside of the hegemonic racial center.

Savagery is the sublime expressed in physical form that challenges the controls set in place by civilization. Positive and negative values are assigned to these forms based upon how close the savage comes to interacting with civilization. When something perceived as wild or untamed comes into cultivated space it must be controlled and altered, whereas the wild outside of modern development is a place to enter when one chooses. For instance, the artist George Caitlin was inspired by Charles Willson Peale’s anthropologic museum in Philadelphia and set

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\(^{79}\) Bederman, 23.

\(^{80}\) Trachtenberg, 208-9.
out to document the vanishing native tribes at the height of American western expansion. As gentle as his portraits are, the motivation was preservation. It is also simultaneously a form of control over a non-dominate group that is fading with the advance of so-called “progress.” Thus, the dominant members of society enact control through engagement with “savage” spaces and people. In the early twentieth-century, this perceived savagery was found in tense race relations and in the natural wilderness, respectively. Both ideas were challenged as a result of modernity and were entrenched with meanings of gender.

Americanist David Leviatin writes of the photographic phenomenon, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, by journalist Jacob Riis (1849-1914) at the end of the nineteenth-century, “With the western wilderness and the Indian conquered, American culture needed new symbols of ‘otherness’ against which to define itself.” Riis, a Danish immigrant himself, was the first to direct a sympathetic eye toward this influx of immigrants flooding into the New York harbors to find economic relief in the New World, though his methods did not necessarily illustrate current sensitivities to his subject. His lectures and publications were a blockbuster hit as white Americans used his work for both education and entertainment, finding the world of the racial “other” to be incredibly dissimilar and possibly terrifying. Riis was a part of the emerging progressive movement that sought to regulate and reform these groups so they can assimilate into the culture of their new home. The arrival of immigrants in mass quantities also instilled fear into white Americans worried that the civilization they worked so hard to achieve, embodied by the White City (not insignificantly associated with Greco-Roman culture), would become diluted with the arrival of cultural and

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81 Goetzmann, 15-17.
racial other. Moreover, the falling American economic security among the self-employed, the professionalization of office careers and the emerging consumer-based middle class, the increase in working class unions, and the concentration of wealth among a select few captains of industry all pointed toward a changing tide based on modern capitalism. Bederman sees this as a call to action for white Americans, who in fear turned to rhetoric of crisis that combined gender, race, and class concerns.

White “civilized” American identity was central to maintaining hegemonic control over the “savage” other and simultaneous to these social transformations was the alteration in how middle-class Americans spent their time. “Concurrent with middle-class men’s narrowing career opportunities came new opportunities for commercial leisure,” writes Bederman. “The growth of a consumer culture encouraged many middle-class men, faced with lowered career expectations, to find identity in leisure instead of in work.”83 These men discovered new identities in the spaces outside of the urbanized, crowded spaces where they formed their careers. While many found liberation in organized athletics, very often middle- and upper-middle-class men took themselves to the wilderness – a sequestered “savage” space – to reaffirm their independence and manhood. Importantly, even leisure time was susceptible to the regulatory characteristics that defined the era out of the Gilded Age and into progressive reform. A civilized society (existing only in comparison to the perceived savage society) found perfection in regulation. Progressive reformers, writes Americanist John Kasson, “saw in the culture of the urban working class not creative adaptation [to civilization] but pathological disintegration.”84 The fear that the “urban class” would not integrate in American society is rooted in the tension between White

83 Bederman, 13.
“civilization” and Non-white “savagery.” One solution was found in the “play movement” and proponents such as Luther H. Gulick believed that “the play-forms of childhood were the building blocks of culture.”

Community leaders would guide little bodies into structured activities, appropriate to their age, and thus cultivate an appreciation for community and health. The latter is remarkably important because, at this same time, the health of the male body was playing a more central role in defining masculine identity.

When Roosevelt, as a public official, sought the wilderness he was doing so in the midst of this masculine revolution. It just so happened that he already discovered the lure of nature in his youth, but as an adult he used his nature philosophy to support political policies and social theories that white Americans grasped readily. Though it was not always employed to arouse racial solidarity and affirmation of civilization (as an opposite of and in order to control savage wilderness), the masculine naturalist-woodsman has a long history in American culture. As a child Theodore tapped into this personality through collecting and entertainment like Cooper’s Leatherstocking tales.

During Roosevelt’s first full term in the presidential office, environmentalist John Burroughs (1837-1921) would write of his close relationship with the president, remembering Roosevelt’s insistence that his life trajectory and all his triumphs, including the highest political office, were a result of his initial trips to the Western frontier. In other words, Roosevelt connected the epitome of civilization – he considered the United States to be on the forefront of advancement, and himself holding its greatest title – with the apotheosis of natural wilderness. This was not only the personal view held by the president, but a persona that

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85 Ibid., 103.
others attributed to him. Writing in 1907, Burroughs proudly declares, “The President…has both physical and moral courage in a degree rare in history. He can stand calm and unflinching in the path of a charging grizzly, and he can confront with equal coolness and determination the predaceous corporations and money powers of the country.” And scattered among other superlatives, “He is doubtless the most vital man on the continent, if not on the planet, to-day.”

Burroughs describes Roosevelt as the embodiment of an ideal, a model that straddles two worlds but creates a perfect example of civilization. In interactions with both human culture and savage nature, the naturalist-politician has the skills required to not only survive, but to succeed. Because of this, he is the leader to direct America into the modern era. Burroughs does not tell readers anything they have not heard before. Roosevelt was a prolific writer and published many of his works (even while holding presidential office) including arguably his most significant speech, *The Strenuous Life* (1900), emphasizing themes of certain American supremacy.

Roosevelt delivered *The Strenuous Life* speech to the Hamilton Club of Chicago in 1899, before he was elected vice president of the United States. Like any other politician (he was governor of New York at the time), his language responds to the type of audience who would receive his message. Other addresses to African American worker groups, small town communities, or college graduates would have different rhetoric. The event at the Hamilton Club allowed Roosevelt to speak to his social peers – wealthy businessmen and other male members of the upper-strata of society – about his most sincere concerns. Since Roosevelt was born into an affluent family, he knew how to speak to these men, and though he was certainly a charismatic public figure who drew many into his orbit, the members of the Hamilton Club would understand him on a particular level. What ensued is a speech that became so popular it

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88 Ibid., 59-60.
was published the next year during his first months as vice president. It is clear that concepts presented in *Life* were not only the culmination of his first years as a politician, but would anticipate his political, social, and militaristic philosophies as president.

_The Strenuous Life_ is an international policy speech, but as Bederman points out, the title phrase quickly began to “connote virile, hard-driving manhood.”89 The question of how this transition occurred is addressed in Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (1995), but her focus is primarily an intersectional study of race relations. Roosevelt presents the speech at an all-white businessman’s club hoping to spur them to action as the “leaders of civilization.” The politician implores

> If you are rich and are worth your salt, you will teach your sons that though they may have leisure, it is not to be spent in idleness; for wisely used leisure merely means that those who possess it, being free from the necessity of working for their livelihood, are all the more bound to carry on some kind of non-remunerative work in science, in letters, in art, in exploration, in historical research – work of the type we most need in this country, the successful carrying out of which reflects most honor upon the nation.90

Bederman writes that this speech carries no emphasis on gender, but looking more deliberately into it reveals otherwise. The passage above clearly separates the responsibility of the sons from the daughters, for instance. The actions, both professionally and leisurely, of wealthy male citizens will be the delineating factor for a fruitful nation. Later on, Roosevelt specifically argues that a “man must be glad to do man’s work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep himself, and

89 Bederman, 184.
http://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000018064087?urlappend=%3Bseq=1.
to keep those dependent upon him.” And that the “woman must be a housewife, the helpmeet of the homemaker, the wise and fearless mother of many children.” These statements may not seem radical in an era before Women’s Liberation, but Roosevelt is speaking to a class of men who are sending their daughters to elite women’s colleges in increasing numbers. The New Woman, and her popular fictional image in the Gibson Girl, flooded advertisements, newspapers, and real-life urban centers. Roosevelt was distinctly employing gender as a support to make strong imperialistic claims about America’s role on the international stage. Specific leisure activities even defined this motive, and is evident in the popularity of football, using military-like terms such as “defense,” “offense,” and “neutral zone.” Notably, football was one of Roosevelt’s favorite pastimes.

Most importantly, “the strenuous life” was to be the mantra of the elite because of their important role in advancing civilization. Paradoxically, this group could either help the nation succeed or add to its struggles through overcivilized habits. In other words, the boundaries put in place as a result of urbanism, professionalization of careers, and the increase of women into the public sphere, men’s character could weaken. He asserts that the “country calls not for the life of ease but for the life of strenuous behavior” and, in this case, this behavior finds its epitome in international control over land and people. Additionally, strict gender roles must be in place in the home in order to find success abroad, lest “bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world.” Bederman reveals that the connection between this new aggressive masculinity and Roosevelt’s international policy has roots in ideas

91 Ibid., 5.
92 Ibid., 21.
93 Ibid., 21.
of white racial supremacy. It is important to recognize aggressive masculinity’s association with domestic conservation policies, as well.

Though Roosevelt spoke freely to the members of the Hamilton Club, the underlying message to arouse aggression and power was inspired by working class lifestyles. Specifically, the people of the frontier and the wilderness itself provoked ideas of “muscular patriotism” and beginning with his trips west in the 1880s, he celebrated the American pioneer. Muscular patriotism included aggressive international policy, but it also integrated ideas of proper use of the land, one that reflects similar masculine characteristics as identified in The Strenuous Life and that he recognized in the western settlers. Roosevelt admired those who settled in the west, the “hard-working, self-reliant, courageous, the frontiersmen…exemplified the best of the American spirit.” His interest in the pioneer spirit predated the Hamilton speech and continued into his presidency, but the reasons for his admiration of masculine control remained the same. Speaking to the people of Carson City, Nevada in 1903, the president declares that the people’s ancestors, “Had iron in their veins” and were able to “make the wilderness blossom.” It would be of utmost importance for the citizens of Nevada to continue in their forefathers’ footsteps and control the land. The president congratulates the citizens of the state in their partnership with the federal government, the largest landowner in the west, to implement the newest policies on water use and irrigation. Though he ends the speech imploring them to watch out for “destructive lumbering,” comparing the care of the natural world with the homemaker’s care of family and

94 Collins, 80.
95 Ibid., 142.
Roosevelt’s approach to both national and international power was to wisely protect land for its most efficient use, but to do so the pioneer must be equipped with the abilities to “conquer” the land, not just settle into it. Conquering, importantly, is synonymous with proper and resourceful use.

The push toward the frontier certainly began decades before Roosevelt’s “strenuous life” declaration with the politically and racially motivated Manifest Destiny, but aside from what John William Ward showed with the symbolism surrounding Andrew Jackson – primarily a class-based nationalism – aggressive western expansion was not so strongly associated with gender presentation. Roosevelt exemplified the mid-nineteenth century Victorian standards of manliness in his youth to then take on fully the “right” kind of masculinity at the turn of the century. “One’s masculinity became measured by one’s action, vigor, physicality, aggressiveness, sexual assertiveness, and even violence,” writes historian Peter Boag. So the conquering and control of wilderness land operated in-line with concepts of hegemonic manhood.

Conservation and Control

Roosevelt felt a deep connection to the wilderness. The self-proclaimed “lover of nature” spoke and wrote poetically about its mysteries. Entreating others to join him, he dedicated his 1902 text, *The Deer Family*, to “the lover of the wild, free, lonely life of the wilderness, and of

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97 Ibid., 416-17.
the hardy pastimes known to the sojourners therein.” 99 The topic of the book is deer hunting, not deer observing, maintaining consistency with his philosophical interaction with the natural world. He is not observational like Emerson, but utterly active, imprinting himself to drastic effect upon the wilds he visits and creatures he encounters. Roosevelt believed that the function of civilized culture, in the form of the American cowboy or ranchman, was to enter nature with masculine aggression, not passive reflection. The cowboy ideal was not a fantastical turn-of-the-century craze produced by one generation. Roosevelt’s fame – along with other popular imagery produced by artist Frederick Remington – helped to solidify the admired cowboy archetype, culminating with the rise of moving images. John Wayne, the cowboy in action, was not only the ideal man, but the ideal American. Roosevelt as cowboy, protector of wild spaces, and able political leader was the most qualified spokesman for this belief. Bederman points out that, with the publication of Hunting Trips of a Ranchman (1885), Roosevelt “was publicly measuring the violent power of his own masculinity against the aggressive predation of ‘nature.’” 100 He saw the interaction as a struggle between two forces: civilization’s control and nature’s hostility. Yet simultaneously, the outdoorsman regularly uses the phrase “lover of nature” to describe his relationship with the natural world. “Lover” implies an intimacy when placed in service of a relationship between two persons. It is not the role of one with moderate interest, but the status of one who knows, protects, and understands the other. There seems to be disjointedness in the two personas – the aggressive masculine hunter and lover of nature – but in reality they are closely connected. The theories and approaches to masculine wilderness protection in Roosevelt’s establishment of national parks correlate with Progressive era gender politics during

100 Bederman, 176.
a time of struggle. Concurrently, it was a moment when many Americans came to terms with an increase in technology and urbanism and the push for women’s greater autonomy in the public sphere.

Roosevelt established six national parks and eighteen national monuments during his time in office, not to forget the fifty-one federal bird refuges and four national game preserves. Additionally, in his professional career he worked to enlarge one hundred fifty national forests.¹⁰¹ The legacy of wilderness protection begins decades before his influence, at the height of the American Civil War, with the Yosemite Act approved by Congress in June of 1864. The bill granted power and protection of the valley and Mariposa Big Tree Grove to California, a telling action during a time of great dispute over state’s rights versus federal control. In 1872 Congress passed the Yellowstone Act, sequestering land in the Montana and Wyoming territories against the “settlement, occupancy, or sale under the laws of the United States, and dedicated and set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people” [emphasis added].”¹⁰² As mentioned, the Hayden Survey was the primary influence in the decision to create Yellowstone National Park. However, Yosemite and the establishment other celebrated American playgrounds like the Grand Canyon and Mount Rainier National Parks were heavily influenced by the nature-philosophy of preservationist John Muir (1838-1914), whose views on humankind’s relationship with the natural world were significantly directed by nineteenth-century American romanticism and nature mysticism. In comparison, the act of

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“loving” nature was drastically different between Muir and Roosevelt. The ideas of both men can be seen in the language used when forming the purpose of the established national parks, of which they had influence.

Founder of the Sierra Club and longtime environmental advocate and activist, Muir is considered the father of the preservation movement. He lived a life in pursuit of nature-based wisdom, opposing the cultural attitude which saw nature as either wasted space or unspent resources. As a young man, and one with a talented engineering mind, Muir resigned his industrial work after an accident left him temporarily blind. In search of new a purpose, Muir eventually found his way to the Yosemite Valley in 1868. This pivotal event inspired a lifetime of wilderness writing and advocating for the preservation of land against the influx of the raw materials and farming industries into the West. He called the sheep permitted to feast on the meadows of the Sierra Nevadas “hoofed locusts” in his *Mountains of California* (1898), protesting that the grasses looked as if they were “swept by fire.” He sadly proclaimed, “The money changers were in the Temple.”

Muir was known for using spiritual language to describe natural phenomena, particularly in describing groves of trees, mountain ranges, and meadows as a holy temple. It is as if the astonishment causing early explorers to connect the big trees of California to the birth of Christ decades earlier never faded in Muir. Environmental historian Max Oelschlaeger identifies Muir’s importance as something that extends beyond the popularity of his writings, which were widely known at the end of the nineteenth-century. In fact, many scholars have connected Muir to American transcendentalism, finding similarities in figures like Emerson and Thoreau. However,

as Oelschlaeger makes clear, Muir’s theology was a “profoundly insightful evolutionary pantheism” focusing on the “sacrality of all being.”¹⁰⁴ He constantly questioned the anthropocentric view in American culture, one that pressured for the dominance and control of man’s hand over the natural world. Muir was an exceptional naturalist and though his works were widely read, promoting the God-connection to the wilderness that many were immediately drawn to, his views would ultimately lose to a more regulated control of the land. Muir was a preservationist, one who wished to separate all of civilization from the wilderness in order to maintain the hallowed ground. Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), Chief of the Division of Forestry (1898-1905) and first Chief of the Forest Service (1905-1910), spearheaded the oppositional conservationist camp whose motto was “wise use” of natural resources, as long as the government was in control. In an era of greater technological, scientific, and professional advances, “wise use” became more and more popular with the government and the public. Though visitors may see the Yosemite Valley as an astounding phenomenon and visualized the “hand of God” in the mountains, progress “won” and the nation supported the controlled use of land.

Roosevelt convinced Muir to travel the Yosemite Valley with him in 1903 and wrote Burroughs to go through Yellowstone. He wished to leave all political talk behind during these trips in order to “be out in the open.”¹⁰⁵ A subsequent letter sent to Muir in May 1903 expresses Roosevelt’s thanks for the guidance on the trip. “I shall never forget our three camps; the first

solemn temple of the giant sequoias; the next in the snow storm among the silver firs near the brink of the cliff; and the third on the floor of the Yosemite, in the open valley, fronting the stupendous rocky mass of El Capitan with the falls thundering in the distance on either hand.”

Roosevelt was certainly a nature lover. He could successfully travel with two of the most extraordinary naturalists to the American wilderness as a peer. He would, however, use his attachment to the wild to promote masculine wilderness, whereas Muir did not. Muir’s association as a founding member of the Sierra Club reinforces the impression of a gentle approach and broad reception of diverse people into wilderness interaction. The organization readily accepted women into the fold as hiking and camping became more common participants of the New Woman movement. Historian Kimberly A. Jarvis sees a connection of this attitude toward wilderness protection rising periodically throughout the twentieth century. Yet, “opponents of wilderness preservation have harbored the suspicion that men who seek to preserve natural beauty instead of promoting national development are effeminate, while women who climb mountains are masculine, and that both are subverting American national strength.”

Roosevelt, on the other hand, pursued nature with a profound longing for a previous masculine wilderness as seen in Natty Bumpo and the western cowboys before the declared close of the frontier. This created nostalgia colored the decisions the president would make regarding the national parks, supported by the popular notions of control in emerging Progressivism.

Roosevelt delivered his first speech to congress as president on December 3, 1901. Essentially, there are three basic components to his message that day: the sad and maddening assassination of President McKinley a few months prior, the necessary government support of the average worker and restraints that must be placed on the captains of industry, and the crucial work to be done in the western states in areas of settlement and irrigation. The final point included an overview of his opinions on the government’s role in nature use. Roosevelt praised the public’s increased “appreciation of the value of forests” and explained

Wise forest protection does not mean the withdrawal of forest resources, whether of wood, water, or grass, from contributing their full share to the welfare of the people, but, on the contrary, gives the assurance of larger and more certain supplies. The fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forest by use. Forest protection is not an end in itself; it is a means to increase and sustain the resources of our country and the industries which depend upon them. The preservation of our forests is an imperative business necessity.\(^{108}\)

The United States was still “moving” west, even if the federal government and Turner declared the frontier closed. Settlers were finding homes in the arid regions, so Roosevelt pushed for greater irrigation technology and regulation by the national government agencies. Big business also continued to move west, seeking raw materials in the vast forests that seemed to extend over the earth. Roosevelt enjoyed his time with the naturalists Muir and Burroughs, both who wrote extensively on the details and nuances in nature, but not with a push for control or dominance over the land. Roosevelt came to the topic of the natural world as a scientist, a respectful hunter, and a politician. He gathered information for purposeful use, not observation. This use came

under several guises: use of natural resources, use of entertainment, and use of the land for the strengthening and performance of masculinity.

A primary instigator to the establishment of the National Parks in the late nineteenth century and beyond is the increase in technology and consumer culture. Americanist Richard Grusin argues that in the decline of American landscape painting after the Civil War, the rise of an interest in sequestering land for national parks “entails the reproduction of an American national landscape in light of the redefinition of American national identity that accompanied the rise of consumer culture.”109 By definition, national parks are evidence of the human hand at work, not matter how many Muir-inspired visitors come to gaze at the mountains, valleys, or trees. National parks are a reaction to a particular direction in human civilization and rises out of a need to isolate the natural world to protect it. As a result, a particular notion of the way a piece of land should “look” or function is established in the minds of those in control of these spaces. Thus, human culture is evident in the fact that it is almost non-existent in large portions of land owned by the federal government. Grusin’s reasons for change are also the factors in altering the ways masculinities are performed at this time. The rise of consumer culture affected the workplace, leisure, and the methods in which men “dressed the part.”

National Parks serve as a visual reminder of the dichotomy between technology and natural wildness, and the reasons humans are drawn to these spaces is evident in the work of William Henry Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and other figures discussed in this chapter. Jackson’s images illustrate early efforts to reorganize the land for use during the rise of industry and mechanical transportation. Bringing new photographic technology to “capture” the

landscape is also a sign of increased control at the downturn of American romanticism. While Americans desired to *look* at the land for visual pleasure, more and more it was under the influence of a rising consumer culture, thus commodifying the land for those who could not readily travel to the west. Later, Theodore Roosevelt embodied a new American type who would seek out wilderness in order to cultivate aggressive masculinity, modeled on ideas of nostalgic frontier culture. While women participated in greater numbers in outdoor recreation at the turn-of-the-century, the push to continue to sequester land for conservation and government control was conducted with male leadership. Additionally, at the core of federal decision-making about the National Parks and the National Forests was an ideology of wise use, along with conservation. Grusin distinguishes a very particular characteristic within these spaces, “Unlike a landscape painting, for example, which can only be owned by a single individual or institution (such as a museum, a corporation, or the government itself), a national park, by not being made available for ownership, reproduces nature as a kind of idealized commodity which could be acquired and possessed, but would never be exhausted or appropriated or used up or consumed.”\(^{110}\) While parks and land seem to embody ideals that diverge from consumerism – individuality, freedom, and expansiveness – each of these ideas can also fully function within the consumer system because the commodity sells the ideals to the consumer to use. The “purchase,” or in this case ownership by national and even state governments, of wilderness land, creates a collective disposition based upon ideals that humans identify with wilderness.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 12.
Conclusion

Natural landscape-as-commodity supports a particular American perspective, specifically revealed in Roosevelt’s public persona. This he “sold” to the American citizens as both election tool and national ideology. By this I do not mean he swindled the public, but that Roosevelt was formative in establishing a very specific form of American masculinity that was intertwined with American beliefs about the natural world. This is not a new perspective, because Bederman writes of his influence on American masculinity in detail. However, the research here goes one step further to show that the relationship between American masculinity, exhibited by Roosevelt, and the treatment of the natural world by the American government is dependent upon one another. The dissemination of ideas about nature to the wider community could only happen as a result of a “dichotomous” meeting of nature and technology. It is “technology for the reproduction of nature,”¹¹¹ used in conjunction with the commodification of masculine ideals.

The commodification of nature continued into the twentieth century. Yet, advancements in technologies, like automobiles and airplanes that alter the human experience with time and land, refrigeration and indoor climate control, and the arrival of epic vistas into the comfort of home through television and computers, create underlying anxieties that spur an evolution in the way people interact with wildlife and landscape. Additionally, the control of nature through land management is questioned by a new generation of thinkers, ones who “discover” the fairly new concept of ecology, which revolutionizes scientific understanding of the natural world.

Writers like Henry David Thoreau certainly hold their place in the American imagination as unique members of our society who serve as beacons in the cultural night, lighting the public’s way towards a better conception of the world around us, wanting to direct our attention

¹¹¹ Ibid., 8.
out of our hurried civilized lifestyles to contemplate quiet nature. The public thinks of these writers as exceptions to mainstream society, intensifying the suggestion of masculinity. The pursuit of masculine wilderness never really disappears after this movement toward wild-seeking, and is particularly found in 1960s counterculture with the writings of environmentalists such as Edward Abbey, but alternative ways of looking press through to challenge the notion of aggressive control. In fact, as the nineteenth century morphs into the twentieth, a feminist approach to wilderness emerges, opening possibilities to consider the landscape as a thing that nurtures. People are unable to control this wilderness, but it should be respected and protected so that it can educate and support human culture – which might not be that far removed from nature. This belief system develops slowly, but can be seen early in the century in works by writer Mary Austin in Land of Little Rain of 1903, “One hopes the land may breed like qualities in her human offspring, not tritely to ‘try,’ but to do.”

Chapter 2: WALKS IN THE DESERT: THE FEMININE SACRED NATURE

Dry earth crunches beneath the feet of a woman walking, her skirt rustling among the creosote under the burning sun. All her senses absorb the temperament of the desert and messages sent by flora and fauna. An inadequate and socially marginalized woman among the rejected land, Mary Hunter Austin sees the landscape with the eyes of a sympathetic viewer. At the turn of the twentieth century, she writes of what she sees in Land of Little Rain, showing the reader that the desert is a place of rejection and dejection for the white farmer – the Jeffersonian hero and the one who will fulfill the national ambition of land cultivation – who views the land as hopeless without proper green vegetation. Land is only useful when in perfect balance with rain. According to writer Terry Tempest Williams, this rejected desert space is best defined “not by what it is, but by what it is not,”113 which exhibits uncanny affiliation with the ways women are socially defined. This limited view blinds many to the vibrant life contained in the land of less-than-preferred rainfall. In this chapter, I argue that the land of little rain is also contained within the woman herself. She embodies the qualities that trigger reasons for the cultivation snub: difficulty, wildness, little support of man. She does not fit the ideal and is not comfortable like the bucolic countryside. Writer Mary Hunter Austin loves this land because she found herself in it.

This is the nature of that country. There are hills, rounded, blunt, squeezed up out of chaos, chrome and vermilion painted, aspiring to the snowline. Between the hills like high level-looking plains full of intolerable sun glare, or narrow valleys drowned in a blue haze. The hill surface is streaked with ash drift and black, unweathered lava flows. After rains water accumulates in hollows of small closed valleys, and, evaporating, leaves hard dry levels of pure desertness that get the local

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name of dry lakes. Where the mountains are steep and the rains heavy, the pool is never quite dry, but dark and bitter, rimmed about with the efflorescence of alkaline deposits. A thin crust of it lies along the marsh over the vegetating area, which has neither beauty nor freshness. In the broad wastes open to the wind the sand drifts in hummocks about the stubby shrubs, and between them the soil shows saline traces. The sculpture of the hills here is more wind than water work, though the quick storms do sometimes scar them past many a year’s redeeming.  

This quote clearly shows the intimacy in which Austin is familiar with the land around her, and it is for good reason. In her words – chaos, drowned, hard, dry, neither beauty nor freshness, scar – is a reflection of Austin’s personal story and identity in this description of the land, as will be made clear later in this chapter. Austin and the desert are one. She walks among the flora and fauna identifying the ways in which life forms around her, and uses it to support herself out of the life struggles that threaten to destroy her soul. Instead of looking at the land and seeing a place of diminutive use, Austin sees a place for heart cultivation and life. This is the center of a feminine perception of nature.

The distinction between the definitions of “feminist” and “feminine” is important to this research. The term “feminist” is not as useful here as the latter term, though many of the works by women in the ensuing analysis are inherently feminist. “Feminist” implies political intent, while “feminine” is a discernable gendered performance. Though both relate to personal identity, this chapter centers around a difference between the two, finding meaning in the location of “feminine” as “masculine’s” perceived opposite. Aside from Rachel Carson and perhaps a few counterparts, the canon of female-authored, female-centric nature writing was limited indeed, and inspires the misconception of a singular way to emotionally, intellectually, and physically interact with the land. As noted in the previous chapter, a patriarchal social system dominated

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and created a mode of thinking that positioned men at the center of culture and nature, personified as female, outside of culture. By the middle of the twentieth-century, as women’s studies and gender topics moved to the forefront of many fields, there was an outright challenge to this too-often reflexive mode of thinking. Female writers and scholars rejected the idea of nature as a thing to be dominated and subdued, but as a source of power which could energize. This dissertation chapter will focus on that conceptual transition, which paved the way for feminist modes of thinking and writing about nature. My intention is to reveal the differences between the masculine wilderness and the feminine wilderness, two simultaneous systems of belief and ways of interacting with the natural world that results in very different ways of being. It also highlights four women who confronted traditional assumptions about the domination of nature in scholarship, literature, and art. These women asserted their place as creators instead of passive receivers, and insisted on the transformation of nature from a subordinated entity to a source of power. Feminine ideals were easily attached to the idea of the natural world as twenty-first century women writers and artists grappled with their roles as creators of culture. This augmented the earlier masculine views of nature and enriched overall environmental study. As a result, there are variations of the feminine wilderness, but essential questions arise out of it about the human connection to the natural world. I know full well the difficulty in attempting a complete view of feminine perspectives of the human-nature relationship. Simply positioned as an alternate option to the masculine wilderness perspective creates immense and infinite variation. Understanding the limitations, but also the great benefit of highlighting dominant attitudes about the wilderness, this chapter tracks flow of feminine ideas about nature by key American authors and artists. It begins with early twentieth-century writings by Western naturalist and wilderness seeker Mary Hunter Austin, considers Georgia O’Keeffe’s southwest
desert walks, and the radical evolutions in spiritual engagement with nature through the writings of Annie Dillard and ecofeminist Terry Tempest Williams. Additionally, the rich ecowomanist perspective is illustrated through the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. The feminine wilderness is a reaction to the masculine wilderness, though the former did not eliminate the latter. The two modes of thinking existed simultaneously toward the end of the twentieth century.

Mary Hunter Austin’s Desert

In 1903 the public embraced Austin as an emblematic voice in western American literature. The collection of descriptive and immersive essays, *Land of Little Rain* brought her fame after a lifetime of personal struggle and connected her to western contemporaries like Charles Lummis and Jack London. The singular insights that Austin garnered through her own life experiences gave her an exceptional perspective from which to describe the desert landscape. Moreover, though eccentric, Austin’s particular worldview allowed her to enter into a relationship with the landscape in a manner different from her male colleagues. Austin rejected the need for control over the land, even symbolically in her writing, as her personal life crumbled around her. Throughout her writing, deep descriptions mingle with mystical encounters. She was the archetypal feminine wilderness seeker.

Austin is often compared with Thoreau due to her rich descriptions of the land, her isolation from urban culture, and the association with sentimentalism. Yet, this is a simplistic

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115 It seems like scholars are continually trying to separate Thoreau and Austin from each other, as it is easy to place them as parallel, but not converging, writers. The language is often full of gendered nuance. For instance, Vernon Young maintains that Thoreau’s naturalist descriptions seem “measured” and “laboriously defined” in comparison to Austin’s. (“Mary Austin and the Earth Performance,” *Southwest Review* 35, No. 3 [Summer 1950]: 157.) Buell also believes that
understanding of her writing. Equating female naturalist writers to male naturalist writers overlooks the necessary analysis of gender in their writing. It also reifies the male/female binary, which is today considered a problematic assumptive tool for cultural analysis for a host of reasons. One is that it assumes that feminine and masculine perspectives are meaningless and have little influence upon the way writers express creativity. The constant performance of gender does not halt with the employment of the pen. There is no filter to catch it, though historically writers who were also women contended with their gender as a signifier more than their male counterparts. Feminists insist on the equal treatment of women in scholarship, but often through a rejection of gender signifiers. This is very much a current scholarly debate and the results are yet to be determined. But no matter how the discussion develops, it is clear that since writers who are men have the privilege of working without the burden of explaining their gender performance, some insist on doing the same for writers who are women. My position is that we should insist on an analysis of gender performance in the writings by men as well as women and those who do not identify with gender binarism, since every author functions within the framework of gender performance. For instance, to discount the feminine and masculine character of naturalist writers would reject a major part of the writer’s experience and ignore important nuances in the text. Chapter one examines the masculine wilderness concept in greater detail, but here an assessment of Thoreau’s masculinity through his most pivotal text, *Walden*, supports an analysis of the feminine in Austin’s pivotal *Land of Little Rain* by illustrating the role gender plays in both texts.

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Austin’s refusal to use the pronoun “I” separates her from the land as an actor, but a member of the natural world, unlike Thoreau’s first-person narrative. (Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 48.)
Henry David Thoreau’s cultural persona that is now familiar to many developed after his death. One might even term this the hagiography or cult of Thoreau. The ideal Thoreau is a link between work and leisure. The entirety of the author’s life gets condensed into his experience at Walden Pond and so Thoreau the man becomes the experience at Walden, and readers attempt to recreate the Thoreau-inspired life. Contemporary hikers trek the Appalachian Trail for this experience and folks read about spiritual explorations into the wilderness to pull the natural sublime closer to them. Some even purchase clothing meant for outdoor excursions to wear as street fashion. The sense of attachment to these experiences and consumer goods that creates an internal narrative, connecting the individual to a lineage of nature-seekers, and it starts with Thoreau. It is leisure and work. The history of the American middle class reveals a tenuous and never-ending tension between the pressures of economic progress and the search for authenticity. “Leisure” becomes the boundary for which to find authenticity in perceived naturalness. “Work,” then, though an aspect of physical labor, is participation in the out-of-doors, requiring endurance, strength, and skill not found in the urban office setting.

Fundamentally, the idea of Thoreau and his experience at Walden Pond serves as the connection between the two perceptions and this distinctiveness is often focused upon when one thinks about Thoreau.

Part of the draw to this outside/inside culture association is the idealistic individualism that Thoreau represents. In his texts, he is able to escape to Walden Pond because he not only challenges western society’s emerging capitalist norms, but he is also the benefactor of a nineteenth-century culture that venerates male authors as authorities of their subjects. He

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116 Lawrence Buell writes of the different “versions” of Thoreau that emerged posthumously as scholars and readers bestowed different “appropriations to which he has been subjected.” Buell, Environmental Imagination, 311.
simultaneously rejects mainstream culture and benefits from the patriarchal system because he
does it in the form of the masculine wilderness seeker. Literary historian Lawrence Buell notes
that while Thoreau was not a top-tier author for Houghton, Mifflin (his seven books sold less
than 1000 copies a year in the late 1870s) Thoreau’s journey into the American literary canon
was not a struggle.\textsuperscript{117} Rather it was a case of steady progress. As the century came to a close
Thoreau’s popularity increased. One can see a correlation between the rise in the managerial and
white-collar middle-class, as described in Chapter one, and an interest in literature about the
outdoors. While Buell details the politics of Thoreau’s rise into the canon, it is Thoreau’s
perceived masculinity, a comfortable topic for academics to cover, that permitted his longtime
status with academics and popularity among office-bound male readers, while Austin’s writing
was later “rediscovered” by feminist historians in the second half of the twentieth-century
(though she never really disappeared from readers’ shelves.) Thoreau’s virile independence and
rejection of societal norms as a self-sufficient wilderness seeker makes him a hero among
readers. Austin’s similar exploits were reasons for suspicion and rejection by members outside of
the literary community during her lifetime, viewing her eccentricities a detriment to her domestic
responsibilities.

Aside from the ways in which the two authors settled into the literary history of the
United States, the ways that readers receive their works affects the understanding of the author as
a person. Because of American patriarchal culture, Thoreau’s immense popularity among later
readers \textit{seems} to have little to do with his masculinity. But in fact, Thoreau’s experience supports
masculine cultural norms. He embodies in the narrative of self-sufficiency and individuality, and
so it is easier to place upon him the framework of American character. Austin’s particular

\textsuperscript{117} Buell, 340-41.
femininity, or rejection the hegemonic standard of Victorian era womanhood, is at odds with cultural norms as she seeks individual rehabilitation in the western desert. Additionally, the decision to write about the desert separates her from Thoreau because she writes about a location that is the perceived opposite of the blessed American pastoral landscape. To place this difference in a larger historical context, one might compare Thoreau to the ancient saints who removed themselves from the world, seeking in nature a perch (sometimes literally, for those atop poles, such as Simon Stylites), from which to critique society. These were, in monastic tradition, eremitic. Most were men. The conventional path for a female to remove herself into solitude was that of cenobitic monasticism, a single-sex community for either nuns or monks. A nun continued to function within an established social community. Thus, the traditional social critic who repairs to nature was almost always a man.

Austin writes from the perspective of a wilderness-seeker and as one whose life was clouded by familial strife. Both challenge the high standards that Victorian women were expected to meet. She also held personal beliefs that she did not meet feminine beauty ideals, she felt socially awkward, and found it difficult to make friends. After an early move to a farm in the San Joaquin Valley with her family following the death of her father, Mary was released from the previous social struggles she encountered in Illinois while at the same time welcomed by the embrace of the arid landscape to begin a new life. But this new life would reveal its own difficulties. After a short period of settling in, she married Wallace Austin, a partnership which would bring much heartache. She thus found herself in the crucially important and highly socially circumscribed position as a mother in the Victorian era. Austin’s first child was born with special needs, emotional and physical needs that Austin felt she could not fulfill. Her
daughter Ruth was eventually placed in care away from her mother for a period of time\textsuperscript{118} - a controversial move in any age but a hopeless situation in the Victorian era, which simultaneously mandated maternal care above all other female paths but stigmatized mental and physical disability. This was, after all, the era of Nellie Bly, another intrepid female, whose muckraking exposes of asylums took on the Victorian approach of hiding “abnormality” away from proper people. Through off-and-on separations from her husband and the release of her daughter to a caretaker, Austin experienced another round of harsh criticism from the members of her community. As Austin tried to make a living through teaching, her “failure” at domestic responsibilities separated her more and more from positive community interaction, endowing her with a negative social role which she knew to be unfair.\textsuperscript{119} Austin always combatted her perceived weakness with fabricated pride and arrogance, which further challenged the development of relationships. Though, even with these struggles, Austin did find a few with whom she could connect and develop lasting relationships.

Through the course of these events, Austin was in the process of writing her first work of environmental literature, \textit{Land of Little Rain}. She had not yet entered into the intellectual community that would nurture her throughout her literary career, once her reputation as western naturalist writer was established. Austin became immersed in the western conservation movement, joining Muir in the fight to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley and dedicated her time to water conservation. Unlike women of the progressive movement who used their identities as wives and mothers to support their efforts in the conservation movement, Austin “sought to

\textsuperscript{118} Augusta Fink, \textit{I-Mary: A Biography of Mary Austin} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983); Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, \textit{Mary Austin and The American West} (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{119} Fink, 109.
redefine hearth and home” and establish her place alongside male conservationists for environmental wellbeing. She had the audacity to speak as an intellectual, with very specific ideas about the land, just like her male counterparts. Additionally, Austin was drawn to mysticism, defining her interaction with the physical world and beliefs about human dealings with nature. She wrote about transcendent experiences while in nature. It is essential to understand that the combination of her unconventional feminist beliefs about domesticity and ties to mysticism create in Austin a sensibility that reveals itself to be a tangible example of very early ecological feminism. Even more importantly, from Austin’s marginalized place in society, she used language to describe a marginalized landscape. In other words, it is distinctly the feminine wilderness perspective that makes her writing illuminate the unique human-nature relationship that deviates from the masculine perspective.

The term “ecofeminism” was coined by French activist Françoise d’Eaubonne in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* in the early 1970s. Many feminist scholars outside of France quickly absorbed the concept and it is now a recognized and valued scholarly category. The acts of dominating women and dominating the land within a western patriarchal system had many similarities. This was also a time when feminist historians were seeking to find the woman’s voice in historical record. Merchant’s *Death of Nature* ties these concepts together and asks how pre-sixteenth century western culture transformed from one that venerated a “female” organic earth to one that understood nature as “dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans” in the post-Enlightenment Era. Ecofeminist writer Susan Griffin’s *Woman and*
Nature: The Roaring Inside Her\textsuperscript{123} uses creative prose to place this question front and center. Both Merchant and Griffin encouraged a generation of feminist theorists, historians, and environmental scholars to develop a full theoretical framework that simultaneously uses analyses of gender and the environment in order to combat ecological crises and investigate the history of women.

An important aspect to ecofeminism is environmental spirituality. By accepting the feminine in nature, one is also open to other transcendent ideas that go against western rationalism. American transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson believed the human spirit could and should connect deeply with the divine through natural world, and ecofeminists build upon this by recognizing the feminine in nature. They also recognized how the “conquest of nature” model fed into male norms of domination, which explains why a female approach was so often different. For Austin, the natural world and indigenous spirituality brought her closer to reality\textsuperscript{124} – the way the world was, really – and served as a method for coping with her social disconnection, both as a western pioneer and an unconventional woman. Austin also connected deeply with the plight of the land as she became more involved with conservation and realized the disturbing association between domestic womanhood and the measured control of the land. She feminized the earth in her writing and complaints, and blamed patriarchal culture’s troubling masculine characteristics for the demise of the environment.\textsuperscript{125}

Of great importance to this study is the weight of personal details in the assessment of a writer’s work. Buell has serious concerns about attaching a writer’s autobiography to an analysis

\textsuperscript{124} T.M. Pearce, “Mary Austin and the Pattern of New Mexico,” \textit{Southwest Review} 22, No. 2 (January 1937), 141, 142.
\textsuperscript{125} Blend, 31.
of their environmental text. The mythical persona gets in the way of the literary content. The critic wishes the reader to not get so “caught up” in the figure, but to pay attention to the environment.\cite{126} The reader envisions the author as a subject, but the environmental author points to the earth. Buell writes, “In the case of a writer so autobiographical and rhetorical as Thoreau, yet also so bookishly convoluted and reluctantly disclosing, the questions of the relation between authorial \textit{cogito} and textual persona take on special weight – all the more so in a study of the environmental imagination.”\cite{127} The author is not the focus, but the mediator. But Buell misses this author-as-filter. Thus, while readers look past the author for his interpretation of the natural world as an example of American environmental literature, one must turn back again to the author to see how s/he filtered the representation and what this means for the interpretation of the text and how it reveals hidden characteristics about the author. By considering Austin’s writing through a gendered lens, and her writing as both an autobiographical statement \textit{and} an example of subconscious influences, one discovers a definitive feminine wilderness seeker that embodies exclusive characteristics different from the masculine wilderness seeker.

\textit{Austin’s Land of Little Rain} centers on the beautifully flat and surreal Mojave Desert, a place vastly different from the American pastoral or sublime landscapes of nineteenth-century art and literature. The book created more space for the reader to love the desert. Dusty brown and pocked by the surreal Joshua tree, Austin’s beloved but perceived-in hospitable landscape reflects the hard circumstances of her life. The author and the landscape are intertwined. Though inhabited with vibrant life – flora, fauna, but also indigenous tribes like the Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone – European men have designated the land inhospitable simply by naming it

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\textsuperscript{126} Buell, 394. \\
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 372.
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“desert.” It is worth noting here that the aversion to the term “desert” was so profound that the “Great American Desert,” as the intermontane west was rather accurately known on early maps, was soon renamed. The “Rain Follows the Plough” cult was itself a manifestation of male conquest of nature, inasmuch as sod-busters (mostly men) would presumably transform a wasteland into farmland through the very act of plowing it up and planting it in crops – the pinnacle of a pastoral landscape. The antipathy to “desert” therefore had a capitalistic economic aspect, but it also ran back to biblical times.

Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be tilled and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is; however dry the air and villainous the soil. This is the nature of that country. There are hills, rounded, blunt, burned, squeezed up out of chaos, chrome and vermillion painted, aspiring to the snow-line. Between the hills lie high level-looking plains full of intolerable sun glare, or narrow valleys drowned in a blue haze.¹²⁸

Austin continues for several pages to describe the place that surrounds her. She knows her readers will come to the book with a preconceived idea of what a beautiful landscape should be, and the desert is not that landscape. Beauty corresponds with either the pastoral or the sublime, found in the arches of grand trees, awe-inspiring waterfalls, and glorious valleys. The desert, desolate to the untrained wanderer, is the opposite of lush and flourishing flora and fauna, or so they think, though it can certainly hold aspects of the sublime. The problem is that the sublime must be paired with fascination, otherwise it can quickly become terror. As Austin shocks and surprises her peers and community members with arrogance (or, rather, confidence in the midst of supposed shame) and eccentricity, so the desert shocks the reader. Her identification with the desert can be found in the passage below, “The desert florals shame us with their cheerful

¹²⁸ Austin, 3.
adaptations to the seasonal limitations.” Like the flowers growing in “inappropriate” places, Austin finds life in the midst of trouble. The reader may come to the book out of a desire to ogle at its strangeness, yet instead of bowing to the wishes of the armchair tourist, Austin upholds the landscape as a mother, one who creates and nurtures life.

The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations. Their whole duty is to flower and fruit, and they do it hardly, or with tropical luxuriance, as the rain admits. It is recorded in the report of the Death Valley expedition that after a year of abundant rains, on the Colorado Desert was found a specimen of Amaranthus ten feet high. A year later the same species in the same place matured in the drought at four inches. One hopes the land may breed like qualities in her human offspring, not tritely to “try,” but to do [emphasis added.]

As a wilderness seeker, Austin placed her desires in the contours of the desert landscape. The above passage holds meaning that plunges deeper than a sketch of the environment, but hints toward a longing for personal development. It is her duty to not only live as a wife and mother, but to thrive. Others mark her as a failure in these areas. Yet she points to the desert for an example of ecological triumph. It is the mother-desert that reproduces these qualities, and she does so with creativity, not logic.

At the beginning of Walden, Thoreau spends significant time on his task of creating a space for himself in this new landscape. He forms, builds, and produces. Austin, on the other hand, observes and enters. Often through the book she speaks as if she is simply a witness, not as one who interacts. Yet, she also speaks of the fauna as if they are intimates, knowing their ways and observing in greater detail than the visitor. Austin rejects ownership. She continually

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129 Austin, 4.
130 This is specifically the case in her descriptions of the fauna. She writes, “Probably we will never fully credit the interdependence of wild creatures, and their cognizance of the affairs of their own kind.” Austin is outside of this interaction. (Austin, “Scavengers.”)
131 Austin, “Water Trails of the Ceriso.”
complains about the European-American practice of naming places and things. She blames European settlers for misnaming, and thus misrepresenting, their environment. Decades after Austin, Griffin articulates this control in *Woman and Nature*, revealing the absurdity of exploratory naming.

Sea. Mountain. River. Plain. Forest. Gorge. Field. Meadow. Rock. Plateau. Desert. Mountain. Valley. Sea. He is the first. Truly he has come farther than any man before him. His eyes have beheld what has not been seen before. What newness he is blessed with, what freshness! None of the beauty of this land has been brought down, no part soiled. He is the first to tread here... He is the first to know, and he gives names to what he sees. He records the existence of these things. The entire system of European exploration is based upon naming, because through it, one owns.

It is also an experience the “first to arrive” gets to boast. Part of the irony in Griffin’s passage is that he who names does not consider the possibility that the places existed before he arrived.

This quote clearly shows the absurdity in the habit of naming landscape features, contrasting the immensity of the ancient structures with the smallness of the human being. Austin’s main critique of the act of naming is that very often the names are flawed. “Open swales, where in wet years may be running water, are plantations of false hellebore (*Veratrum Californicum*), tall, branched candelabra of greenish bloom above the sessile, sheathing, boat-shaped leaves, semi-translucent in the sun. A stately plant of the lily family, but why ‘false?’ It is frankly offensive in its character, and its young juices deadly as any hellebore that ever grew.” Austin reels at the misnaming the ferocious plant. This is just one example through the text of challenging the European, patriarchal method of control over the land.

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132 Griffin, 49.
133 Austin, 59.
These passages represent the tension that existed for Austin within a Victorian system where the total and continuous control of women, the position of women within a patriarchal system, was suffocating and erroneous in its representation of women. That control was exercised and felt at the individual bodily level (corsets), at the broad social level (cultural expectations), and at every point in between during most women’s lives. The author was brought to the desert against her wishes as a teenager, but it was the desert that provided the language for expressing her apprehensions. The desert also delivered the metaphors that embodied her personal struggles. However, the theme arises over and over throughout her later publications. *Isidro* was written around the same time as *Land of Little Rain* and the book contains allusions to feminine restrictions while continuing to be a standard Victorian romance novel, but Austin does not play into the typical feminist narrative, either. Literary scholar Janis P. Stout writes that Austin’s “views and her novelistic imagination were always more supportive of the complete or primal woman than they were of the new, liberated woman.”  

\[134\] She shunned the trajectory of the new feminism at the turn-of-the-century, though she found herself thoroughly involved in suffrage.  

\[135\] Her entrance into the conservation movement was also unlike other progressive women of her generation. The urban association with both early feminism and the conservation movement may be one reason for Austin’s disconnection, but also because she did not solely identify with the progressive era women who involved themselves with conservation efforts and did so under the banner of wife and mother. Austin was neither urban nor an ideal domestic woman. Rather, Austin’s conservation ethic is all-inclusive. She “struggled to achieve a more


\[135\] Faith Jaycox, “Regeneration Through Liberation: Mary Austin’s ‘The Walking Woman’ and Western Narrative Formula,” *Legacy* 6, No 1, Western Woman Writers (Spring 1989), 5-6.
holistic view of the traditional Christian ethic, which preaches mutuality among human beings, to include what she called ‘mind conscious mind’ drawing together the non-living realm of water, wind and air, as well as creatures usually identified as competitors and enemies… and enlarged the traditional concept of home into a ‘house of earth’ which included all outdoors,”¹³６ writes Blend. Austin as feminine wilderness seeker anticipated the mid-twentieth-century move toward ecological feminism.

**Georgia O’Keeffe in the Desert**

Austin was not the only woman to find inspiration in the desert wild, nor was the only female cultural pioneer to do so. Another artist would later follow a similar path, but this time by choice instead of happenstance. Painter Georgia O’Keeffe remains a beloved, though elusive, figure in American art. From her early New York romance with the embodiment of modernism, Alfred Stieglitz, who lavishly and intimately photographed her, to her later immersion in the southwest, O’Keeffe’s life and career carry disparate elements which served to make her a feminist icon. O’Keeffe’s dive into the New Mexican landscape contains similar characteristics to Austin’s desert sojourn. Like the writer, the painter also places distance between herself from others: the local community, her eastern friends, and even her spouse in lieu of personal independence and intimacy with the landscape. O’Keeffe used abstraction to transform what is seen to what is internally experienced through manipulation of color and perspective. She approached her environment as one who enters in, rather than one who owns. Paradoxically, she uses gentle language of ownership and naming as a part of her practice.

¹³６ Blend, 14.
It is well known that O’Keeffe created a proverbial wall around her home in New Mexico that symbolized her remove. She only rarely allowed strangers to access her intimate spaces. Even Perry Miller Adato, director of the acclaimed documentary *Georgia O’Keeffe*, produced in celebration of the artist’s ninetieth birthday, struggled to convince the challenging O’Keeffe to open her guarded life. Introverted and private, she was warm and collegial with those she let in to her world. Friend and fellow painter Dorothy Brett also spent time in New Mexico – around Taos, in particular – and O’Keeffe’s attitude about the area and the people who lived there comes clear in a 1930 letter:

One thing that gets me about where you are – Taos country – it is so beautiful – and so poisonous – the only way to live in it is to strictly mind your own business – your own…your own pleasures – and use your ears as little as possible – and keep the proportion of what one sees as it is in nature – much country – desert and mountain – and relatively keep the human being as about the size of a pin point – That was my feeling – is my feeling about my summer – most of the human side of it isn’t worth thinking about – and as one chooses between the country and the human being the country becomes much more wonderful.

O’Keeffe was not antisocial because she disliked the company of others, but because she was also directionally focused “outward” to the natural world, and perhaps felt the more superficial elements of human interaction hindered her relationship with the land. Throughout the years of splitting her time between life with her photographer/curator husband in New York and her spaces in New Mexico (primarily Ghost Ranch), O’Keeffe developed an intimacy with the desert land that grew with time. Her early work reveals herself as one who looks at the land, but later

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paintings express an “entering” into it with the body, mind, and spirit. This relationship was cultivated over years of wandering the landscape, sequestering herself from the hustle and bustle of cosmopolitanism and withdrawing from the life of fame her artwork was bringing her through the 1920s and 1930s. She had male artistic counterparts who also made the journey to Taos, such as Taos Society of Artists founder Ernest Blumenschein and modernist colleague Marsden Hartley, but O’Keefe became the symbol of this movement.

O’Keeffe’s first real experience with the American west was during 1916-1917 when she taught for the West Texas Normal College in Canyon. Canyon was and is a small Panhandle town proximate to Palo Duro Canyon, more topographically evocative of New Mexico and Arizona than the popularly-imagined plains of Texas. In fact, Palo Duro is the second-biggest canyon system in the United States. The rising, plunging, multihued, light/dark landscape moved her deeply. During this period she produced watercolors that expressed the intensity of color – reds, yellows, and deep, electric blues – that are characteristic of the arid region of the panhandle. *Evening Star No. VI* (Image 4)\(^{139}\) offers an oppressive heat, though it is the cooler part of the twenty-four-hour day. A yellow moon is enclosed by a deep red sky and supported with a dark blue landscape, almost like an abyss. O’Keeffe practices ways to convey a sense of feeling through color, which leaves the viewer with superficial sensations of temperature and widening space. An intimacy with the land is not transmitted, though. Later in New Mexico, O’Keeffe spent more and more time with the landscape and began to experience it as an organism with which to interact. She painted the same locations multiple times, manipulated perspective, altered color, and adjusted the visual effects in order to convey particular sensations.

For instance, she returns in her painting to a favorite location in the Bisti Badlands that she
dubbed “the black place.” Two works illustrate the many ways she approached the subject: *Black Place – II* (Image 5)\(^{140}\) and *The Black Place III* (Image 6).\(^{141}\) Both works present a darkened landscape abstracted at the start by her choice to focus on the structure and form of the land, instead of its place in relationship to the sky. It is a landscape, but it is also a still life. Traditional landscapes piece together three parts: the land, the horizon, and the sky. Both *Black Place* paintings include neither the horizon nor the sky, but use the land’s form as primary subject. The 1944 image is a series of textures ranging from smooth hills to a jagged yellow lightning-like mark striking down the center of the picture plane, arresting the viewer in a series of dramatic exchanges. The strike guides the viewer to the bottom of the painting, where sienna hills pulsate like lungs pulling attention back up through the blackness to white forms above. The movement is continuous and intense. In 1945, she returned to the hills for another inspired look into the hills. *The Black Place III* utilizes the same focused gaze without horizon and features dark grays that weave together like a blanket. Instead of dramatic sharp edges, O’Keeffe makes the landscape smooth, as if there is a heavy blanket covering each ripple. The effect is a settling to a space that is at once broad and expansive and deeply quiet.

\(^{140}\) Georgia O’Keeffe, *Black Place II*, 1944, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

\(^{141}\) Georgia O’Keeffe, *Black Place III*, 1945, pastel on canvas, The Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Fig. 5, Georgia O’Keeffe, “Black Place II,” oil on canvas, 1944, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489063.
The intimacy conveyed in O’Keeffe’s work is no accident. Her relationship with the landscape permitted deep knowing. She is able to manipulate and abstract, not as one who takes a form and bends it to her own need, but as one who directs based on a more profound sense of understanding. Throughout her career, she expressed a hesitant ownership over the land she inhabited, at times asserting, “It’s my private mountain…it belongs to me. God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it.” The difference between O’Keeffe’s ownership and patriarchal conquering, however, is that the painter approaches the experience as one of desire, work, and effort. She is in relationship with the land. She must pour herself out to become worthy of possession. The more she paints, which in itself is a vulnerable process for the artist, the more she is able to enter into the landscape. She must ask, not conquer. Over time she becomes intimately connected with the land in partnership through her sacrifice. Thus, the relationship must not be tainted with deficient human relationships or interaction.

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142 Quoted in Lynes, *O’Keeffe and New Mexico*, 80.
Why did these women find freedom in the desert, a landscape thought of as at least difficult, at most uninhabitable, by modern humans? I argue the answer is found in the way Austin and O’Keeffe brought forth the image of the land in their work. This identification with the desert has its source in their rejection by and renouncement of mainstream patriarchal culture, to find their place in a supposed desolate space. They reclaimed the desert as a land that gives life without all the qualities of the prototypical pastoral landscape. Feminists would continue to salvage and repossess womanhood and use nature as the metaphor and inspiration. However, there is a distinct difference between a writer who also happens to be a woman and a writer who identifies as a “feminist.” What follows is an exhibit of three writers for comparison.

Writer Annie Dillard moved through and wrote about natural spaces from a woman’s perspective, but defied stereotype of both the feminine and Judeo-Christian. Ecofeminist Terry Tempest Williams reclaimed spaces in a distinct woman’s voice in order to assert the feminine in a masculine-dominated culture. Finally, womanist writer Alice Walker reveals the life-giving, even transcendent, support that black women find in nature while moving through an oppressive world.

Annie Dillard’s Spiritual Spaces

Dillard approached nature and identity through creative production, emblematic of the late-twentieth century feminine wilderness perspective. One challenge the writer faced is the presumption that the gender of a wilderness writer is male. Literary scholar Sarah McFarland asserts, “The exclusion of women from nature writing is not a problem only because it disguises the fact that the very concept of wilderness is a male construct, but also because it leaves careful
readers with the impression that nature is no place for women.”143 As discussed in chapter one, the wilderness is an idea that represented nineteenth-century ideals of manhood. Its association with masculinity became so deeply rooted that the control of wilderness coincided with the control of womanhood – both entities were used as tools to enhance male dominance. In a patriarchal system with this kind of structure, a woman seeking to write about nature, or name it, describe it, and essentially “own” it, reorders the hierarchy. One does not know what to do with these writers. The environmental writing canon is filled with the names of men and, until recently, only intermittently do women appear on the list. Part of this has to do with the conflation of “adventurer” with student of, or in, nature. This brings with it a great deal of sexist baggage. But one female author who is rarely denied access to canonical lists is naturalist Dillard. Ranking alongside Emerson, Thoreau, and Edward Abbey because of her immensely popular Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,144 Dillard is an anomaly for literary scholars and feminists alike. She is a woman writing about nature, but is not explicitly an ecofeminist, under the strict scholarly terms by which “ecofeminism” is usually understood. Whether or not this argues for a broader inflection where the term is concerned is an open question. A greater understanding of gender’s role in the formation of worldview and identity not only deepens the scholarship on Dillard’s writing, but it reveals nuances that would otherwise be hidden. By highlighting her, even nuanced, deviation from the standard masculine perspective, one can recognize this unique angle. It is clear that Dillard maintains deeply rooted Judeo-Christian beliefs of her heritage, which creates a foundation for her work, but employs an intimate eye on the world that defies

other prevalent Christian perspectives of the world. Additionally, her strong prose prompts some scholars to masculinize her author identity, but these assumptions are formed in a patriarchal hierarchy. Yet, Dillard reveals to be a kind the feminine spiritual seeker that requires reconsideration.

*Pilgrim* is Dillard’s second book, but the first to make her writing known to a wide audience. It was received with mixed reviews from critics, some celebrating the work, others calling it “self-absorbed” and “hysterical.” These negative criticisms have such obvious sexist connotations that it is hard work to imagine a male-authored text sparking such terminology. The reviews, distinctly place a partition between the female naturalist and her male counterparts. Calling the work “hysterical” attempts to discredit Dillard’s writing as less serious than Abbey’s reflections about the desert. Her work is self-reflective and is a signifier of her gendered perspective, pulling herself close to the land through meditation instead of writing about her *actions upon* the landscape. “Men are expected to be brave and to explore. Women should stay safely protected in the company of others,” observes ecologist Joan E. Maloof. “For a woman to write about nature, then, she must appropriate some so-called male behaviors.” Literary historian Richard Hardack insists, “Dillard’s work is not the autobiographical or non-fiction nature writing of a contemporary woman, but the trickster fiction, or tinkering, of a postmodern confidence woman impersonating a male voice that is much older.” Both are compelling arguments for the deviation of standard feminine voice in women writing about the environment,

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145 Charles Deemer of the *New Leader* quoted in “About Annie Dillard,” in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 286.
147 Richard Hardack, “‘A Woman Need Not Be Sincere;’ Annie Dillard’s Fictional Autobiographies and the Gender Politics of American Transcendentalism,” *Arizona Quarterly* 64, No 3 (Autumn 2008), 76.
not just Dillard’s work, but do not fully explain the role gender plays in environmental nonfiction. As ecofeminists incorporate spiritualism into theory as a way to subvert the dualistic, masculine-dominated perspective on nature, so Dillard utilizes spirituality to draw her closer into communion with the natural.

Literary historian James McClintock maintains that most Cold War American naturalist writers “rejected Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism” in lieu of “spiritual alternatives” because, as he claims, part of the mid-century ecological crisis was the Judeo-Christian domination of nature. ¹⁴⁸ While this is true to some extent, it is a large and perhaps over-broad claim. There are certainly parts of Judeo-Christian tradition that sacralize nature. Song of Solomon or St. Francis of Assisi come to mind, as well as Celtic Christian tradition. The claim is nevertheless meritorious insofar as it fits into the generalized rejection of the traditions which supposedly led the United States and the West to its late-twentieth century environmental crisis. Another problem, the materialism of Marxist-Leninism which resulted in such disasters as the draining of the Aral Sea, requires another angle of critical interpretation.

Dillard’s Protestant background serves as a foundation for her writing. She takes a divergent path that is twofold and lies in the deviance of her beliefs in the hierarchy. First, Dillard rejects the notion that she must leave Christian spirituality in lieu of engaging the natural world’s sacredness. Second, she manipulates rigid Protestantism to incorporate earth spirituality by writing about sacred experiences on her daily walks. A confrontation with a water bug, the excitement of a burning tree, and night explorations point to a mysticism that lies beyond the church. It is as if her role is to look into nature and tell the reader what is happening – she is to be

our eyes, ears, and skin. She stoops low to level with bugs and forest critters and meditates about what she sees. She is not an authority simply because she is there and everyone else is not, but she is the messenger between two worlds: the reality of the natural landscape and the room in which we, as readers, sit. This humility of perspective and knowledge becomes clear in several passages.

Early in the book, Dillard is the witness to the life-sucking tactics used by a giant water bug to liquefy and destroy the entire body of a frog, at first perceived as intact under the water. When she realizes the grotesque but natural reality she “gaped bewildered, appalled”\textsuperscript{149} and expresses initial disgust at the cruelty at the actions of the destroying bug. But she then then asks, thoughtfully, “What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an unthinkable profusion of forms? Or what do we think of nothingness, those sickening reaches of time in either direction? If the giant water bug was not made in jest, was it then made in earnest?”\textsuperscript{150} Dillard may be appalled at the destructive forces of the life-sucking bug, but along with shock is the realization that she is not at the center of the universe. Even if she is sickened, she marvels that the bug serves a purpose that extends beyond her limited comprehension.

Dillard explains her perspective at the end of the first chapter, owning the status of the observer-naturalist, but not the scientist, and claiming her role as quiet witness.

I am no scientist. I explore the neighborhood. An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn’t the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn. In a couple of years, what he will have learned instead is how to fake it: he’ll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place. Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the

\textsuperscript{149} Dillard, \textit{Pilgrim}, 8.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 9.
neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover *where* it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can’t learn why.\(^{151}\)

Dillard’s questions are existential. What is this place? Why are we here? These are the thoughts that drive her to study the natural world, not explain it. A few paragraphs later she identifies herself as more than an explorer, she is “also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself… I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood.”\(^ {152}\) She dons the masculine hunter persona, familiar to her modern readers through the previous writings of male naturalist writers. Her purpose is to point, to direct, or to guide. The hunt metaphor is pulled from the Native American tradition of placing “lightning marks” on the arrows that enhanced the ability to track the escape of the game. Blood flowed from the running body. Dillard is the arrow and the book is the blood. She places herself in a position that is remarkably different from the masculine hunting experience of Theodore Roosevelt. Dillard is in a fluid position – one that claims the authority of an articulate voice while maintaining self-sacrifice in service of the natural world.

Dillard is acutely aware of her inability to control or dominate nature. She has little drive to even try to do so. She writes of her time at Tinker Creek with rich, deep descriptions of the natural occurrences around the cabin, not what she does at the cabin. But she walks, reads, and conducts minor household tasks. Through this she describes her spiritual experiences. At a local gas station Dillard caresses the beagle beside her while viewing the landscape, coffee in hand. Specifically, she “watch[es] the mountain.”\(^ {153}\) To watch is to look forward to action or to prepare for a movement by the watched object. Most people do not assume that a mountain will engage

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 14.
\(^{152}\) Ibid., 14-15.
\(^{153}\) Ibid., 79.
in any kind of motion, unless it is volcanic. Dillard’s mountain is not volatile. Yet, she sees the aliveness.

Shadows lope along the mountain’s rumpled flanks; they elongate like root tips, like lobes of spilling water, faster and faster. A warm purple pigment pools in each ruck and tuck of the rock; it deepens and spreads, boring crevasses, canyons. As the purple vaults and slides, it tricks out the unleafed forest and rumpled rock in gilt, in shape-shifting patches of glow. These gold lights veer and retract, shatter and glide in a series of dazzling splashes, shrinking, leaking, exploding. The ridge’s bosses and hummocks sprout bulging from its side; the whole mountain looms miles closer; the light warms and reddens; the bare forest running chart, a wildly scrawling oscillograph on the present moment. The air cools; the puppy’s skin is hot. I am more alive than all the world [emphasis added].

This is more than keen observation. Dillard teaches the reader how to see. She tells what to look for in the natural world that will lead to profound experiences, though what she sees is not always tangible. The sun plays light tricks with her eyes, emphasizing canyons, making rocks glow, and shortening the perceived distance to the mountain. The visuals create in her a heightened sense of connection to the surrounding landscape, but the moment she begins to think about it, the awareness ceases. Environmental ethicist Jim Cheney argues, “There is nothing of the masculine drama of alienation from God in Annie Dillard, and nothing of the related masculine penchant for taking the transcendent, the spiritual, the abstract as the real, the true, what is of value – and the opposite of these as less real, the sources of error, of less value.”

Dillard rejects a hierarchy of facts. Instead, she accepts her experiences as something that can

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154 Ibid., 79.
connect her with god. This, as Cheney points out, is incongruous with the traditional western and masculine perspective of a distant and separate God.

Dillard’s identity as one who walks is at the core of her writing. Through the book she records her pedestrian travels through the natural world and she observes more slowly than either a driver or an explorer-on-a-mission. She is not in pursuit of a resource or a destination, but rather wants to record what her walks allow her to see. Moreover, walking becomes ritual for Dillard. She writes of “trying to feel the planet’s roundness arc between your feet,”156 wandering along the banks of the Tinker Creek – even at night in the cold in order to “quit the house” and amble under the stars157 - morning walks to Adam’s Woods that illuminate the newness of spring,158 and walks that bring her to the cedar that is on fire,159 uniting her experience to Moses and his burning bush. Dillard walks through Pilgrim and to understand this as simply a means to get from one place to another is to miss a significant point to the text. McClintock observes that Dillard’s “rituals she strives for – and experiences – reconciliation between herself, a sometimes horrible – as well as beautiful – nature, and a mysterious God who at times seems as maniacal as loving. Fittingly, her rituals blend Judeo-Christian rites and language with her own private rites in nature; they are the rituals of stalking, seeing, and dancing.”160 This blending of tradition and personal spirituality lets Dillard skirt around rigid theology in lieu of a nature-focused, nature-centered practice. Her walking also connects her to a lineage of female naturalists like Austin and, in particular, O’Keeffe – who spent her days wandering the New Mexico desert. Thoreau also walked, so the action is not limited to the feminine interaction with nature, but it is possible

156 Dillard, 5.
157 Ibid., 69.
158 Ibid., 109.
159 Ibid., 36.
160 McClintock, 94.
that the ritual of walking has been misunderstood as a solely masculine wilderness experience. Environmental historian John Tallmadge points out that in nature writing, “The protagonist engages this world as an observer or learner with an attitude that is contemplative as opposed to aggressive, manipulative, or consumptive.”\textsuperscript{161} Hegemonic masculinity, and its relationship to the natural world as illustrated in the first chapter, is driven by dominance. A disciplined progressive organization and systems management, for instance, drives the National Park Service policies, for example. In contrast, naturalist writers tend to exemplify a “benign, essentially harmonious relation between self and the world.”\textsuperscript{162} This is the heart of ecological feminism. Though Dillard is not a self-proclaimed ecofeminist, embodying this harmony and holistic connection through spiritual walking takes on the feminine perspective in one’s relationship with the natural world. To deny the feminine in this voice is to deny its substance.

**Ecofeminism: Nature as Mystical Space**

Dramatic cultural changes American society experienced during second half of the twentieth-century resulted in an understandable turn toward nature. D'Eaubonne’s assertion that the domination of the natural world had many similarities with the domination of women in a patriarchal culture, and solutions to both environmental problems and women’s rights issues are found through these parallels. By embracing femininity, a deeper and more holistic human and earth connection was uncovered. Yet, this femininity did not correspond with the dualistic gender performance essential in a patriarchal system. The primary goal of ecological feminists

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 198.
was to obliterate the system of dominance that subverted both women and nature. Early in its conceptual formation, ecofeminist Judith Plant asserted, “By understanding that we are all part of the same organic flow of life, we are reminded, with a stirring that excites our deepest selves, of who we really are. We are part of this earth, and thus the world becomes a place of infinite mystery, of delight to the senses and the intellect.” Ecofeminism integrates a historical and social view of environmental interrelationships, acknowledging the human place within an organic system – not a mechanized system – by reaching to pre-modern and indigenous spirituality, perceived societies that functioned without the constraints of a patriarchal system.


Griffin approaches her subject – the woman in patriarchal society – with creative prose. She simultaneously tracks the history of this subjugation alongside the “discovery” and subsequent control of the New World landscape. Griffin explains that the primary reason to place her work in poetic prose is that through this dominance, cultural works and expressions associated with the feminine are relegated to a status under analytical academic writing. She challenges the book’s antagonist, the “civilized man,” and his insistence on being “objective, and separated from emotion.” Importantly, Griffin’s book rejects that separation and makes a political declaration through form and content and provides a holistic perspective as the reader progresses through the argument. Merchant’s research takes an academic route, tracking the global movements,

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165 Ibid., xiii.
ideological, and scientific changes in European tradition that shaped the changes to the way the organic, feminine earth was perceived. Both authors challenge and present an alternative to the masculinized mechanistic, scientific, and technological landscape, and argue for a spiritual return to nature.

Writer and activist Terry Tempest Williams is perhaps the most striking embodiment of an ecological feminist, that is, a feminist who is ecologically-minded and centered. This is not necessarily the same emphasis as “ecofeminist,” which carries more scholarly connotations and titles. She weaves personal narrative, environmental justice, and feminist protest through beautifully written prose about many natural phenomena, including the migratory patterns of birds and the movement of water. If anyone shifts environmental writing in a feminine direction, it is Williams. She celebrates the symbolic and physical significance of motherhood, sometimes writing seemingly inconsistent passages over the years. Though as ecocritic Karla Armbruster finds, Williams’s perspective shifts because of a poststructuralist belief that her “subjectivities are constructed by (sometimes contradictory) cultural/historic forces outside of ourselves,” and most importantly to Williams is the influence of the natural world.\textsuperscript{166} The reliance on nature to mold her intellectual and spiritual beliefs produces consistency and depth to her writing. Her theology is simultaneously cerebral and emotional and is sustained by ideas of the earth mother, even as she remains firmly in her identity as a Mormon believer. In many ways, she subverts the dualism in Western culture, but thoroughly embraces feminine aspects nature. This radical stance challenges a patriarchal system by lifting the association between woman and nature to ordinary wonder and reverence – not as something to combat or control, but as a force that moves among

all of us. The system of the natural world provides the language to communicate anger, respond to loss, and express love, and it does all of this without a false hierarchy of power. Williams requires that we look to nature for answers and not as problem to be managed. The complexity of her writing integrates narratives of the human and natural world to show the remarkable intimacy between them, and an emotional reaction is necessary.

Armbruster warns that by embracing the feminine nature, could “sanction women’s own oppression,” if these authors are not meticulous about avoiding same.\textsuperscript{167} They must find a new voice with which to write that does not take on the language of dominance. Feminists knew this concern and shirked from “align[ing] with nature, [in] a society accustomed to thinking in radical dualisms.”\textsuperscript{168} Ecofeminist subversion would challenge the core of American social beliefs. For a nation formed on the idea of the ownership of an expansive wilderness through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in combination with the systematic oppression of women in that society, ecofeminists confronted the problem of dominance head-on. But dominance could not be challenged with responsive dominance. Williams and her ecofeminist colleagues reappropriated the image of the earth goddess/earth mother as strong and powerful, but nourishing. Rooted in poststructuralism, ecofeminism of the twentieth century took on the woman-nature relationship and used it as a tool for identity creation, as well as environmental protest.

*Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* is an early acclaimed work by Williams. In it she laces together the narratives of her family, career as an environmental writer, and the Utah landscape. Williams aligns the struggle to deal with matriarchal family illness with the challenges facing the development and control of natural spaces. She is a bird watcher, a

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 209.
pastime that was inspired by her grandmother, and through the book she brilliantly moves back and forth between her developed skills of watching and connecting. She watches the birds move along the land and in the air, and she watches her mother die of cancer. She connects with the land and experiences rage that surface as both changes to place and family occur. An “unnatural history” is one that is unexpected, but one must contend with its force. It is invasive. In an interview with David Sumner, Williams expressed that the overarching question throughout *Refuge* is “How do we find refuge in change?” A refuge is a place of safety. It provides clarity, calmness, and nourishment. William seeks both in *Refuge*, for herself and as an environmental activist. The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is threatened by the rising water levels of the Great Salt Lake and Williams’s emotional refuge in her mother is threatened by the rising tide of mortality. It is not a story of control over a natural problem for the benefit of human populations, or even systemized control of the waters for the protection of birds, but it is a story of a woman who is a part of larger ecosystems – the natural world and the family. This is most apparent in the way she mingles ideas throughout the text. For instance, early in the book she describes a conversation between herself and a friend on a day journey to the bird refuge: “We spoke of rage. Of women and landscape. How our bodies and the body of the earth have been mined.” Williams’s writing is spare, but because it is unadulterated with excessive language it hits the mark harder. There is no room for extras. She speaks of life and death.

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Importantly, Williams does not see the difference between environmental writing and other genres. This is why I made the distinction above between being an ecological feminist and an ecofeminist. For Williams, the environment and her femaleness (not femininity) are mutually supportive but also life-orienting rather than primarily literary. When asked if she was comfortable with the term “nature writing,” she responded, “I don’t really know what that is…And I think the term is detrimental to the land. It marginalizes the land as something extra, instead of something integral to what we are doing.”

She sees it as directly a part of the lineage of American writing and calls out Willa Cather and Ernest Hemmingway as writers with a sense of landscape. In Refuge, she simply reorders the emphasis in the narrative so the land is not secondary, but situated on the same level as her family story. “That was, for me, the revelation in Refuge,” she confesses, “when I realized my mother’s health and the health of the desert were the same story.”

Williams’s decision to portray the family as an ecosystem illustrates the ways she is dependent upon others and the struggle to survive independently of them. Women writers were long placed in a category of their own due to their subject matter. They write about what they know, so the formula went. Under the rigid gender-splitting code so prevalent throughout most of history, women “knew” family and mothering. Therefore, family and child-rearing have been the favorite (and “most appropriate”) topics. Family dynamics from a feminine point of view are still popular narrative devices, compared to masculine storylines of independence and control that gain critical acclaim. Significantly, a feminine family perspective is dependent upon

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171 Williams to Sumner, 2002.
172 Ibid.
relationships. Women writing about family or feminine love is popular literature, not high art, and thus was kept out of the literary canon, argue scholars Ann Douglas and Janice Radway.\textsuperscript{174} It is the difference between “doing” and “being.” Yet, this is the same distinction that ecofeminist writers sought to enrich. A feminist perspective of the environment emphasizes the act of being \textit{in} the environment, not just actions upon the landscape. Ecofeminism rejects dualism,\textsuperscript{175} it shuns a hierarchy, and seeks to value the devalued in the web of being. Ecofeminism acknowledges the whole and its dependence on each part. These distinctions bear spelling out because there is more to a female ecological perspective than a simplistic formula that states: “Women are supportive, women nurture, therefore women authors writing about nature support and nurture it.” Indeed, if that was all there was to ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, then that would simply add a new restrictive stereotype. Instead, the pith of the idea is to make the male/conquest/adventure/exploitation model no longer reflexive and instead to recognize that there are multiple ways of encountering, experiencing, and interpreting nature. The difference is frequently one of sensibility; of sensitivity to that which has hitherto been unexamined.

There is a difference, then, between the environmental writings by Williams and those by Thoreau or even Edward Abbey. Williams spends a lot of time by herself in the wilderness, like Austin, O’Keeffe, and Dillard, and these women understand themselves in connection to the whole, and spend little time discussing the nature/culture separation. Thoreau and Abbey, on the other hand, insist on their uniqueness to the rest of the civilized world. Though Abbey writes, “I remain a part of the environment I walk through,”\textsuperscript{176} he maintains a distinction – a fierce

\textsuperscript{175} Judith Plant, \textit{Healing the Wounds}, 5.
\textsuperscript{176} Abbey, \textit{Desert Solitaire}, 13.
separation – between civilization and nature. He complains in *Desert Solitaire* about the National Park Service and the “industrial tourists” who flood Arches National Monument. The social and the wild are not the same. His wish for hermetical living is a metaphor for the way the natural world should be separate from human culture. Williams, on the other hand, interlaces human culture and wilderness through *Refuge*, using one with the other to help deepen our understanding of both. The social and the wild are the same. The family social structure mirrors the interdependence of the natural world, and when one part fails, the ecosystem is out of equilibrium.

There are many threads of ecofeminism that emerged throughout the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century, but Terry Tempest Williams’s perspective is emblematic of some of the central tenants. Powerful, emotional, spiritual, evolving, and nurturing – her writing challenges the dualistic patriarchal system of control by arguing for the inherent rights of landscape and the beings who live upon it. She tries to describe the web that connects all together, and the only way to do this is to immerse herself within that web to show the readers how it works. She does not describe from afar, but actively climbs within it to perform the role of femininity in nature. Four essays in *Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape* (1995) blur the lines between cultural eroticism and the erotics of landscape. Some would consider this work a nod to pagan passion, it is so outside the norms of mainstream white American erotica. But Williams usefully presents to the reader a convincing argument for human connection to the land. She does not use the landscape as a fetish, but illustrates the natural connection between her spirit and body to earth, water, fire, and air. In obvious ways, it problematizes and demolishes the “desert-as-badlands” trope. Additionally, writing from her own perspective reduces the risk of *Desert Quartet* morphing a woman’s singular experience into an object of male desire and she adeptly
avoids the gaze. Williams has control, chooses what to reveal, and how to reveal it. Even in the most erotic passages she maintains a perspective that connects, with purpose, to values typically suppressed: feminine passion and reproduction.

We are water. We are swept away. Desire begins in wetness. My fingers curl around this little frog. Like me, it was born out of longing, wet, not dry. We can always return to our place of origin. Water. Water music. We are baptized by immersion, nothing less can replenish or restore our capacity to love. It is endless if we believe in water.¹⁷⁷

Here is an impassioned merging with the Rio Colorado during a walk through the canyons. Her experience is not limited to appreciating the views or possessing the land, but it invokes primordial memories of our humanity – ones that begin with bodies, a mother’s womb, and physical birth. The wetness of this experience reminds her of the wetness of spiritual renewal, the transition of the soul through physical contact with earthly elements.

One problem with ecofeminism is that a narrowed definition of it evolved over years of theoretical development. The founders are not necessarily to blame. The push to define one’s stance within the boundaries of academia, arguably the system ecofeminists sought to challenge, funneled ecofeminist writing into a model that, in seeking to incorporate marginalized perspectives like those from outside the Judeo-Christian European tradition, defined a very specific kind of interaction with the natural world. Additionally, it was perceived that an ecofeminist writer, artist, or activist must express distinctive feminine characteristics: emotional attachment to the earth, rejection of logic or rational thought in search of non-dualistic language, but also maintaining a reverence for motherhood and reproduction, and engaging in a “sensitive” female writing voice. Prominent women naturalists do not necessarily embody these descriptors.

As a result of the created boundaries, a naturalist writer who is also a woman can be placed outside of the ecofeminist circle or thoroughly within it, but the division is arbitrary. Through this obstacle, a distinctive feminine spiritual naturalism emerged in the 1970s taking on many characteristics beyond ecofeminism, though ecofeminism is the iconic feminist environmental framework. A tension exists between the construction of ecofeminism and the nature writing standards with which women must contend.

It is absolutely true that writers, artists, and intellectuals of different heritages and ethnicities played important roles in the formation of American culture. In key ways, ecofeminism reveals problems and solutions to the question of dominance in the hierarchal social system. Iconic aspects of ecofeminism were, and are, heavily influenced by non-European traditions. At the core of the feminist wilderness perspective are ideas that embraces wholeness and reject the partitioning of the human-nature relationship in the Cartesian sense. This is the distinction I wish to make clear about the feminine wilderness perspective. However, the dominant paradigm even within the core ecofeminist movement is rife with cultural appropriation. In the process of rejecting the dominant patriarchal system, early ecofeminists attempted to take on deeply rooted identities from the cultural Other in the formation of a divergent social structure. Both ecofeminism and the mainstream feminist movement that inspired it were criticized for not sufficiently incorporating the perspectives and needs of women who did not fit the heteronormative and white social mold. Often, especially in the case of ecofeminism, these leaders adopted beliefs associated with Native American or African spirituality. Early white spokeswomen for the movement cried out with calls to adopt associations with coyotes and bears, to acknowledge the earth mother, and to act through the righteous anger that comes with oppression. There was fury toward male ecologists who refused
to take on the perspective of the connected whole, maintaining fields of science that are “removed and masculine.” In the process of moving forward, white ecofeminists neglected to acknowledge the privileged position from which they spoke and did not utilize the voices of women of color nearly enough. As a result, alterative environmental feminisms emerged.

**Ecowomanist Perspectives**

Womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker, materialized as an answer to black women’s frustration with the feminist movement. Additionally, ecowomanism, defined by ethicist Melanie Harris, “acknowledge[es] the profound source of wisdom and morality that religion, spirituality, and social protest faith communities have been and are for people of color…[ecowomanism] considers the cosmologies that ground these faith systems as primary sources from which to reinforce earth ethics.” Womanism is notable for its incorporation of issues somewhat sidelined by the mainstream, such as calling for the full personhood of all genders. This is particularly important when one considers the long history of methodical destruction of the black family structure at the hands of white oppressors. Womanism simultaneously responds to social injustice of gender and race oppression, and ecowomanism acknowledges that environmental problems are also a racial issue and unites womanism with the environmental justice movement. It is a holistic perspective. What proceeds is an exhibit of the ways in which ecofeminism and ecowomanism are revealed in women’s writings, illustrating the direction the feminine perspective can take in literature about the natural world.

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Womanism is purposefully multilayered and descriptive. Walker first gives the meaning of “womanist” in the book *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Prose* in a four-part definition. The first is as a “black feminist or feminist of color” and inspired from the folk saying of mothers telling their daughters they are acting out of “willful behavior” (“You are acting womanish.”) Girls in this sense are “acting grown up.” Additionally, Walker uses the term to describe lesbian women, but also women who simply prefer the company of other women. Distinctly, though, from white feminism, a womanist is “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” and utilizes the force that is deep within her to protect her people. (As in, Walker writes, “‘Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.’ Reply: ‘It wouldn’t be the first time.’”) Third, a womanist “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.” And finally, the phrase that scholars love to reference, “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” Walker describes a womanist in historic and familial terms, relationally, and sensually. The womanist is not driven by one mission – namely, the equality of the sexes – but in a universal manner, acknowledging the self, the web of relationships, and the world around. Walker’s final statement shows that her understanding of womanism has a more complex make-up than feminism, and is more radiant. Ecowomanism, then, as Harris defines it, takes the depth of womanism and merges with it religious and theological concepts and environmental justice. Both womanism and ecowomanism can be found in Walker’s triumphant novel, *The Color Purple.*

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181 Harris, 27.
An oft-cited passage from *The Color Purple* is Shug’s revealing of her earth-based spiritual beliefs. “My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people.” Harris calls this “fluid spirituality” that allows black women to escape the mental, emotional, and spiritual oppression that surrounds their lives. While *Purple* is not a so-called naturalist text as those by Dillard and Williams (keeping in mind the latter’s avoidance of the phrase “nature writing” as a descriptor of her work), Walker connects herself to an earlier author whose writing is even more entrenched in nature images. She stated that Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had an enormous impact upon her life. In the novel, Hurston’s Janie Crawford moves through a world that tries to break her down, but the moments describing her attempts to rise above the struggle are full of the language of nature. “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone,” writes Hurston. “Dawn and doom was in the branches.” Early in the story Janie experiences an awakening while gazing into a pear tree in bloom. It was the moment she felt there was life beyond the small, child’s world she knows. The tree image surfaces over and over in the book, a particularly striking metaphor for the changes she experiences throughout her life – times of blooming and times of dormancy, but always symbolic of vibrancy waiting to materialize.

Walker uses fewer direct nature images in *The Color Purple*, but an abundance of metaphor is not necessary since the entire pulse of the novel finds its touchstone in Shug’s declaration, “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it.” More than sentimentality, Walker directly moves the perspective away from

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184 Ibid., 7.
the white man’s religion to the all-pervasive spirituality found in the world around the women at the center of the story. Shug is the high priestess, the once perceived “fallen woman”-turned-lover-turned holy mother who guides Celie to the full understanding of who she is, body and soul. Later, Celie would assert her strength against the violent Albert, thrusting a curse upon his life that she felt, “seemed to come to [her] from the trees.”\textsuperscript{186} In Shug’s statement is a call for black women to lift their heads and pay attention for signs of Divine Love that spring forth outside of the realm of white religion. Walker’s own earth spiritualism is evident here, calling it her “theological work” that “examines her journey from the religious back to the spiritual.” The very heart and soul of the book, in her perspective, was to “explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and help of others, breaks free into the realization that she, like Nature itself, is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine.” \textit{The Color Purple} is a sacred text, not defined by the white god.

What is important about Walker’s womanism, and the ecowomanism that comes out of it, is its rejection of the dualistic social structure that places non-white men, women, and the environment in opposition to the perceived white male counterpart. As political scientist Shamara Shantu Riley puts it, “One part is not simply deemed different from its counterpart; it is also deemed intrinsically opposed to its ‘Other.’”\textsuperscript{187} Full rejection is the only means by which to restore agency. Walker is the benchmark by which to discuss womanism and ecowomanism for the obvious reason that she coined and defined the first term. It seems like a natural extension to

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 206.  
include environmental concerns to womanist theory, but one must be careful to not join the two without careful consideration, lest the historic association between nature and black women be continued. Rather, the reason for the association is not necessarily out of an inherent relationship that is specific to black women, but because of the power that is found in rejecting the supremacy of white patriarchy. Walker’s own evolution of ecological thinking illustrates the point. In “Only Justice Can Stop a Curse,” she gives the reader a prayer-curse she discovered in Hurston’s collection of African American folk sayings. Though very old, the prayer struck Walker as something a woman of color probably wrote. In it, the speaker is righteously angry at the violence done to her body, her children, and her home, that she cries out for retribution. Walker recognizes the fury and sees a relationship to the contemporary apathy apparent people of color toward environmental concerns, specifically the anti-nuclear movement. For the oppressed, the obliteration of one’s enemies is desired at all costs. Perhaps full destruction of the planet is the only revenge available.

Out of this complicated space comes ecowomanism, which calls for a total “reformulation of everyone’s relationship to nature by socially reconstructing gender, class, and ethnic roles,” writes Riley. Womanism rejects the disassociation that the white ruling class makes between themselves and nature, lumping non-whites of all backgrounds into a “more natural” category than themselves. Ecofeminists would probably not argue this point, but their error lies in the overlooking of environmental concerns imperative to people of color and the avoidance of acknowledging their role in systematic oppression. The womanist contends with

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189 Riley, 216.
sexism, racism, classism, and environmental racism on a scale unrecognized by white women a part of the feminist or environmental movements. Importantly, these –isms are inseparable from one another and include many others, such as ageism, homophobia, and disability prejudice. The point of ecowomanism is to destroy the nature-culture dualism.

**Machine in the Garden or Death of Nature?**

In an effort to reject the restrictive patriarchy that placed women’s writing in a separate category from “serious” writing by men, a gendered reading of an author’s perspective becomes a difficult line to tread. Does a man write a certain statement because he is a man? Does a woman really write in a particular style because she is a woman? These questions subvert the real substance of a gendered analysis of an author because it does not consider the long trajectory of the masculine or feminine experience as it relates to writing. First, an acknowledgement of the gender binary is useful, if only to recognize its massive influence on American society and belief system. For instance, if one discusses the femininity of a particular writer, this does not negate the need to discuss the masculinity of another. “Feminine” is not a deviant from the hegemonic standard of masculine writing. In fact, femininity is evident in contrast to masculinity is simply a relationship in which both sides must be acknowledged for full understanding of each half. One exists because of the other. In western culture, the masculine performance only exists in contrast to femininity. Additionally, femininity and masculinity are not bound to female and male physicality. A male author can utilize feminine characteristics and a female writer can employ masculine performance in writing. Literary scholar Richard Hardack argues this, calling Dillard’s work an example of a “postmodern confidence woman impersonating a male voice that
is much older.”^{190} If an author can take on the voice of masculinity and femininity, unrelated to their biological sex, then this performance is necessarily informed by the author’s personal understanding of the ways that performance should be executed. It is informed by outside factors and so this intersection of personal history, identity, and performance must be another location of analysis.

Part of this intersection is a focus on *place* as a participating factor: the author’s and the reader’s respective spatial locations. I now turn to an analysis of the concept of nature in academic thought. The landscape idea can be used as a framework to investigate performances of masculinity and femininity in western society, particularly in the way scholars discuss literature and art. The interpretation of a text is influenced by their own worldviews, and so functions as a type of cultural text in and of itself. For example, renowned yet controversial Americanist Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) and feminist historian Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980) each explain earlier evolving ideas about science and technology. The works reveal contemporary thoughts about the history of the environment, specifically the landscape idea, and also expose individual perspectives on how the perception of landscape functions as a cultural expression. Because the natural environment imbedded itself onto the collective consciousness of western culture, any social or political changes will reveal itself in an interpretation of it. Both of these authors come to the landscape idea concerned with the effects these changes have on views about ecological issues.^{191} While

^{190} Richard Hardack, “‘A Woman Need Not Be Sincere:’ Annie Dillard’s Fictional Autobiographies and the Gender Politics of American Transcendentalism,” *Arizona Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (Autumn 2008), 76.

^{191} While Marx’s text is not of an environmental nature, he clarifies this concern in the afterward of the 2000 edition of *Machine*, writing, “Having been an enthusiastic wilderness camper and amateur ornithologist, I had already become sensitive to our society’s increasingly reckless assault on the integrity of the natural environment.” *Machine*, 368. Merchant specifically aligns
Marx understands this process as the result of the tension between the cultural response to the pastoral ideal – a well-ordered semi-natural landscape organized by the human hand – and technological developments, Merchant sees the progression as having its roots in the traditional cultural rejection of the feminine organic whole in nature in lieu of a dead, passive landscape for which man can exert control. But Marx and Merchant have a shared aim in arguing that control over nature is the impetus for change, though they diverge in their solutions.

Marx began his study of the machine in a pastoral garden at the rise of the American studies discipline, despite the fact that the final publish date was in the early 1960s. His writing is influenced by symbol-myth scholars who sought to define a culture through broad images imbedded in the national consciousness that could reveal hidden motivations at the core of Americanism. Seeking to find answers about a perceived exceptionalism found in American individualism, the desire to explore, and generally a different kind of western culture from the European roots, American scholars looked to canonical literature. As a result, many of the sources used were by white male authors, the primary members of the literary canon. Marx worked within this limited range and reveals the values important to scholars thinking about the natural world. The settlement of the new world was based upon ideas of a “perfected” and idealized place. With the introduction of new technologies, Americans needed to contend with an existential shift to this core identity. Marx argues that the pastoral ideal is deeply imbedded in American identity. This continues into twentieth century culture, even though the majority of Americans are separated from traditional agrarian lifestyles. “My special concern is to show how herself with the ecological feminist movement of the 1980s and acknowledges that one of the main purposes of the text is to redirect attention in the preface to the 1990 edition of Death of Nature.
the pastoral ideal has been incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction – a way of ordering meaning and value that clarifies our situation today.”

This “situation” is one that Marx does not expound upon until the end of the book. He is perplexed at the state of the cold war and the “intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society.” In the epilogue, Marx does not make a plea for changing mindsets to acknowledge the “sky filling with smoke,” but wonders why people chose to blindly follow an ideal that does not exist anymore. Marx provides a grim outlook to where twentieth century is heading as dependence on the technological landscape grows. His “solution” is very limited.

The resolutions of our pastoral fables are unsatisfactory because the old symbol of reconciliation is obsolete. But the inability of our writers to create a surrogate for the ideal of the middle landscape can hardly be accounted artistic failure...To change the situation we require new symbols of possibility, and although the creation of those symbols is in some measure the responsibility of artists, it is in greater measure the responsibility of society. The machine’s sudden entrance into the garden presents a problem that ultimately belongs not to art but to politics. In these last sentences of the original published text, Marx not only stops short of a full solution to the problem, but also provides an ambiguous reason for the problem’s existence. He finds no solution in literature, though it allows us to see where the ideas originate. As artists embrace the technological landscape, what political solutions are available to pull ourselves out of the trajectory toward nuclear disaster or to escape “our society’s increasingly reckless assault on the integrity of the natural environment?” Marx offers no real answer, but to his credit, this is not

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193 Marx, 354.
194 Ibid., 355.
195 Marx, 364-65.
196 Ibid., 369.
the point of the book. Rather, he identifies expansive characteristics broadly painted over one
culture, based upon the landscape idea in key texts.

While a principal work of scholarship in the history of environmental thought, it is limited. Though the majority of Marx’s evidence stems from the work of male writers, thinkers, and artists, his assessment of the literature has no gender analysis. (Nor, for that matter, do the neo-Marxist interpretation of the Industrial Revolution, by Raymond Williams, whom some consider having supplanted Marx on the pastoral topic, delve much into gender. Williams works are class-based analyses.) It is a marker of the era in which was published, before the multicultural turn in academia and significantly before gender studies garnered a noteworthy influence in historical research. Yet, the absence of a gendered lens causes a considerable gap in the work and ultimately leads to an incomplete interpretation of the construction of the pastoral in the American imagination. Merchant’s assessment of the nature idea in western cultural history is immersed in gender theory and feminist studies. This opens the reader to a deeper analysis of how ideas have formed in connection to each other, early modern European thought influencing the post-Enlightenment thinking that affects twentieth-century interactions with both the natural world and gender performance. While Marx is able to use literature as the focal point between history and technology, Merchant’s gender analysis serves as a hub between history, technology, science, economics, and social theory. The recognition that gender, through the identification of the feminine in both iconography and rhetoric, can serve as a useful analytical framework marks the beginning of a significant turn in the critique of nature and culture. Merchant’s text serves as a good example for the kind of feminist turn in historical analysis that parallels ecofeminist ideas. It explores a framework that is a continuation of the feminine emphasis in nature ideas.
Marx and Merchant connect through the symbol of the machine. Both see the machine as that which provoked major change in western society. But unlike Marx, who argued the machine motivated American thinkers to simultaneously contend with technology and the pastoral, Merchant sees the proverbial machine as the source of a fundamental change in the way western culture understands relationships – among each other, and between humanity and the natural world. “In investigating the roots of our current environmental dilemma and its connections to science, technology, and the economy, we must reexamine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women,” writes Merchant.\footnote{Merchant, xxi.} Among many issues, two problems exist in a patriarchal system: the mutilation of the earth by human management and the aggression by men toward women.

Merchant maintains that an “organic theory” existed among pre-modern European society that upheld the idea of the “nurturing mother” as a source of energy and power that ran between all parts of the natural world, including humanity. The birth of the Scientific Revolution obliterated this ideology in lieu of concepts of mechanization, resulting in the false confidence that man can dominate and control nature.\footnote{Ibid., 2.} Nature never really discarded its original association with the cultural feminine, thus as the image of the nurturing earth mother came under the dominant system of emerging science, so did all who were linked to her – women, girls, and the “weak.” Additionally, Merchant argues that this concept of dominance was required for the pastoral landscape to even exist in the western imagination. “The pastoral mode, although it viewed nature as benevolent, was a model created as an antidote to the pressures of
urbanization and mechanization…The Arcadian image rendered nature passive and manageable.”199 Merchant reaches further back to explain the existence of the pastoral idea, finding its instigation in the gendered understanding of nature.

Merchant’s text is important as a cultural touchstone for two reasons. First, she pushes beyond the feminine idea in nature that scholars, up to this point, took for granted. Nature-as-female is a perspective perpetuated by men. Merchant uses these writers as evidence to show the dominance they employed, but must reach far back in time to trace the changing ideas. Marx, as an Americanist, primarily locates his work in the history of American thought, though he uses Shakespeare significantly and argues for the English playwright’s influence.200 Second, Death of Nature marks a specific change in the way feminist scholars approach critical analysis. Not content with the “add women and stir” method in women’s studies, Merchant and her ecofeminist colleagues sought to find evidence in the creation of the patriarchal system. As noted above, the changing tone of language (in religion, philosophy, science, and the arts) constitutes the change of ideas. Feminist writers and artists pressed for a new understanding of the natural world, initiated by the resolve for a different way of understanding their place in modern society.

Conclusion

This chapter explains the second of two dominant perspectives about the human-nature relationship in American culture, based on ideas about gender performance. My point is to show that, though it is not the only way to interpret the relationship, the correlation between gender

199 Ibid., 9.
200 This is not an arbitrary choice by Marx. Lawrence Levin would later show Shakespeare’s prominence in mainstream, and even working class, American culture in Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).
performance and human use of the natural world is nearly inseparable. The same ideologies that cause individuals to engage in masculine or feminine performance are the ideologies that guide the way an individual sees herself in relationship to nature, since these performances respond to the world one engages with. As such, that individual will behave in ways that reflect these beliefs. The masculine in wilderness dominated nineteenth century thought and propelled Americans westward to claim lands for the growing nation. In conjunction with developing technology, men who trekked westward determined the value and usefulness of the land and cataloged it appropriately. Likewise, as women sought out spaces for themselves, women writers and artists claimed the land in a different way. The need to repurpose the desert into something vibrant corresponded with an insistence on a new way to define gender in the twentieth century. Therefore, the ability to transform the human-nature relationship is fluid and functions as a response to societal norms and tensions.

Masculine and feminine wilderness ideas maintain one particular connection to each other, and that is the need to use nature as a place to develop one’s character. Wilderness is the place a person can go in order to find one’s true nature. The following chapters will explore a new way of experiencing nature as a result of the digital revolution: as performer on a stage. While there are plenty of visitors to the American national parks – increasing in number every year – the usefulness of nature is slowly evolving as a result of the ability to continually view it through a digital screen. Additionally, visitors to wild spaces take devices with them in order to connect back to the “real” world, which challenges the notion that wilderness is a place to reboot and refresh. It defies traditional interactions by previous wilderness seekers.
Chapter 3. WIRED NATURE: THE COMPLEXITIES OF ENGAGING THE NATURAL WORLD THROUGH THE DIGITAL SCREEN

The digital screen mediates for many nature-lovers their connection to the environment. People refer to the Internet as a place where one can find content on nearly everything. Users browse through web pages, communicating on social media platforms, but it is also a platform on which to and enjoy discussing the natural world while typing on keyboards. What may seem like a paradox – experiencing images of nature through a screen rather than looking out one’s window or physically placing themselves in nature – is actually a sign of the deeply rooted human-nature relationship in the most modern of forms. One fascinating expression of this experience is the blogosphere, where not only images are in heightened focus, but also beliefs about the natural world and the human role in it. This chapter positions the not-so-traditional literary form of the blog with other popular nature imagery found in American films to show the ways that images of nature are consumed by an American audience. While there is value in exploring the traditional literary canon, a truly dynamic internet content can show changes in user and writer ideologies as material is constantly added to the original document, the blog.

My intention is to analyze the tension between long-established ideas about the relationship between humans and nature and the increased use of digital technology. Specifically, it focuses on the nature of the so-called “screen” (in its early twenty-first century context) as mediator between the perceived dichotomous worlds of nature and technology. As such, this section considers the format of the hiking blog via the new “small” screen, the computer, and a more traditional way of “looking at” nature on the so-called “big” screen, with popular film. Both are ways that modern Americans engage with images of the outdoors, while simultaneously receiving and creating meaning from those images. Hiking blogs provide answers to nature-
culture dualism, revealing that the “divide” between nature and culture is less a barrier than initially perceived. It is important to discern this relationship in order to realize the argument that follows in the next chapter. The basis for an American wilderness nostalgia used as mediator for the anxieties related to the technological sublime has its foundation in the transition of the human-nature relationship to the digital screen. Rather than simply being examples of the way people use nature images online or in film, the information here illustrates concrete ways users and viewers utilize nature images to form specific identities. These messages isolate nostalgia and feel-good states of mind that replace previous sensations of the alarming sublime once associated with wilderness. As such, nature images become the comfort necessary to deal with technological sublime in the digital era.

Americans revere figures such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir as ministers of modern wilderness spiritualism because of their ability to heroically traverse into nature to come back with fundamental truth. These human arbiters are heroes in American culture. This connection with nature is likely the most remarkable and real relationship in the history of humanity, constantly informing the way people think, speak, and create. Nature, as the original surroundings in which the species evolved, is the original Other. It is that which people measure themselves against. This is not to imply a hard distinction between humanity and nature, for culture intertwined with flora and fauna like a woven blanket. Though, some scholars argue that the modern concept of nature as the public still understands it did not exist until Alexander von Humboldt traversed to the New World and published his findings to an eager audience.201 This only further supports the ancient basis for a united relationship. Yet, this relationship is complex.

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The recognition that nature and culture are fundamentally “separate” is an idea found in early religious texts. It is seemingly based upon an inherent need to free oneself from toils, but also based upon a fascination with nature that reveals an age-old, complicated bond. The Us/Not Us dialectic sits at the heart of world religions. This flawed perception quickened pens, paintbrushes, and chisels, and motivated technological change. As people found themselves increasingly separated from nature, their fascination with it remained consistent. The relationship evolved in conjunction with the development of technology.

Twelve days into her trek along the Te Araroa trail in New Zealand, American hiker Erin “Wired” Saver candidly responded to a curious remark on her blog, *Walking with Wired.*

As for the comments about my focus on technology and wifi …um, did you not notice the big logo at the top of the blog that says Wired and has the plug trailing off the end? Yes, that is who I am and if that’s a turn-off for people, this is not the blog for you and you will not like my take on things. We are all different and experience nature in our own way. There is no need to judge it, and if it’s not your thing, you don’t have to follow. Yes, I keep it in perspective and those that follow know that it’s a fun bonus for me to be able to watch shows, Skype, and post to social media. Just this summer, I was on hikes where they were so remote that I’d go a week or more without connectivity and I can appreciate that as well. I’m not alone in this enjoyment of wifi, and it is a factor for many of us out here to now have such limited connectivity and wifi. Again, mentioning it as an aspect of this hike is factual. It doesn’t make me spoiled, petty, or unable to appreciate nature like everyone else. It’s just another factor to be mentioned that impacts this experience. Know, that overall, I am having lots of fun out here and am enjoying the hike!²⁰²

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This is a fairly unusual passage for a blog that contains primarily reflections of Saver’s thru-hikes around the world. She blogs almost daily while on her trips, offering insightful prose and photographs of the terrain and people she meets on the trail. The unique challenges she faced during her walk along the Te Araroa created frustration, since much of the hiking was along paved highway instead of backcountry trail, and shelter limitations (and payments) were regular travel issues. These topics were often the focus of her writing. Wired received comments from readers about her need for digital connection during the trip, to which she published the response above. A curious remark appeared in the comments thread. “You should have had plenty of time to meditate on this while you walked them, even with your preoccupation with podcasts & audiobooks,” writes the reader. “I’m still trying to figure out who this ‘Wired’ character is. Right now, I’m kinda digging Felix’s style…. but Felix isn’t blogging...It’s a curious thing to me, these seemingly conflicted ideas.” Saver took on the trail name “Wired” shortly after her first thru-hike on the Pacific Crest Trail in 2011. A substitute teacher from Portland Oregon, Wired spends nearly half the year hiking throughout the United States and on trails around the world. The nickname refers both to her energetic personality and the fact that she enjoys digital connection on her hikes. The interaction between the reader and Wired illustrates the underlying anxiety that exists between the ideas people have about walking in nature and current trends toward sharing online human experiences in nature.

Wired’s resolve to write about her experiences on the trail is not a new phenomenon, even though the methods of interaction differ greatly from previous thru hiking writers. In fact, the tradition of writing about one’s hiking experience it is an old, even venerable, one. People

who follow her blog are also a part of the long tradition of consuming narratives by wilderness seekers. This particular reader does not see the irony in criticizing Wired’s daily connection to the Internet for blogging, though he is a regular visitor to the blog.

Why Blogs?

It is a well-established practice to use popular film in the study of modern American culture, but the link between traditional works of environmental literature and hiking blogs might seem like an implausible jump. There is good reason to utilize the blog form in lieu of a published work for analysis. A published text serves the purpose of dispersing the author’s gathered information to the public, to which the reader opens the text, absorbs the information, and then ultimately puts the book “down” to pick up another. The narrative is contained within the framework of the book, directed at the reader, unchanging. John Miles Foley, scholar of comparative oral tradition, insists that this is a regressive dispersal of information in the digital age. Rather, at the heart of his *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* (2012) is the principle that information is changeable and collaborative. In fact, the Pathways Project online serves as the foundation for the published book is open-ended, thus creating some challenges for the hard-copy book. The “default medium of the book” is an obstacle for learning and Foley prefers “to grasp the dynamics of alternative media.”204 His goal is to usurp the power of the book, its cult following if you will, and bring awareness to the existence of the power of dynamic media: websites, wikis, and blogs. He acutely senses the shift from immovable media (the book) to something more pervasive – and ultimately relatable to the original manner of

communication: oral tradition. “Culture shock can lead to acculturation,” writes Foley.  

What Foley identifies in the dynamic nature of new media is the interdependence on people and their ideas. Blogs, for instance, function as a network, both textual and social, according to digital communications scholar Mark Tremayne. Blogs hold concrete and ephemeral qualities (archived materials and social links, respectively) which make it both ideal for research and fascinating for study. Additionally, it has been shown that bloggers have an incredible amount of influence on the mainstream media. Blogs are evolving, meaning the content is in constant production: the blog website, instead of the hard-bound book. Regardless of the topic, blogs are creative productions to which readers can actively respond, pushing the creative and intellectual buttons of the blogger as the content is produced.

Active discourse between users – “average” people – in new media is an iconic characteristic of the post-postmodern era. The twenty-first century information age values sharing and collaboration, as Foley describes in The Pathways Project. Blogging is a perfect example of this kind of information distribution, a brand new literary device combining the digital and traditional forms of organic storytelling. Out of it comes wide-ranging changes to subject matter that may have previously received less attention. Similar to the transformations that occurred in the nineteenth-century with popular magazines and women’s writing, discovered and deemed historically valuable by Ann Douglas, with the blogosphere comes “Mommy blogging,” a specific style and subject that rose out of the accessibility and unpretentiousness of

205 Ibid., 3.
207 Ibid., xv.
the platform. In fact, media scholar Lori Kido Lopez discovered that mommy blogs open a door for women into a traditionally masculine digital sphere.\textsuperscript{209} Douglas’s earlier research proved that the literary lives of women were as essential to the study of America as that of Melville. Utilizing the new form of the blog as valuable literary source is fully in line with this method and opens opportunities for further study into the fabric of American society.

Even beyond holding a place in customary academic scholarship as an unconventional textual source, blogging is a nucleus for bringing different groups of people together for one common interest, and thus valuable to study. Maria Cristina Paganoni, scholar of media and communications analysis, shows that the “phenomenon” of blogging served as a “sounding board” after the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Washington D.C.\textsuperscript{210} People came together in the virtual sphere to heal their personal and collective wounds. Paganoni argues that the simultaneous occurrence of the attacks and the emergence of blogging as a popular online activity, blogging became “a widespread collective habit” that “may also be taken as inaugurating new memory practices and aggregating emerging discourse communities linked by their direct participation in the public sphere debate.”\textsuperscript{211} Nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, blogging is no longer a “phenomenon,” but a fully accessible way of connecting with others. Blogging is now a profession, with bloggers publishing books, giving lectures and interviews, and gaining nearly cult status in areas like self-help, spirituality, fitness and health, finance, education, and the arts, just to name a few. With the ever-present 24-hour news cycle, journalists and news outlets are now expected to host blogs in order to publish “breaking news.”

\textsuperscript{210} Maria Cristina Paganoni, “Blogging 9/11 and Memory Discourse,” \textit{Other Modernities} (Sept 2011), 279.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 290.
The core difference between a blog and a news story, though, is the addition of reader commentary and interaction with the writer. More than a phenomenon, blogs are the embodiment of the discourse evident in post-postmodern information gathering and sharing. It is divergent from traditional publishing, creating a meaningful impact in social communication, and thus, worthy of attention.

**Crossing the Divide**

Twenty-first century digital technology gives the ability to break down the barrier between the Natural Other and people. Constant connection to culture through the Internet and mobile devices creates the perception of a divide because this technology is unlike anything that existed before, except the arrival of the television. The television’s pervasive existence in the American home also inspired anxieties over social interaction. One sees people tethered to mobile devices and criticize users for living a distracted life. Social media “Friends” come in immense quantities and important and minor life events are plastered on constantly updated webpages. This new way of interacting with the world creates anxiety, rooted in the technological sublime, but this will be explained in the next chapter. I propose that the perceived divide created by digital media is not as much a divide, but rather a historically-based manner of using images the natural world for a specific human purpose. Digital media allows one to visualize and experience the natural world virtually, instead of placing bodies “in” nature and undermines the perceived divide between nature and culture. The experience of nature is brought closer to Americans through digital media, creating a connection to place through heightened awareness of the pleasures that come with viewing nature. Additionally, by bringing digital media with humans *into* nature people essentially become ambassadors and help others to
connect with nature. For instance, hiking bloggers maintain a continuous dialogue with readers, bringing the “wilderness” to those who may never step foot on the Pacific Crest Trail or the Te Araroa. In essence, the digital screen serves as a window to view the landscape and particularly real experiences of people hiking in wild spaces, basically in real time. It also functions as a window back to civilization when in nature and through the use of social media platforms, like Instagram and Facebook.

The perceived division between “true” nature and “true” culture is not as vast as it seems. Answering the question, “What counts as natural?” (an important marker for the distinction between the two perceived opposites), postmodern literary critic N. Katharine Hayles argues, “When ‘nature’ becomes an object for visual consumption, to be appreciated by the connoisseur’s eye sweeping over an expanse landscape, there is a good chance it has already left the realm of firsthand experience and entered the category of constructed experience that we can appropriately call simulation.”212 This perspective is important because much of what people experience “first hand” is simulated in some manner. Meaning, parks are constructed by government services, backyards are tended to by gardeners, or seemingly small adjustments are made to allow access to different parts of the natural world. Hayles finds the expansive grey area between “simulation,” or adjusted nature, and the natural world, obliterating the idea that, somehow, there is a pure division concerning the two.

Another way to access this kind of content is through television and popular film. Streaming services like Netflix and Hulu give access to 24/7 programming and offer hundreds of titles in both the fiction and nonfiction genres to bring remarkable scenes of natural vistas and

intimate encounters with fauna at the touch of a button. Rather than lament the changes taking place that seem to draw attention away from nature, it is helpful to consider the potential for digital media to actually make Americans more in tune with nature, and at home and in other parts of the globe. It is possible that the nature/culture divide is actually fading as people engage the natural world through digital screens. Observing these changes will show that Americans are cultivating a new interaction with the natural world, different from the masculine or feminine wilderness.

Writing About the Sublime in Nature

It is not a new phenomenon for writers to describe their walks in nature on the page. The tradition of American letters serves as a touchstone for future wilderness seekers, whether they step on the trail or simply enjoy the genre for leisure, and it is certainly not restricted to American-specific genres. The fascination with landscape follows humanity through an apparent “separation” with nature as technology develops. There exists in most traditions an emphasis in the relationship between humanity and nature, much of this through the experience of “leaving” civilization and entering into wild spaces. Early white Americans seized the wilderness seeker legend as an allegory for ideal (and very patriotic) individualism. Stories of Americans who walk in nature to find their true, morally strong self continue into the twenty-first century. Today many are inspired by these writings and search for their own enlightenment and reconnection to wholeness, and “detach” from the busy modern lifestyle.

213 For more on this subject as a historic theme see Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
Well-known scientist/explorers like Alexander von Humboldt, who inspired generations of artists, writers, scientists, and politicians, still fascinate readers. Historians Aaron Sachs and Andrea Wulf both argue that Humboldt continues to arouse in people the pursuit of the frontier, whether in the cosmos or the microbiome.\footnote{Aaron Sachs, \textit{The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism} (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Andrea Wulf, \textit{The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015).} He bridged the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, seeking to catalogue and therefore “capture” knowledge, but also expressing the intense emotional power of natural discoveries as reflective of the sheer beauty and excitement of the world. Even after the close of the age of exploration readers revere those who leave “civilization” to spend time in wild spaces and ask them to be our eyes and ears. The perception is that humans are naturally separated from nature, and the way they interact with the natural world reflects this assumption. Land is annexed by civilization, including the additional removal of native tribes from their historic lands, often in service of nature protection. Because of this separation, there is a need for human representatives to traverse these spaces. In the digital age, people are still hungry for wildness. They yearn for explorers to go out and report back about the mysterious places that are so different from the landscape many encounters in our daily lives. Digital devices give people a connection, linking them to flora and fauna, deserts and mountains, through the excursions of people brave enough – and fit enough – to sacrifice comfort for the explorer’s life. It also allows them to follow the explorers as entertainers on a dramatic stage.

A notation about the variances in the perception of connection to nature: each person’s digital/natural threshold is different and is dependent upon life experience. While one individual feels like she is “in” nature while sitting on a park bench in a grove of city trees watching the squirrels, and another person takes an ultra-lightweight pack along the rugged Wonderland Trail
which circles Mount Rainier. Remember that simulated nature is simply constructed experience. It is a difficult thing to measure because it is subjective and the internal factors vary greatly from person to person. In fact, there have been several studies to try to quantify nature’s impact upon the human psyche without definitive results. In 2004 two psychologists published research on what they titled “the connectedness to nature scale,” a measurement created after five studies that would determine “individuals’ experiential sense of oneness with the natural world.”\textsuperscript{215} They argued that the source of individual sentiment is psychological and previous work established measurements of empathy person to person, so why not person to natural world? The intentions for this study were good. The researchers understand that a measurement of connectedness to nature might result in a measurable location to begin the process of caring for the planet. Or, as they write, “people need to feel they are a part of the broader natural world if they are to effectively address environmental issues.”\textsuperscript{216} Using the CNS could be the first step in bringing awareness to humanity’s relationship to nature. Some studies followed with a critique of CNS and proposed their own method to measure a person’s connection to nature. There is great difficulty in locating quantifiable evidence of a person’s attachment to the natural world, but this does not mean that environmental psychology is on a fool’s errand. Researchers do show that there are benefits of interacting with nature, \textit{even if it is through a screen}.\textsuperscript{217} This dissertation is less concerned with how much people feel connected with nature than the ways in which people use digital media to connect with nature, so avoids measuring unquantifiable sentiments.

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 505.  
Henry David Thoreau’s account of hiking Maine’s highest peak Mount Katahdin serves as a framework for exploring twenty-first century hiking blogs. The story appears in *The Maine Woods*, a three-part narrative of the Maine frontier originally published in full in 1864. Literary scholar Robert F. Sayre notes that Thoreau presented parts of his account at “Ktaahhn” during at least one lecture before publishing in the final text. It is an insight into the people who inhabit the frontier, descriptions of the flora and fauna, and importantly, Thoreau’s internal experience with the land. The most compelling part, and the section that many like to point out when discussing his spiritual attentiveness with nature, is Thoreau’s ascent of Katahdin, though it is only a few paragraphs of the story. It is often described as his most raw encounter with nature, though *The Maine Woods* was written well after the actual experience, and probably filtered through several revisions. The section is thrilling, as Thoreau connects his experience to an intrusion upon Vulcan or the Cyclops, both mythologies familiar to the reader. He is the explorer returned, recounting the terrors of the voyage and expressing that he “is more alone that you can imagine.” A sense of dread is created before he fully dives into a description of what he saw, personifying Nature, “Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the planes. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you.” Thoreau writes in third person narrative, which in turn engages the reader to take on the experience for herself. He creates terror by separating humanity from the very edges of nature,

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220 Ibid.
the sublime nature, a place unfit for humans. But brave Thoreau lived to tell the public of his adventure. Finally, he connects the ascent to the heights on Katahdin as a measure of civilization, “Only daring and insolent men, perchance, go there. Simple races, as savages, do not climb mountains, - their tops are sacred and mysterious tracts never visited by them.” Contemporary readers are convinced that Thoreau is a special kind of man, one willing to risk his life for civilization’s sake. It is important to note that Americanist Gail Bederman found significant connections between nineteenth and early-twentieth century rhetoric about manliness and civilization. Thoreau’s belief that “savage races” do not attempt to traverse specific areas of the landscape, such as mountain peaks, is an early iteration of this move of associating ideal masculinity (a marker of civilization) with nature. “Real” men pursue wildness, but as the embodiment of civilization.

For all his renown and enduring influence, Thoreau was hardly the only American environmental writer with lasting impact, but *The Maine Woods* does show how the lineage of this kind of excursion writing existed before the advent of online journaling. The characteristics are similar. Thoreau’s momentary disturbance of sentiment is buttressed by descriptions of his hiking companions’ activities and facts about the surrounding landscape. He also discusses the supplies used, food consumed, and character of the people they encounter on the trail. This would be a dry read for someone not interested in hiking, but characteristic of the popular science literature of the era, authors showing their legitimacy in the field while relaying an exciting story. There are minor troubles along his journey, like the delay of an entire day due to rain, that create drama. Thoreau also regularly returns to recount landmarks and names of rivers,

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lakes, and homesteads. He knows readers might use his account as a guide to find their own way to Katahdin.

While there are structural and content similarities between Thoreau’s writing and twenty-first-century online hiking journals, this is where the parallels end. When reading about his experience hiking the mountain and coming in contact with sublime nature, people get the impression that he is alone with his thoughts. Yes, he has companions with him, though he quickly leaves to find later, “where [he] had left them, on the side of the peak, gathering mountain cranberries.” His encounter with the sublime was utterly solitary, then, and the reader’s interpretation of the account depends on the idea of humans against nature, or at least humans in sublime nature where they do not belong. Thoreau leaves wholly changed and gives a striking contrast to his cranberry-gathering companions is striking. As Moses was changed irretrievably by his journey up Mount Sinai, accentuating his anger upon finding the people left behind cavorting and misbehaving in willful ignorance, so Thoreau now knows more than his companions. Thoreau does not exhibit righteous anger, though. He simply detaches himself from their obliviousness.

In contrast, many twenty-first century hiking bloggers write for a daily audience that creates a nearly real-time account of their journeys, and they readily acknowledge that audience. Mobile devices are used to track whereabouts and document the excursion for online followers. While the means for communication changed greatly since Thoreau presented his well-formed lectures to audiences or magazine readers, the desire to hear of a hiker’s experience in the wild has not changed. Now there is a more relaxed, almost unaffected quality to blog writing. The question that remains is whether the new form of communication changes the way people

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222 Ibid., 9607.
encounter the natural world. What this change entails is documented in the following sections, but first and foremost includes the use of a digital screen as mediator in the dialogue about and with nature. Is it possible to maintain the isolation from civilization that Thoreau experienced, or do they discover an entirely new way of interacting with nature? Through mobile devices and regular interaction with the blogosphere, there is fluidity between culture and nature – wilderness, sequestered by their own hand in contrast to civilization – because they take civilization with them.

**Walking and Writing in Nature’s Place**

In 1994, environmental historian William Cronon and other researchers met at the “Reinventing Nature” seminar at University of California’s Humanities Research Institute. Their goal was to work through the radical notion that nature was, in fact, an idea instead of a *thing*. In doing this, the interdisciplinary scholarship shook the very core of the environmental movement, disturbing a foundational principle in the American story. If wilderness is an idea, what did this mean for nineteenth century westward expansion across the continent, space exploration, or American individualism? Before this conference, other scholars complicated the traditional idea of the West as both landscape and concept. The PBS series (and subsequent publication) *West of the Imagination* (1986) and the Smithsonian’s controversial exhibit of 1991, *The West as America*, both consolidated images that portrayed the various groups that interacted on and transformed the western landscape. Part of the appeal of the West, it was revealed in both the documentary and the exhibit, was the idea that there was an expansive land full of opportunity for those who were strong enough to take it. This kind of idea can only occur on a landscape that is a proverbial “blank slate.” In other words, it is the idea of the land itself that permits the
activity that is engaged on it. In this context, the wilderness takes the role of a character on the historical stage, opposite the rugged American. The cowboy did not need the cow as much he needed the wilderness to live his story. Cronon argues that the wilderness idea is a product of civilization, and the hesitation one has about combining “wild” nature and human culture is a distortion of reality. The binary only exists when this perception endures. Because people interpret humanity as disconnected from nature, people separate humanity from nature in order to preserve “civilization” and go to nature when they need to escape the constraints of that civilization.

In the digital age, there are numerous methods available to connect to the wilderness. It may seem like a paradox to claim a human connection to nature through the digital screen. The question that needs to be asked at the start is, “Which nature?” Like Baudrillard’s assessment of *demuseumification*, the attempt to find Nature’s authenticity after Science, people must contend with post-westward expansion, post-exploration wilderness. In other words, people seek the “more authentic” model of the nature idea. Like readers relating to the idea of wilderness through Thoreau’s writing, users of digital media can view images, video, and read about terrain they might never encounter, essentially “entering” wild spaces in their minds. It is an engagement with the idea of nature, but not the physical form of nature. Digital images of nature, even more than previous written accounts, become the simulacra for original nature. Of course, one does not view a digital image of Mount Rainier and believe she is actually in the presence of the mountain. Instead, is the idea of wilderness that is experienced through the digital image that is the simulation. What the wilderness stands for is reaffirmed in the image, and to the viewer, this is the most important part of the nature experience. Those writing about nature must convey

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223 Baudrillard, 11.
a certain essence about the subject (Nature) and the writer’s role or relationship with that nature. “When the real is no longer what it was,” writes Baudrillard, “nostalgia assumes its full meaning.”\textsuperscript{224} Since those who write about nature gather this information for their readers, the writer and the reader engage with the simulation of nature, not the nature itself. The most important aspects of meaning that assist the writer in identity formation, but also engage the reader in the story, are the believed truths associated with nostalgic memory.

It all started with Earl Shaffer – a legend in the thru-hiker world. He was the first to solo hike the full Appalachian Trail and his published trail journal from 1948 inspired countless thru hikers ever since. His account was one of the few available to potential hikers and outdoor enthusiasts before the 1990s when hikers like Paul Magnanti published theirs in the up-and-coming world of web logging, now transformed to the well-known term “blogging.” Magnanti hosts and writes for the site “PMags” where he publishes his “ramblings,” a take on the nature and style of his informal writing, the direction of subject matter that ranges from hiking experiences to gear review to non-hike topics, and the idea that “rambling” through nature is an ideal state – one is not tethered to the constraints of the mundane. In 1998, Magnanti was one of the first to publish a journal of an Appalachian Trail thru-hike in blog format. Since technology did not advance quick enough to permit his blogging on the trail, he mailed pages of his paper journal to a friend who transcribed the content to the website Trailplace.com.\textsuperscript{225} His musings of 1998 reflect much of the same content of other trail journals of previous years, which can now be found on his current website. It is difficult to tell if Magnanti was just writing for himself or a

\textsuperscript{224} Baudrillard, 6.

potential audience. Though nuanced, the distinction is significant. The theorist Walker Percy maintains that in order to tap into a feeling of an authentic experience, people must share that experience with others. Clearly, “experience sharing” is not a new concern that arose in the twenty-first century with the advent of social media. Percy saw an obsessive grasping for the real arising out of a desire for authenticity, based upon the idea people have of a particular place they visit or an experience with which they engage.226

His writing is lively, honest, and creative. When one hikes long journeys, creativity must be found in little tasks like writing a small journal entry. His pages are not lengthy documents of the days, but short accounts that get straight to the point, sprinkled with imagination.

Mile Post 244.7 ~ Groundhog Creek Shelter
March 21 ~ It did not rain today. Snowed instead. Nothing like a little variety in the weather, 'eh? But this weather has been inspiring. The word frosty has been in my head all day. So with no further ado I present: Frosty, the AT Thru-hiker Frosty, the AT Thru-hiker, had frozen Vibram soles, with Goretex gear, and two Leki poles. There must have been some magic in that Snickers bar he ate, For when he put it in his mouth, his boots began to stomp on the ground! Down to the shelter with Lekis in his hand, He yelled to the squirrels, catch me if you can! Frosty, the AT Thru-hiker, now had frozen toes, with a blue nose, and shelter mice eating his Cheerios. - Paul227

The ups and downs of his spring on the trail are similar to other trail journals of previous years and are introspective. The framework for the journals relies on this kind of contemplation to carry the narrative. Though the entries are short, the reader gets the innermost ideas running through Paul’s mind. He also writes at the end of the day, so often he is weary and ready to rest.

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He discusses important events, the people he meets, and specific locations he deems significant, but ultimately the entries are final reflections instead of narrations of the day. In contrast, his post-twenty-first century blog entries rely more on visual content. He waits until a few days after the trip, even months, to upload content on his blog and includes many impressive photographs, carefully curated. In fact, one gets a sense that he uses the images to reflect upon the trip and they trigger a narrative for him. They serve as visual notes and the result is a more substantive entry. Of course, there is more pressure on bloggers to provide entertaining content for their followers to maintain a strong base of readers. Even so, there is a distinct shift to visually driven descriptions of his hiking excursions.

One would imagine that hiking narratives provide the reader with a virtual-tourist experience, since the blogger serves as guide through wilderness spaces. The so-called armchair tourist emerged with the popularity of YouTube and other video-sharing websites, giving access to the far reaches of the globe from the comfort of one’s home. The blog is a natural extension of this kind of content, but this is not always the case. Magnanti’s blog is a great example of textual content paired with photographic images to create a sense in the reader that she is actually in Magnanti’s shoes as he hikes through the wild terrain. The reader is not just along for the ride, the reader can take the actual perspective of the hiker through images and first-hand, intimate accounts of the experience. Though a nuanced distinction from tourist videos, reading accounts like Magnanti’s engages greater intimacy and provokes imagination. For instance, on March 27, 2017, he published an account of a recent hike to the Black Ridge Canyon Wilderness in Colorado. The entry provides links to previously published accounts on his blog and a short introduction to the reason for this hike. What follows are nineteen beautifully executed photographs of his overnight trip that allow the reader to see the experience from the eye of the
hiker. Paul narrates like he is writing in a journal, but with extra awareness that thousands of eyes will read the account.

Magnanti writes, “Solo backpacking is not just something I enjoy. It is something I need.” One could easily overlook the nuanced tension that exists between the juxtaposition of the isolating experience of a solo hike with the very public platform of the blog. It is nearly a contradiction, though only one that exists because of the overarching solitude that he emphasizes in his writing. He recognizes the interest readers have in solitary experiences. Magnanti is not just writing a guide for future hikers and it is distinctly more than a personal journal; he wants to bring the reader in, to experience the excursion as if they were there – as if they were Paul. He chooses the right words to emphasize that it is imperative for him to seek solitude outdoors, but he feels the drive to share this experience with others. He picks certain views in order to enhance the visual, and intimate, experience for the reader. There are wide vistas where he stands on the edge of the canyon ledge before descending, brings the reader cozily close with blooming wildflowers, gazes up an old and precarious-looking wooden latter, and peers through sandstone formations. His photography is eye-catching and it is easy to see why readers follow his blog. Entries like this can appease the reader who might be stuck in his cubicle, even if it is a review of the gear used on his hike.

Many hiking blogs respond to the increased popularity of photographic journalism, now moving away from the monopoly held by print journalism. Online blogs are the ideal medium for telling a story through images, often captured with mobile devices along with stand-alone cameras. Christy “Rockin” Rosander is passionate about experiencing nature. Specifically, she is

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excited about trekking to far corners of the wilderness and writing about it on her blog, *Lady on a Rock*. Her “day job,” as a school teacher, spans over two decades and the desire to teach combined with her interest in hiking through the formation of *tHInK outside*, an organization that supports and educates middle school aged children in developing the skills they need to hike the Pacific Crest Trail. She is also an amateur photographer who employs strong visuals in her blog. To read Lady on a Rock is to take a dive deep into the wilderness, if the reader would allow herself the excursion. Take, for example, the 2016 trip along the cross-country Sierra High Route with Wired, and Why Not, another hiker-blogger. The three women form a small cohort who regularly hike wilderness trail together. This trip spanned twenty-three days and Rockin’ managed to post a blog update for every day of the trip. The technical requirements for this mean that along with her regular backpacking gear, she needed a camera, a tripod, a mobile digital device in order to write (in this case an iPhone), a charger, and a Wi-Fi card. As anyone who has ever before carried a backpack knows, every ounce matters and small increases can lead to a heavy pack. Rockin’ carries digital items in order to write blog posts and compensates for their weight by reducing in other areas.

After a long hiking day, Rockin’ spends part of her evenings writing and uploading her thoughts and incredibly beautiful images she captured. She is certainly not alone, since she is with traveling companions. Instead of maintaining distance from technology, Rockin’ touches back to her readers through the blog. For each entry, she posts the date, trail section name, and distance covered, along with a short review and numerous photographs. Following the three hikers through the blog posts is a remarkable experience. While Rockin’ captures images that reflect the influence of artists like Ansel Adams upon American visual consciousness, many of her images reveal the spontaneous nature of amateur photography. Rockin’ clearly tries to reveal
the grandeur of the wilderness to her readers. In the entry titled “Day 12 SHR: Crusin’ and a Room With a View” from July 7, 2016, she recounts the hike from July 2 where the group trekked over twelve miles from Lake Italy to below Bighorn Pass. During this trip they encountered treacherous climbs and descents, huge fields of snow with an unknown depth, boulders to scale, and beautiful lakes at the top of the world. Both Mills Creek Lake and Gabbot Pass are divots in the mountains that very few humans see in person. The images reveal the nooks and crannies of the mountain range, instead of wide vistas. This creates the sublime feeling of being alone in wilderness, even for the viewer looking in on the trip through a computer screen.

*Lady on a Rock* is a blog that draws readers with remarkable images and succinct writing. Additionally, she provides practical advice about gear and trail information. Many hiking bloggers use their platform to promote and rate gear they use, with the assumption that the readers will be inspired to proverbially follow them on the trail. Rockin’ connects her blog to an online marketplace so the reader can purchase the gear she discusses. Some bloggers write more gear reviews than others, as this is a source of revenue, a pseudo-sponsorship. Hiking blogs are an ideal place to go for this kind of information because of the need to know how expensive, and incredibly variable, gear holds up on the trail. Bloggers become product experts based on the simple fact that they use and write, consider and compare, and usually seem like practical users, if not completely impartial. In this way, the hiking blog that also provides gear reviews enters completely into the national consumer culture as promoters of product. Readers of the blog are consumers of both the product and the blog content. The idea of nature, then, becomes weighted with consumer values.
It is an understatement to use the terms “avid hiker” and “blogger” when talking about Erin Saver, also known on the trail – and blogosphere – as Wired. This nickname encompasses much of what Saver is all about. In 2016 through 2017, for instance, she hiked and blogged about 249 days which included: Sierra High Route (CA), High Sierra Trail (CA), Wind River High Route (WY), Kings Canyon High Basin Route (CA), Wonderland Trail (WA), Larapinta Trail (Australia), Bibbulmun Track (Australia), Cape to Cape Track (Australia), Te Araroa Trail (New Zealand), and through Tasmania’s hiking terrain. Saver has loads of energy and people gravitate to her electric personality. Her passion for thru hiking began in adulthood and emerged out of a background in long distance running and weekend backpacking trips. After reading other blogs by women who thru hike long distances, Saver felt she could take on this challenge. Her first trip was on the Pacific Crest Trail in 2011, originally planned with a friend but she ended up traveling solo, and she used the blog to inform her family and friends of her whereabouts, writing and posting nightly from her iPhone. Soon into the trip Saver cultivated a regular following of readers and received many more “hits” on her website than she ever dreamed. In fact, this resulted in her feeling a bit overwhelmed with the new responsibility. Because of her sincerity and humor, readers wanted to experience life on the trail through her eyes. In the midst of many fabricated and curated online personalities, Erin is a breath of fresh air.

The following year Saver embarked on another trek across the PCT, but did not blog about it. She picked up again in 2013 journaling the Continental Divide Trail and has continued offering her hike experiences to readers around the world. Today, Saver is often listed as a “top 10” hiking blogger on numerous outdoor themed websites and gives presentations about her

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journeys. She seems to make friends wherever she goes and often incorporates stories of these relationships in the writing, though she makes a point to not include too many intimate details about conflicts. Her writing style is informal, but she includes a lot of information for the reader, including technical details, personal experience, and photography of the landscape. “Wired” is a name that has multiple meanings for her. Along with the desire to blog, she is an unabashed television lover and received the name on her first PCT hike because she was too “wired” to fall asleep one night early in the trip. She claims it cheerfully, “due to [her] energy, little need for sleep, and timely blogging while on the trail.” Additionally, the blog logo includes a script font of the word “Wired” with an electric plug trailing out of the letter “d.” The reader knows what kind of hiker she will encounter while reading this blog: one who utilizes digital technology while on the trail.

A familiar criticism by those who are less inclined to use digital technology in wilderness spaces is that the technology can infringe upon the encounter one has with nature. Saver illustrates that this is not true for her experience. She writes of a moment early in her first PCT thru-hike on a chilly morning at the highest elevation yet (8000 ft.) with another hiker nicknamed “Top Shelf,”

I had my music playing on random and right when the clouds lifted it had landed on the song, “Defying Gravity” from the musical Wicked. At the height of the song, the music swells and she powerfully belts out, “So if you care to find me, look to the western skies. As someone told me lately, everyone deserves a chance to fly. And if I’m flying solo, at least I’m flying free.” Yep, in that moment with what we were going through and the clouds lifting, I definitely had to hold back tears! Top

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Shelf was in front of me and turned around beaming to tell me that he was listening on his iPod to his home (Seattle) sports station and how awesome it was at that moment for him. We were psyched and unstoppable.\textsuperscript{232}

Unlike Magnanti, Saver does not often wax eloquent about the grad vistas along the trail or ruminates life’s questions for her readers. Rather, she usually writes about all of her trail experience: from scenic views to human interaction. While it is certainly entertaining to read blogs like \textit{PMags}, what is special about \textit{Walking with Wired} is the connection she offers to followers in her relatability, openness, and the reality she brings to the blog. Of course, she does not always reveal relationship difficulties and does maintain a sense of distance about the really personal aspects of her life. But, when it comes to trail life, she is open. Sometimes this garners criticism from readers who are not prepared to encounter someone who does not fit their definition of the wilderness voyager. Throughout her online journaling, she continually jokes about the desire to watch television and listen to music during the tedium of the hike (because, yes, it can be monotonous), the struggle for reliable Wi-Fi connection in order to blog, and regular connection back to family through Skype. All this is dispersed in between descriptions of landscape, plans on the trail, and new friends met in the experience. She is unapologetic about her use of digital media and relies on it to enhance her trip.

The interest in hiking blogs continues to grow, not just in readership but also in active writers. Unlike film or television, the typical participants in blogging culture can be simultaneous users and producers of the genre. Starting shortly after the turn to the twenty-first century, scholars began looking at the reasons why people blog or read blogs. Identity construction and networking are at the top of the list of driving factors.

The Spectacle of Nature on the Big Screen

The creator and reader experience in hiking blogs is understood in relationship to other on-screen nature entertainment, since it can be easily compared to, but exhibits departures from, traditional on-screen media. A blog’s (nearly) real time experience of nature interaction presented for reader engagement is striking compared to other on-screen nature representations. One major difference between blogging and film production is that blogs are often open-ended without a set completion to the narrative. Even if the content covers a finite time (like a planned hike) its spontaneity shuns traditional narrative requirements. Readers are drawn to the unplanned, unprocessed style, though the blogger can filter much of the content and attempt to convey a fully-formed narrative track. The theatrical screen, on the other hand, requires a complete narrative fit into a two-hour time frame. Normally the viewer expects a continuous series of highs, lows, and conflict resolution. Yet, the simulation of the nature idea maintains importance and continuity between the computer screen and the “big” screen. In films where the main character(s) enact their stories along a natural landscape, nature takes the stage as a character, and in some cases nature is the actual protagonist or antagonist in the story. This narrative thus manifests the demuseumification of wilderness in film. In order for this to happen, an acute delineation between nature and humanity is made to heighten the removal of perceived civilization in the “wild” spaces. The portrayal of nature in film often encourages the me/Other mentality toward the natural world, heightening a sense of continuous discourse with nature in positive or negative functions. As you will see here, the most recent adaptation of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013) utilizes the epic Icelandic and Himalayan landscapes as strong supporting characters to Mitty’s great challenge. Using the entertainment screen to engage with stories about
nature, or people in nature, is a form of spectacle as defined by theorist Guy Debord. At the beginning of *Society of the Spectacle* he writes, “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.” Thus, the relationship humans have with once-familiar things, especially the natural world, show up nostalgically on the screen. Nature becomes a memento of the past, a touchstone for a good life once lived, and as the place to go to find our true self. This is not that different from the needs that Roosevelt, Austin, or Williams sought to fulfill. On the film screen, Nature’s role is maintained as the separate, “go there” location to complete deep human desire.

In 2015 actress Reese Witherspoon received an Academy Award best actress nomination for her role in *Wild* (2014), the film adaptation of Cheryl Strayed’s memoir of the same title published in 2012. The account relates the story of Strayed’s solo hike through the Pacific Crest Trail in 1995. Both the film and book met remarkable acclaim as the story settled into its rightful spot among tales of walking the American wilderness. Strayed’s story is the deeply longed for hero’s narrative. She is an all-American girl who came from humble, and at times difficult, beginnings. The reader finds Strayed reeling from a broken marriage, addiction, and the loss of her mother – the instigator of the downward spiral that placed her feet on the trail. She had all the potential in the world, but so did her mother, whose love and positivity rings through the story like a lifeline Cheryl clings to for strength. Her story has the hallmarks of the American bootstrap narrative: childhood poverty and potential success through education as both she and her mother attend college together. Her mother’s cancer diagnosis and death spins Cheryl into personal destruction, but *Wild* is the story of her recovery. It is also the creation of a hero. In essence Strayed finds her death and recreation in nature.

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Among the initiation phase of the hero’s tale, mythologist Joseph Campbell describes the “Meeting with the Goddess” as a common theme. Nature, or the wilderness, is Strayed’s goddess. Campbell’s hero is usually male, especially when interacting with the goddess. The female hero becomes the goddess and is usually “rewarded” for her physical and moral perfection with the romantic advances – whether she wants it or not – of a mystical husband or god. But nothing of Strayed’s memoir is usual. It is too infrequent that the public reads stories of women separating themselves into the lonesome wilderness on their own, rejecting civilization in lieu of independence and self-sufficiency. This is typically male territory, with people like Mary Hunter Austin and Annie Dillard dotting the historical landscape. Moreover, “nature” is found in the feminine, and vice versa, so women are proverbially closer to nature. “The fact that man does not consider himself a part of nature, but indeed considers himself superior to matter, seemed to be to gain significance when placed against man’s attitude that woman is both inferior to him and closer to nature,” writes feminist Susan Griffin. Strayed thrusts her body and mind into wilderness in a remarkable and unashamed search for herself, which takes her face to face with the goddess.

Campbell writes, “The mythical figure of the Universal Mother imputes to the cosmos the feminine attributes of the first, nourishing and protecting presence. The fantasy is primarily spontaneous; for there exists a close and obvious correspondence between the attitude of the young child toward its mother and that of the adult toward the surrounding material world.” Strayed’s downward spiral to drug use and detached promiscuity was activated by the sudden

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236 Campbell, 94.
loss of her mother to quickly progressing cancer. She had horrific dreams after her mother’s
death that she describes at the start of the memoir, showing the reader that it was this event that
turned her into the careless woman set out for destruction. The pain of missing the moment of
her mother’s death was too much to bear. Indeed, Jung’s Great Mother concept is called to mind.
It is not my intention to psychoanalyze Strayed, but her story points clearly to the intricacies of
the inner mother complex. Strayed was propelled into self-destruction after she felt her mother
deeply ripped away from her. The turn in her memoir to find healing in the natural Mother is
striking and makes sense through Jungian theory. Some of the core characteristics of the mother
archetype being “maternal solicitude and sympathy…the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that
transcend reason…the place of magic transformation and
rebirth,” and she found all of these on her pilgrimage. “Nothing would put me beside her the
moment she died. It broke me up. It cut me off. It tumbled me end over end,” Strayed laments.
Her healing would come through interaction with another mother, the true Universal Mother.
Campbell continues, “But there has been also, in numerous religious traditions, a consciously
controlled pedagogical utilization of this archetypal image for the purpose of purging, balancing,
and initiation of the mind into the nature of the visible world.” Readers were viscerally drawn
to the memoir because of this instinctual relationship to the natural world. Strayed was alone, so
she picked the surname after her divorce to signify her disconnection. She “came home” to the
wilderness, though the journey was not easy, and through a physical, mental, and spiritual death-

239 Campbell, 94.
240 Strayed, 97.
like process she was reborn with a changed (or rediscovered) identity. Nature-as-goddess surged Strayed into trials that would challenge all aspects of her identity, but she emerged on the other side a changed woman.

The publication met huge success when Oprah Winfrey chose it for her Book Club 2.0 shortly after its release, and in true American fashion, the film adaptation followed. Much of the book was cut for the movie, but the overarching idea of reinvention through the wilderness remained intact. Additionally, the remarkable aspect of the film is that nature moves to the forefront of imagination as viewers “see” Witherspoon-as-Strayed traverse desert and mountain. Because of this visual element, the sensory experience is enhanced and the meeting with the goddess, underlined. Much of the film has little to no musical score, boosting the sound of the breath and Strayed’s internal dialogue to guide the reader through the landscape. One senses her isolation and sometimes fear. While beautiful landscapes permeate the screen, it is the relationship between the hiking woman and the goddess that draws our attention. Like Campbell states, the goddess – the wilderness – “purges, balances, and initiates” Strayed’s mind. She is the hero who walks through the goddess’s gate, takes on her trials, and emerges on the other side, reborn. Nature is directly a character in the film, an antagonist with which the audience is familiar.

Nature in film perpetuates the idea that nature is a place, adversary, or companion one goes to experience transformation. It is a separate encounter that is outside of everyday experiences. It is an escape. In fact, films like *Wild* preserve sentiments that nature is a mystical place and the only available to those who disconnect from everything else. In fact, the observer of the simulated nature – through the storytelling of another – is engaging with some of the same emotional and psychological elements. There is a reason wilderness experiences are so impactful
on the big or small screen: humans connect viscerally with the concept of wilderness. Other films support this idea. The reproduction of Walter Mitty in 2013, starring and directed by Ben Stiller, is based on the well-loved 1939 short story by James Thurber. The new film (there was also a 1947 version, starring Danny Kaye) is notably different from the original story. Stiller’s version reveals an important characteristic of twenty-first century ideas about nature. The short story appeared in The New Yorker and is the tale of a bored husband who daydreams his way into exiting situations, instigated by small comments or scenes throughout his day. He is a surgeon, a pilot, and at the mercy of a firing squad. Stiller’s adaptation is markedly different, thrusting Walter Mitty into a journey across the Atlantic, onto volcanoes, and into the real affections of his love interest. At the core of Stiller’s film is the notion that wild spaces can be a catalyst for personal change. Mitty, a shy negative assets manager at Time magazine embarks on a journey to find the publication’s most valued photographer in order to locate a promised negative – one that will be used on the cover of the issue’s final edition. Mitty is tormented by newly arrived associates at the soon-to-be transformed (fictional) Time magazine office for his tendency to mentally stray from conversation due to his daydreams. Like the 1939 Mitty, they are instigated by the simplest comment or image. Soon enough, in pursuit of the photographer (performed by the extraordinary Sean Penn), Mitty’s real life becomes far more interesting than the daydreams as he finds himself on a plane to Iceland, setting off on a helicopter and jumping into open ocean waters while attempting to land on a dinghy boat, running directly toward an erupting volcano in Iceland, and through Yemen and Afghanistan to hike the Himalayas. Finally, Mitty finds the photographer, capturing images of a rare snow leopard, and proceeds to play a pick-up soccer match with local Sherpa men. The audience discovers throughout the film that Mitty was once a young man with wild intention and freedom from fear. After the death of his father during
Mitty’s teenage years, he settled down to help take care of the family. Mitty’s journey pulls him out of the constraints of fear, worry, and daydreams to discover his natural, free spirited self once again.

The film is noteworthy for its epic scenery and the incredible soundtrack that seamlessly draws the audience into the journey with Mitty. It is adventurous and exciting. He is drawn out of the New York life, working for a large company on the verge of closure, and into the grips, sometimes at the mercy of, nature. That *Time* magazine is on the verge of discontinuing print publication (a fictional narrative) is a telling tale about the transition of digital culture, and Mitty is the embodiment of irrelevance as the “negative assets manager,” a title that not only signifies archaic methods of corporate photographic management, but points to Mitty’s state of mind. Digital media no longer needs film production or the “archaic” method of storing and protecting analog photography. Mitty is a man of a previous era and this is underscored by his surge into the wild. Analog and liberation go together and are the anecdote to cold digital and cultural “progression.” In the end, the lost photograph is revealed to be an image of Mitty sitting alone analyzing a sheet of negatives, the famous photographer enlightening the audience with the truth that purity in spirit is made manifest in Mitty. This information is presented to viewers by the liberated photographer, who they place in a god-like role as someone who found enlightenment in nature and away from societal constraints. Secondarily, viewers recognize that Mitty represents ideal Americanness, since he is the one who goes “out” and encounters foreign people and places. There is no question about whether the people in the Icelandic small town need to go see the world for personal improvement, rather it is Mitty’s encounter with them that enhances *his* life. This film tells of the mystical place nature hold in American visual culture as a thing separate from people, but vital to our humanity. *Mitty* shows that there is a belief that nature is
not by the front door, but is a far-off location that is experienced by only those willing to go through trials to get there. Or, at least, this is what makes for a good story.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that digital content related to the natural world not only inspires Americans to pursue nature experiences, but is a continuation of a long wilderness-seeking heritage. At the beginning of 2017, the United States Department of Interior reported that national park visitation set a record in 2016, with a total of 331 million visitors for the year. This is a 7.7 percent increase of recreational visits since 2015, including a 2.5 percent increase in overnight stays, 6.7 percent increase in backcountry overnight stays, and 77 parks set a new record for annual visits.241 It is not accurate to conclude that digital technology is discouraging people from engaging with nature and it is too simplistic to determine that an aversion to technology is what prompts people to “find solitude” in wilderness. Rather, as I show here, using technology to capture – metaphorically and physically – images in nature, assists in an identity-making process that existed for generations. In conclusion, it is worthwhile to briefly consider some recent developments that combine digital technology use and engagement with the outdoors. An increased pursuit of the natural world coincides with increased digital technology use, exemplified by the developments listed below, exhibiting a heightened interest in the natural world in the digital age.

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The National Park Service gives credit for the growth to programs like “Find Your Park/Encuentra Tu Parque,” a website dedicated to making park information accessible and inspiring a wide variety of people to visit. The site includes a series of YouTube videos that highlight parks with short ranger tours and inspirational videos. For instance, “Those Park Guys” features Jack Steward and Colton Smith summiting the Grand Tetons. “These parks do more than preserve wildlife and natural wonders, they’re our sanctuary as well,”^{242} they proclaim. The website offers blog-style articles about small details, enticing visitors with the exceptional flora and fauna. It is extremely user-friendly and gives the online visitor an engaging interface to explore the parks through the site, but all online tasks have the end goal of getting the individual into a park, in person. Additionally, the federal program “Every Kid in a Park” sparked increased attendance for families with children in fourth grade. Children receive free admission to national parks during their fourth-grade year, which coincides with national curriculum focusing on the history and content of national parks.\textsuperscript{243} Like “Find Your Park,” this program has an excellent online presence that connects both educators and families to information about parks before attendance. Finally, the online activity \textit{iHike} was created in conjunction with the Obama-era \textit{Let’s Move!} program by the National Park Service to encourage the transition from digital screen to actual foot traffic. All of these programs are close relatives to the earlier, and global, Geocaching outdoor scavenger hunt, popularized in the early 2000s which uses GPS navigation.

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Experimentation with the connection of online platforms to outdoor activities is a well-established endeavor for people in America and the rest of the world.

While many national parks are not wilderness parks, per se, the dual rise of park attendance in wilderness parks and online digital content about parks shows that people are using technology, instead of rejecting it, when seeking to go outside. With the increased popularity of social media, thousands of images from national parks and other wild spaces are shared with friends and acquaintances each year, drawing more and more people to parks. Search “American national parks” on YouTube and over nine million results are provided to you. Additionally, hiking bloggers sense the increase in readership and traffic to their blogs about trail experience. Digital culture creates a road between people and wild spaces more than ever before. The fascination with nature permeates visual experience as people share stories and images online.

A traditional approach to mystical nature is still evident on the big screen, but bloggers present a more conventional practice that resonates with readers. The reality of the nature experience as presented by Saver, Magnanti, and Rossander is one of an evolving relationship with nature— a story that continues, rather than coming to a well-planned conclusion. This is why blog narratives may feel more “real” than the images in film. In Mitty, Stiller emphasizes exotic natural scenes to underscore the evolution of a man from quiet and withdrawn to his “true nature” as confident and open to possibilities. The style of blog narrative, on the other hand, clicks with innate security in the continuation of the natural world and our place in it. As writer Jerry Lanson says, “[In blogging] there are no gatekeepers, just writers telling readers what they think or what they’ve experienced.”

The spontaneity and perceived openness of social media

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extends to a new form of publication in blogging. It is a delight to many readers who seek vulnerability and relatability in their writers. Erin Saver’s off the cuff writing style and insistence on daily entries while on the trail makes readers gravitate to her blog to find an interaction with the natural world that they cannot get on any other screen. The readers also do not necessarily find fault in her doing so. As communications scholar Adriana de Souza e Silva writes, there is a “ubiquitousness caused by new digital technologies [that] changes and enlarges the concept of what the real can be.” These hybrid spaces exist as an “in between” location among the real and the imaginary, moving with people as they carry mobile devices with them. The concept of “going online” is fading because there is no separate place to go. Nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, a generation of young people find hybrid spaces commonplace. De Souza e Silva writes that questions of reality simulation will disperse, “because both spaces [real and imaginary] are merged in the same environment.” Additionally, she insists that it is not just the two worlds “colliding” that make hybrid spaces remarkable, but that they are also “nomadic” in the sense that users make the space move with them.

People understand hybrid spaces as legitimate places to interact and even create new areas to create dialogue and establish relationships. The conceptual distance between places shrinks as someone like Saver presents almost-real time information to followers. Importantly, hybrid space is not wholly about technology, but the human element alongside technology use. It is the relationship between nature (humans) and culture (digital technology.) Human relationships also play an important part in the continual process of hybrid space, because it is

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245 De Souza e Silva, “From Simulations to Hybrid Space,” 209.
246 Ibid., 215.
247 Ibid., 216.
248 Adriana de Souza e Silva, “From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces,” *Space and Culture* 9, no. 3 (Aug 2009), 265-266.
not a stagnant thing. The social network that connects the user to technology is the driving force behind hybrid space. De Souza e Silva primarily works with cityscapes as the physical space that hybrid space works upon, but because a hiking blogger can utilize similar technology – social media, blogging site, GPS – this easily transitions to wilderness spaces. At the time of de Souza e Silva’s writing in both 2006 and 2009, the technology was not so advanced to allow users to engage in mobile technology outside of a developed urban or suburban space. Now it is much more readily available.

There is some collective anxiety that arises with mobile technology’s appearance, even dispersion, in outdoor spaces. Some worry that it will delegitimize the authentic experience for the human visitor, but this fear supports the false nature-culture dichotomy and ignores possibilities asserted by theorists like Percy. Rather, it is the recognition of this relationship that may create a more realistic perception of the relationship between humans and nature. Environmental historian Dolly Jørgensen presented work arguing that it is essential to consider the development of digital technologies in conjunction with the human relationship to nature.249 Jørgensen contends that by simply taking digital cameras into the ocean to capture images of wildlife alters the way people engage with it – often, through their home computers. Moreover, scholars must ask the appropriate questions about the ways humans interpret nature and how nature is altered by human technology. Even beyond academia, people are beginning to ask, “what is natural?” as they bring digital technologies into wild outdoor spaces.

The next chapter considers the potential effects of digital technology on the human experience when interacting with both nature and culture. The fascination with images of the wild sublime reveals deep nostalgia for the natural world. I argue that experiential nature serves a particular role in alleviating the anxieties associated with the technological sublime. Images of sublime nature is thus a comforting balm for the unease that rises in the face of heightened technological use. The search for wildness continues in the digital age, quite possibly as a reaction to increased use of digital media and devices. It is imperative to include the human experience in a study of the nature idea, because culture and nature are ideas created by humans. Digital technologies shorten the divide between human culture and the perceived separate “nature” instead of creating a greater cavern between the two. While I do not believe humans should flood wild spaces with digital technologies, a new level of awareness is required to make decisions about the future of the planet and technological developments. If we understand that humans are a part of nature, that digital and mobile technologies actually can bring people closer to experiences in nature, perhaps we all will be more apt to take greater measures to protect these spaces, but more importantly, see humanity as a part of the whole natural system. In order for this to happen, an emotional connection to nature must exist.
Chapter 4: WILDERNESS AS INTERCESSOR FOR THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

So far, this research illustrates some of the major threads in the American nature idea. What follows is a final assessment into the reasons for a nostalgic turn in images of the natural world on digital media. Wilderness images that are viewed by people on a personal computer, computer tablet, or smart phone are more than just a source of entertainment. People who upload images of wild spaces or write about them on blogs do more than share snippets of their lives. As discussed previously, images and descriptions of the natural world that exist on digital media convey collective beliefs about the human-nature relationship. These exist as the hyperreal, explained by Baudrillard, and represent the so-called “death of the object.” The object in question is nature. No longer can Americans engage with a natural world that is void of association with the museumification of natural spaces, but with a simulation of the original nature. In other words, in a demuseumification world, “nature” cannot revert to its pre-contact, pre-science state, no matter how much humanity wishes it to be. After generations of scientific exploration and development of the natural world, digital media creates a desire to locate the “real” in its perceived opposite. What is left are our ideas about nature: what humans believe the purest, most authentic nature would look like. It is this idea of nature that is revealed in images on the digital screen and what people use to balance the effects of the technological sublime. At their most basic, these images are nostalgia for what once was, before the existence of the now-threatening digital/technological sublime. The digital revolution affected and continues to affect the human connection to the natural world. Images of natural spaces viewed by Americans, out

250 Baudrillard, 7.
of nostalgia for a more authentic lived experience, serves as a mediator to the current struggle
with the technological sublime.

Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan explains that the environment in which individuals live is a
significant power in human life. Love of place is quite complex because it combines all aspects
of other loves upon one proverbial canvas. Tuan calls this “topophilia.” It is the emotional bond
that people have to place or setting.\textsuperscript{251} Tuan illustrates how the existence of cultural dichotomies
affects these conceptions. He writes that “‘home’ is a meaningless word apart from ‘journey’ and
‘foreign country.’ Claustrophobia implies agoraphilia. The virtues of the countryside require
their anti-image, the city, for the sharpening of focus, and vice versa.”\textsuperscript{252} Indeed, the very
existence of the word “wilderness” reveals the existence of “civilization” concept. One idea
informs another. Now, as in the past, the wilderness/civilization dichotomy exists on a physical
plane. For example, those who hike can feel released from civilization simply by moving to the
spaces designated as wilderness. While American culture becomes more dependent on digital
technology in the first decades of the twenty-first century – already widely known as the Digital
Age – that separation blurs. The nature/culture divide is arbitrary as people find themselves
exploring nature with digital technology in their pockets and assisting in their exploration of wild
spaces. They can be “in nature” while simultaneously in a digital space. They can explore nature
with digital assistance. They can accentuate their digital experience through a natural lens. The
potential combinations are many. Digital media gives access to the visual experience of wild
spaces which one would not otherwise encounter in daily life and often permits people to take
“civilization” with them into these wild places. It requires us to ask if the nature-civilization

\textsuperscript{251} Tuan, 4.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 102.
dichotomy, insistently upheld by many environmental purists, actually exists. In fact, maintaining a separation between nature and culture might do more harm than good. This chapter explores the potential effects of digital technology on experiential nature and considers the human-nature dichotomy and engagement with sublime wilderness. In context with historical ideas about nature and human culture, I assert that the interaction with nature on digital platforms serves a pacifying role to the anxieties of the technological sublime.

Why the Sublime?

It is true that there are many ways to engage with the natural world. For instance, the landscape and the flora or fauna on it can be understood as a theater for entertainment, as raw materials, or as inspirations for theology. In the traditionally dominant American cultural system, the natural world holds three distinct categories of observation: the beautiful, the pastoral, and the sublime. This tripartite division forms a mainstay of nature study across several fields, including art history, the history of the American west, and American studies. Emerging out of European Enlightenment philosophy and blending with nineteenth century Romanticism, these ideas dictate the broad ways humans transform the landscape as active agents in the natural world. Imperative to the understanding of this activity is the idea that regardless of the lens, each is a situation where humans are viewers of the natural realm from its perimeters. Kant, for instance, considered reactions to the beautiful and sublime dependent only on the internal reaction of the individual. This was a major divergence from previous philosophers’ belief that it was the external situation that roused these feelings. Kant’s departure from English philosopher Edmund Burke – and even the literary analyses by the Greek philosopher Longinus who placed the sublime focus on the aesthetic work, rather than internal reception of that work – illustrates
the widespread move to an interest on the internal human reaction to the world. Additionally, René Descartes’ dualism of the sixteenth century continued to inform thinkers well beyond his generation. The so-called Cartesian split is evident in the works of both Burke and Kant who emphasized the importance of the mental versus the physical. Descartes locates the Self in the mind, which is inherently separate from the world around— an idea that continues to dominate the human/nature divide. This reifies the split between humanity and nature referred to elsewhere. American romantics then (mostly) moved from a scientific analysis of the internal workings of the mind to welcoming – even requiring – attention on the individual’s emotional life. The response to the natural world necessitated an understanding of the personal, emotional response. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s proverbial transition to a “transparent eyeball” comes out of gladness “to the brink of fear” and the sudden disappearance of his individual self.\footnote{Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in \textit{American Art to 1900: A Documentary History}, edited by Sarah Burns and John Davis (Berkley: University of California Press, 2009), 288.} The sublime is intertwined with emotion and becomes the primary driver in the perception of the post-Enlightenment natural world for both philosopher and the average well-educated American who had access to Emerson’s publications and public lectures.

The beautiful and the pastoral are not neglected by these theorists, though they perhaps take a less exciting position to the sublime. As Americanist Leo Marx proves through analysis of literary works, the pastoral and the (technological) sublime met as the progression of technological innovation quickened in the form of railroads, automobiles, airplanes, communication systems, and domestic gadgets. The machine that found its way to the garden did not simply arrive there haphazardly, but each reinforced the other, particularly allowing the garden to “make up for” and hide the damage caused by the machine. In fact, as Marx notes, the
field of American studies could give credit to the cerebral awareness of the pursuit of the pastoral — to his argument, against the development of sublime technology. Jefferson’s agrarianism, westward expansion, and Henry Nash Smith’s “myth of the garden” represented a “poetic idea...that defined the promise of American life.” Yet, as Cronon observes, wilderness is “quite profoundly a human creation,” existing only because of its opposite: civilization. In the same way, the garden, the pastoral, or the agrarian state, exists in contrast to (perhaps, overly) technologically-impacted civilization. Because modern society believes that humans are inherently separated from the natural world, it is a place to enter and, eventually, leave. Thus, when urban anxiety reaches a zenith, one can simply go to nature again for reprieve. “What is attractive in pastoralism,” writes Marx, “is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural.” The rural landscape holds deep nostalgia and the intrinsically American desire for noble republicanism at the core of the agrarian lifestyle. Though the manner in which this is pursued changes, it is evident even today in the existence of the front lawn that is ubiquitous in suburban neighborhoods. The American dream and agrarianism are one in the same, and thus are the American dream, the pursuit of natural spaces, and the propelling stimulated by the technological sublime.

It is imperative to recognize that post-enlightenment modernity categorizes the world into dichotomous contrasts: pastoral against technological, wild against pastoral — their existence

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putatively based upon the use and perception of human agents on the land. It is this dichotomy that gives way to the twenty-first century human-nature relationship that I explain here. Images of nature can function as nostalgia against technological changes because nature embodies an ideological opposition to technology. Thus, this research must focus on the wilderness sublime—the most extreme visuals of the nature idea—to center on the aspect of this relationship that is perceived to be the most distant from human culture. Therefore, emphasizing the belief system that sustains the relationship between all of them.

**Relating Previous Arguments to the Current Discussion**

Thus far, this research reviews a trajectory of American thought about the natural world in conjunction with the variations in American views about human identity. It is important to keep in mind that ideas about nature are numerous and more like a web of intellectual and cultural ideas instead of a fiber of singular concepts flowing along the tides of time. The same is true about identity performance. However, the overarching themes that find home in gender performance are key to understanding beliefs about the natural world because of the relationship between identity and place. Feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa, unflinchingly working with her identity including that of mestiza and lesbian woman, connects the compulsory and voluntary, real and elusive borderlands that those of nonhegemonic social perspectives find tethered to the identity creation process by articulating:

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
*el mar* does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his arrogance, 
Yemayá blew that wire fence down.²⁵⁸

Anzaldúa writes of the power that nature executes on the naïve human population – those who believe they can control and displace, subdue and enslave. It is this force that the writer recognizes is also within herself, thus resisting and defying the oppressor. Those who live on the edge of a society know all too well how relationship to place affects one’s identity. Very quickly one can become an alien, a refugee, or a citizen based upon the politics played out on the landscape. Additionally, those who hold political power utilize the land to establish and force that power, ignoring the borderless and unfettered character of the natural world. Aside from the difficult question to answer about one’s identity (“Who are you, really?”), one’s relationship to place influences and is influenced by personal and social identity construction. This, in western culture, begins with selfhood and gender labels. Anzaldúa dwells at the “thin barbed wire,” representing the wavering and treacherous space of the middle landscape between the United States and Mexico and her marked status of a lesbian woman in a restrictive gender culture. Ideas of place and of personal identity are connected because one informs the other. An individual who identifies as a straight, white male envisions a particular world (re: landscape) in which he is able to move seamlessly, and perceives the landscape as “open” to his desires and dreams, supporting his identity as a straight, white male. Anzaldúa describes her physical limitations through barbed wire imagery, reasoning it comes from the identity she holds through gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Gender is connected with cultural significances of the

landscape because gender and place are one of the primary methods of forming personal identity in modern western society.

Scholars point out the ways that Euro-American life in the new world was crucially impacted by the natural world at the very start of European settlement, but an alignment with particularly American ideals and ideas of nature begins with the Transcendentalists. The mid-nineteenth century brought with it defined particulars on how white Americans believed gender roles should be performed. There was nothing necessarily keeping women away from the natural world. Indeed, many women toiled alongside their male family members for their physical survival. It was the venture into nature for nonessential personal development that was deemed masculine. Even later as environmental historians returned to nineteenth-century writing, a preference toward male writers prevailed. The wilderness writing canon was soon dominated by Henry David Thoreau, whose works put forth emerging ideas of manliness as a “thing to grasp” while in wilderness conditions. It was not just an entrance into the wild that stimulated pure manliness, but the man’s ability to control and subdue it. Theodore Roosevelt is certainly

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260 Lawrence Buell writes that the full canonization of Thoreau into American literature happened in 1906 with the Houghton, Mifflin publication of the twenty-volume collection of his writings (Buell, 341). Gail Bederman also describes this period as a formative one in the establishment of contemporary ideas of masculinity. Prior to 1900, “manliness” referred to the moral character held by the Victorian man, or the “highest conceptions of manhood,” according to Bederman. “Masculinity,” on the other hand, was “fluid” and “empty” – perfect to apply to anything and everything. By the 1930s, “masculinity” had morphed into a term associated with aggressiveness, physicality, and sexuality (Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. P.18, 19)
remembered for his protection of natural spaces through conservation, establishing the United States Forest Service and signing the 1906 American Antiquities Act, but also for his fascination with conquering wild game. A famed image of the man who would become president is from his book *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* when he was twenty-seven years old. This journey to the west took place after the birth of his daughter, Alice Lee, and the simultaneous deaths of his wife and mother. He took his pain to the wilderness. Clad in buckskin, he portrays himself as a serious ranchman, perhaps also wishing to counter the judgments of other politicians that he, an arch New Yorker, was too civilized, “effeminate” and soft.\textsuperscript{261} Later, “The Strenuous Life” speech would transform from an international policy address to the phrase that would encapsulate the manliness movement. Wilderness and manhood were tethered to one another, deep into the American psyche, but in a vastly different manner than the way womanhood and nature were correlated.

The reemergence of the feminine wilderness in the Euro-American mind at the turn of the twentieth century developed discreetly, but was revealed nationally with the ecofeminist movement in the 1970s. The work of writers and artists like Mary Hunter Austin and Georgia O’Keeffe, diving fully into wild spaces to enhance their creativity, set the stage for later women to claim spaces in the wilderness. These were not places where they were confined because of feminine “naturalness,” but empowering spaces that destabilized a patriarchal society. To them one might also add Marsden Hartley, whose identity as a gay male lent his paintings of the southwest a new and gender-complicating dimension. Hartley emphasizes the openness of the landscape through simple, direct imagery that can be understood in contrast to the forced social

\textsuperscript{261} Bederman, 176-77.
restrictions surrounding him.\textsuperscript{262} Notably, Austin and O’Keeffe found themselves in the desert wild, a place that Euro-American nature writing had thus far labeled as desolate. Finding life in these areas, the reclamation of the relationship between women and nature resulted in movements toward positive identity-making experiences for women. It was not culture against nature, or culture to dominate nature, but a deeply intimate partnership these artists found with the natural world. The convergence of nature-focused writing by women, the Women’s Movement, and the materialization of the modern environmental movement resulted in ecofeminism and a greater understanding in the ways to gently manage and care for the earth.

Though seemingly different, the “masculine” and “feminine” nature experience are defined by one similarity: each utilize the natural world in order to cultivate and manage the identity-making experience. Nature is the setting and the instigator for desired positive values. The natural landscape serves as a catalyst to eradicate the old, less pure self that was overly impacted by culture. While it is evident these beliefs are not fading away, there are new ways of utilizing nature for personal use emerging with the increased engagement with digital media. With the advent of the all-pervasive screen (evident in smart phones) and attachment to one another through the Internet, the natural world is not only used as a way to change one’s internal landscape, but an individual may curate their online persona by using an association to nature to portray specific qualities. What one posts to social media is primarily a decision made by the individual user and the images of nature signifies particular values and beliefs the individual wants to relay to his followers. Additionally, images of nature are bound by the frame of the screen, limiting the visual experience to the way the creator or user of the image wishes it to be.

Images of nature throughout the world are now, more than ever, accessible to anyone who has access to the Internet. As a result, images of the natural world move beyond the role of a catalyst for personal change, but also hold the designation of symbol of that change. In other words, these images embody particular ideas and can be used as a tool for conveying these ideas. As images begin to represent values – born in nostalgia – people can use the nature idea to both form personal identity and perform personal identity.

**Digital Screen and Nature: A Partnership**

This research combines several fields of study into one analysis: American studies, digital humanities, and ecocriticism. American studies because it is an attempt to define the ways Americans utilize digital media while interacting with the natural world. It connects with digital humanities because of the materials at the center of this research. It is also ecocriticism because it utilizes a form of literature, namely blogs, to consider the ways people talk about the natural world. In fact, these disciplines are usually separated due to the perceived content, without consideration for their similar methodologies. Ultimately, American studies, when utilized liberally as originally intended, can fully approach one primary question: why is it that Americans are particularly preoccupied with sequestering wilderness, maintaining the mythic ideal of the rugged individual exploring the frontier, all while pursuing an unparalleled future-mindedness? Digital humanities and ecocriticism approach the “What?” and “How?” but not the “Why?”

There is discussion about digital technologies in humanities scholarship, and nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, scholars continue to grapple with questions over the digital impact upon global society. Both the bright spaces and dark corners of the internet are the ripe
for study. Yet since digital culture is still in a state of becoming, its matured form remains unclear. This is especially exciting because digital media is in a constant state of change. By its very nature, people expect continual transformation in the digital realm because they want digital innovation to meet both basic as well as frivolous needs. That is to say, people trust digital technologies to find solutions for safety and well-being, but also to be a source of entertainment.

One Swedish scholar who works in the digital environmental humanities is Finn Arne Jørgenson, whose research on the provocatively named “Cabin Porn” illuminates an entry into creative digital scholarship. He uses the term for the existence of a very specific type of wilderness cabin images online. It signifies both an emphasis on visuals and an obsessive quality to the act of viewing these images. Indeed, the photographs are gripping. There are thousands of people, Swedish and otherwise, who enjoy viewing images of cabins on various landscapes on a digital platform. Many of these images have little commentary by either the individual who posted in the image or by the viewers, but plenty of “likes,” demonstrating popularity. The phenomenon will resonate with anyone familiar with that classic Midwestern phrase, “Up north at the cabin,” which is part of quotidian vocabulary from Ohio to Ontario to Minnesota. Jørgenson argues that there is a desire for authenticity and technology illustrated in the “visual nostalgia” offered in the photographs, often portraying a warmly lit cabin seemingly detached from civilization. It is an oasis of comfort in the middle of perfect, sublime wilderness. The hyperreal is evident in the nostalgic craving for authenticity, intensified by the fact that the “oasis” is in the middle of a technological “desert.” In other words, it is not just the existence of the image, but the manner in which the image is produced and where the image is located that emphasizes the hyperreal.

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Jørgenson does not merely consider the content of “cabin porn” as the source of nostalgia, but meaning is also found the ways these images are used across digital space. Images are edited in specific ways to convey particular meanings by the creator, but then are operated by users to transfer and suggest additional messages based on how the images drift through digital space. Unlike other traditional forms of media, digital platforms permit the user to engage with content in remarkable ways, sharing and altering images to curate personal narratives. The same image can be used infinite times by a multitude of users to add a specific element to their particular story. Simply “liking” an image is an active assertion by the user as she engages with digital content. Cabin porn, as Jørgenson suggests, conveys ideals embedded in nostalgia, authenticity, and the simultaneous acceptance of (by using digital media) and rejection of (by venerating perceived technology-free spaces) modern technology.

Existential questions about nature find their way into a myriad of academic disciplines and philosophical problems, from environmental science to the makeup and subsequent analysis of gender and racial constructs. Leo Marx first drew attention to historically ambivalent attitudes about technology and the pastoral, middle landscape in American literature. Like the steam engine’s impact upon the American psyche about nature, time, and spatiality, digital culture deeply challenged long-held assumptions about what nature “is” and “is not.” Then, discussing another aspect of simulation in the early 1990s, N. Katherine Hayles challenged academics to consider the perceived relationship between the “real” and the not “real.” “If nature can be separated from simulation in a clear-cut way,” she explains, “then we risk believing that nature is natural because it is unmediated, whereas simulation is artificial because it is constructed.”

Even more than the railroad train chugging through the pastoral and wild expanses of North America, digital medial challenges the assumption that Nature and Civilization are inherently separate, and that humans are fundamentally separate from wild nature. Environmental historian Cronon asks scholars to do the most difficult: reassess a priori standards of what is “natural.”

Natural wilderness is laden with myths and values that support the American cultural system. The narrative of the rugged individual (man) is sustained only by the belief that there is a perpetual frontier. Digital media asks users to re-evaluate these beliefs because the idea that there is a separation between human activity and the natural world. In essence, “By teaching us to fetishize sublime places and wide open country,” writes Cronon, “these peculiarly American ways of thinking about wilderness encourages us to adopt too high a standard for what counts as ‘natural.’”

As a result, people neglect the nature that is right in front of them, in lieu of the wilderness myth. Though, the desire to experience nature with or through the digital screen complicates even this pre-twenty-first century assertion.

At the time of his writing, Cronon was primarily concerned with the ways in which contemporary views about nature affected the environmental movement. If people venerate wild expanses, but not the nature in their own front yard, this will be the demise of environmentalists’ efforts. But the manner in which people actually consider themselves a part of nature propels scholarship into the twenty-first century, because this is when the once polarized entities come together. Mobile digital media maps, tracks, and records human activity upon the natural landscape in remarkable ways. It is also used to experience the natural world by drastically reducing the distance between one the user and the real-life location in nature. If the existence of wilderness is entirely dependent upon the separation of a particular landscape away from

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humanity, is it even possible to maintain wilderness in a digitally mediated world? The
topophilia humans feel toward wild spaces creates a feeling of desire to experience them. Like
the Romantic Age celebrity fascination with Humboldt, people ache to know about the world and
we idolize those who traverse into these spaces for everyone else. As the Age of Exploration
gave way to the Space Age, the actualization of the dreams of those who remain civilization-
bound by those who did venture far afield continued unabated. This dynamic was widespread,
fueling the rise of National Geographic into a national cultural institution, for example. Of
course, what civilization extracted from explorers varied from age to age as the zeitgeist
changed. Today, through advances in digital technology, people are able to experience nature
and culture simultaneously and with perceived benefits from both, since Americans experience
nature as a simulation of the idea. It is the nostalgic hyperreal, the “panic-stricken production of
the real” in the midst of a technological tidal wave that convinces viewers of a pseudo-
authenticity, but results in a possibly very real reaction to what nature images represent.

The very terms “wilderness” and “civilization” are problematic because they are rooted in
shifting cultural perceptions which move in and out of salience. If, as Cronon notes, nature is a
“profoundly human construction” we are those that establish the separation of humanity from the
rest of nature. I do not mean that human culture should permeate all spaces on the earth.
Rather, a recognition of the constructed wilderness might indeed be the thing that saves us from
ourselves. The foundational “me/other” separation would no longer exist and a greater effort to
protect our environment might come to fruition. It is difficult to overcome this mentality, though.
It is difficult to engage empathy for beings outside of the immediate “tribe,” even if that comes

\[266\] Baudrillard, 7.
in the form of the natural world. Particularly, in the American mind, the “Other” is subdued or assumed dependent. One explanation for the hostility many Americans have toward climate change science rests in this problem.

Sequestering nature for wilderness protection, while necessary in order to preserve favored spaces and the creatures therein, may create the opposite ideological effect than intended. That is to say, it risks fencing off “nature” from places designated, at least by implication, as for human activity. A perceived separation might create a public disconnect or apathy that has long term effects on the environment. It can place “nature” “over there,” further apart from the world of humanity. The Pew Research Center published a study in 2016 revealing a disconnection between feelings for the environment and proactive environmentalism among Americans. While seventy-five percent of American adults surveyed express a “concern” for the environment, only one in five acknowledge actually altering their lifestyle or making decisions based upon this concern. Cartesian or not, there remains a gap between the idea and material action on this matter. Concern is not shifting to empathy in order to create action. This is because a mentality exists that separates humanity from wilderness and preserves the belief that nature is the perpetual “other.” Making such distinct delineation between culture and nature could generate more apathy in the minds of Americans. Perhaps there is a need to, very carefully, bring the two together.

There is a long history of spiritualizing the wilderness in many of the diverse global cultures. Within the dominant Judeo-Christian American ethos, the idea usually comes is through a patriarchal, monotheistic lens. This is not axiomatically necessary. Biblical sources such as the

Song of Solomon, or religious figures such as St. Francis of Assisi, present fully sanctified Judeo-Christian examples of love for and identification with nature. But these are distinctly secondary in effect to the message of dominion over the natural world that comes at the start of Genesis and dovetails so efficiently with the American myth of virgin land awaiting conquest. Unlike indigenous spiritualism that finds its strength and inspiration from the natural world, much of mainstream Judeo-Christian theology functions through separation from the natural world. Undergirding this nature theology is “control.” Indeed, there is evidence that western paganism – embodied in the root tales of Proto Indo-European mythos, which often feature a sky god/father dominating an earth goddess/mother – also features elements of this gendered separation. Nature, on its own without the divinely inspired influence of man, can in this trajectory become a fallen, and indeed a satanic, place. It was exactly that to the Pilgrims and Puritans of colonial Massachusetts. While this belief was certainly complicated with the rise of American transcendentalism and the fascination with the divine sublime, there remains an unbreakable thread of belief that the natural world must be subdued and utilized for peak functionality. Many early settlers dealt with the New World in religious terms, but also very much economical ones in hopes of establishing thriving communities. The continual expansion across the continent in the nineteenth century brought settlers face-to-face with trees dating to the birth of Jesus Christ, in their minds justifying the settlement across the continent. The North American wilderness – as it was perceived and made mythic to sequential generations – was not only the opposite of civilization, because of its mystery, was also in many ways a spiritual space. It is a common belief that natural spaces are sacred spaces and can transform the depths of a person’s spirit, but at the same time, the nature that is outside our proverbial front door is useful.
The existence of nature-as-character in popular entertainment is prevalent and it is not new, and is a result of the fascination noted above that is deeply ingrained in the western psyche. For as long as people created images by their hands, inspiration was found in nature. This illustrates the union humans have with it even as technology seemingly separates them from it.

Popular British naturalist David Attenborough began producing nature shows for the British Broadcasting Corporation in the 1950s, launching a full and notable (and somewhat controversial) career. In 2017, the *Planet Earth II* (2016) featuring a narrating Attenborough, landed the designation of “Highest-rated U.S. nature show among adults 25-54 in five years and most watched unscripted telecast ever in total viewers an BBC America.”

The BBC reported 2.7 million American viewers and further noted that the show and its previous series, *Planet Earth* (2006) receive perfect “100” scores on the public review site Rotten Tomatoes. American based company Discovery Communications owns Discovery Channel boasting 92 million American viewers and Animal Planet claiming 90 million a year. The international viewership soars into the hundreds of millions.

Discovery’s four digital brands (Seeker, Source Fed Studios, Discovery VR, and Discovery GO) claims 4 billion monthly streams and its YouTube channel claims 2.3 million subscribers. Additionally, search the phrase “nature documentary” on YouTube and the site will offer over 10 million results and “hiking” produces over 3.5 million videos. BBC/BBC America and Discovery are two of the largest corporations in the business of

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producing nature-based entertainment, but there are many other smaller production companies, such as Curiosity Stream LLC, taking advantage of movable digital platforms and the growing viewership of streaming content.

Why do Americans want to experience nature through their screen? Arguably, it is a natural evolution from the genre of naturalist writing to the medium that most Americans consume today in a visual culture. As cultural historian Karal Ann Marling writes, the increased popularity of television in the 1950s produced an American popular culture where the visual became the most important of the five senses.\textsuperscript{272} The way Americans interact with the world in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond is directly connected to the visual nature of things. Regarding nature, reading and looking have entirely different experiences that may relate to what it means to be human. This is not to say that one \textit{must} be able to see or hear in order to be “fully” human, but that the ways people respond to these stimuli reflect human nature. People viewing nature through a digital screen can be attempting to fill a void, or trying to solve a problem with the solution found only in experiencing nature. The practice of reading about nature versus looking at nature may have different impacts on the psyche. A study published in 2009 found that simply viewing images of a landscape or being around plants has a positive effect on an individual’s intrinsic aspirations, as opposed to extrinsic aspirations.\textsuperscript{273} The researchers assert, “Nature can bolster autonomy directly by affording stimulating sensations (e.g., environmental stimuli that are naturally interesting and personally satisfying, that facilitate orientation to the present) and opportunities to integrate experience by encouraging introspection.


and a coherent sense of self, and indirectly by providing an alternative to the pressuring elements of everyday life. In either case, nature affords individuals the chance to follow their interests and reduces pressures, fears, introjects, and societal expectations.”274 It may be for this very reason twenty-first century Americans seek out the visuals of nature through digital platforms. The researchers found that just viewing images of natural spaces, even with a mediator like a computer screen, produce positive effects in an individual.

Americans live today in an age of reality television, where the false “reality” presented on screen through this style of entertainment is now a common joke among many. Indeed, there are cultural critics who maintain that the current president won election because of his prior role as a reality TV star. Middle class audiences are the primary consumers of the genre and reality television can be said to “promote middle class values.” The middle class is historically the “mediating class” in popular television, but reality television uses both working class and upper-class subjects for the principal gaze. This spectacle ultimately “makes visible” two social classes that are not typically the focus of popular culture.275 Cultural historians Fredrik Stiernstedt and Peter Jacobsson reason there may be a different kind of middle class gaze forming through reality television viewership and ask for further inquiry. Instead of affirming middle class values directly, showcasing other classes affirms hegemonic values by highlighting difference. If this is true, by allowing the primary middle-class gaze to be placed upon the classes “above” and “below” their economic strata and encouraging a moral critique based upon the differential, this same pattern might exist in the “reality” of nature programing. Often, nature programs are referred to as “documentaries,” with the weight of reality bearing down on it. Its root word,

274 Ibid., 1316.
“document,” implies a factual record and the recording of facts, though the maker to provide entertaining content manipulates many nature programs. While Netflix and HBO group nature films as a subgenre of the documentary category, Media historian Derek Bousé explains that due to the inability of plants and animals to provide informed consent or offer personal accounts a heavy-handed narration is required. But the problem lies in the fact that humans come in as a “foreigner” to interpret and provide context. Bousé ultimately determines that the rules of conduct in place for other documentary subjects cannot apply to wildlife programming.  

Whether they realize it or not, viewers know these rules are in place and so mostly trust what they see. So, nature and wildlife shows continue to be categorized as “documentary” programming. A famous case pointing to the pitfalls of this faith came in a 1959 Disney film, *White Wilderness*, featuring lemmings leaping off a cliff. The allegedly unseen hands tossing those lemmings became an imperishable part of popular culture folklore.

Reality television that presents the natural world simultaneously, and conflictingly, cultivates trust in the medium as well as an inherent cynicism with what is offered to the audience on the screen. The viewer suspects that a filter exists but wishes for truth to be revealed, and a dialectic between the beautiful and the vulgar is created through both the presentation of content and the act of viewing nature on a digital platform and/or social media. Mexican poet Octavio Paz named this tension “meta-irony” – an “irony of affirmation.” Categories, which are perceived as opposite, are in reality interdependent, as David Foster Wallace finds is the case with the late twentieth-century practice of using lowbrow cultural

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images in highbrow literature. This constitutes a twenty-first century maturation of the literary phenomenon Tom Wolfe termed “status detail.” This also brings to mind the Americanist Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Rather than seeing the two cultural levels in perpetual opposition, Levine (and Wolfe) see them as reaffirming each other. In order to have one, the other must exist. The power in the irony comes from its sincere opposite. What follows is post-irony, both ironic and sincere and moves beyond the double negative meta-irony provides and accepts both sentiments equally. This is where nature is evident on digital platforms. In the twenty-first century, Americans are conditioned to viewing images that seem real through a lens informed by the reality television viewing experience. The irony therein lies in the relationship between content and platform: a dichotomous connection in the natural versus the unnatural. Viewers expect both in equal amounts.

Scholars sense the anxiety that exists in spending so much time focusing on a screen. Being “glued to the TV” becomes a colloquialism. If one cannot help but gaze at the world created through a false window, one must justify the action to mask it as a choice, not a blind obsession. Americans learn about the world through television! A broad belief about documentaries is that they teach viewers about the world and open them up to sights unseen, but Bousé and Wallace sound the alarm at the attachment to the screen. There is no use in arguing the veracity of nature programing, but rather what it is that draws viewers to it. Does the sense of security and desire the Americans experience when viewing nature on the screen have any impact on the way they view the world? What brings them to seek out images of nature in so-

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called unnatural media? To be clear, this is not an argument against the use of digital technology. These observations about a paradigm shift in the ways people engage with nature simply help to round out our understanding about the ways modern Americans make sense in a changing world and of the human role in the natural world. Over the centuries in western culture, there has been an increasing division between who man thinks he is in comparison with nature. Digital technology did not create a divide and it is not my intention to argue for its influence on a greater divide. However, digital technology does require different language and ways to interact with nature. Just like the invention of photographic technology functioning as a filter which influenced the annexation of areas of land for American national parks, digital technology creates a filter for current understanding of nature.

**Addiction to the Sublime**

European Enlightenment philosophers grappled with concepts of the sublime and beautiful to form working definitions in relation to their new understanding of how the psyche responds to the stimuli. As colonization of North America proceeded, Europeans found all the elements of the sublime, in particular, evident in the “wild” natural world. One might locate this phenomenon at work, for example, in the writings of Thomas Jefferson, that Enlightenment figure whose enthusiasm for the potential significance – political but also cultural – of the North American wilderness prefigures Romanticism. The journals of Lewis and Clark, written at Jefferson’s express order, constitute a major textual example. Expansiveness, vastness, depths, heights, darkness, and overwhelming beauty combined to have a forceful impact upon Europeans who settled here. The sublime became synonymous with North America, particularly in the United States with the expansion westward through the nineteenth century. Concepts of the
sublime renewed with each generation as the frontier moved further and further west. In addition, as Americanist David E. Nye notes, the technological sublime arrived in lock step with the natural sublime, allowing for the “American amalgamation of natural, technological, classical, and religious elements into a single aesthetic.” The natural sublime and the technological sublime became nearly interchangeable as Americans adjusted the landscape for more useful purposes in the service of capitalism. Simply because the landscape was in the realm of the natural sublime, it did not signify an avoidance of developing that land. Niagara Falls and the California redwood groves represented a sublime idea, even as they were reproduced for the masses in print. Due to wide-spread accessibility, though, effects of the sublime deadened and real-life experiences failed to live up to the idea behind the images.

The way we understand the sublime today is still that of a culturally conditioned reaction to the outside world. It is simultaneously an inward and outward experience. The stimulus is external, but it requires a response that has as little precondition as possible. A landscape might be sublime to the tourist, but not the local resident who is desensitized to the grandeur. In Nye’s discussion of the technological sublime, we see that with each generation the astonishment to technologies like electricity or the railway system slowly lose the power of inspiring the sublime. This is not to say that when one stands near the Hoover Dam in the twenty-first century it is impossible experience a sublime reaction. It is the everyday-ness and the expected sensation that makes it slightly less astonishing. “Those in whom both feelings join,” writes Kant, “will find that the emotion of the sublime is stronger than that of the beautiful, but that unless the latter

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279 Nye, 23.
280 Ibid., 27-28.
alternates with or accompanies it, it tires and cannot be long enjoyed.\textsuperscript{281} With each generation, a settling and weakening of the technological sublime occurs.

If a person takes the time to think about the internet’s true characteristics, it must be seen as a very overwhelming place. Though it does not take up physical space, per se (aside from the massive data centers scattered around the globe), the internet as a place to “go” exemplifies all the standard elements of the sublime: vastness, magnificence, and infinity. As a feature of the digital “space” it embodies, the internet has the potential to destroy very important aspects of our lives that we weave and create on the digital sphere: our personal and financial identity. The more we curate our individual personas along social media platforms and digital interactions, the more it seems like our actual selves exist only in the digital realm. While this specific idea may be too apocalyptic for reality, it is true that the digital and its companion devices facilitate a world of its own. De Souza e Silva explains that the world of cyberspace, made up of the interconnectedness among users on digital technology platforms, seems to be at its very nature, separate from physical space. Thus, we sequester it as a “world” in and of itself. It is a place where we can take off our physical personas, place them aside, and become new individuals with identities relevant only to the digital screen.\textsuperscript{282}

Since Burke and Kant attempted to rationalize the sublime into a formulaic definition, philosophers of aesthetics have tried to rework it. As postmodernists reviewed what it means to be essentially human, the idea of the sublime also shifted. One postmodern conclusion is that there are no longer definitive essences that guide the human condition, which is what steered

Enlightenment thinking. Instead, postmodernists maintain a belief that an “authentic experience of self-transcendence”\textsuperscript{283} is at the core of the sublime. In other words, the sublime is not reliant on a belief in god or the premise that the sublime takes us one step closer to the godhead. A secularization of the sublime actually permits it to be found in new places, such as man-made technology or in everyday experiences; “the contemporary sublime is mostly about \textit{immanent} transcendence, about a transformative experience that is understood as occurring within the here and now.”\textsuperscript{284} No matter how cynical the postmodernists were about eagerness and sincerity, it seems as if the search for the sublime undercuts all the doubt. The sublime’s transformative power is irresistible to the human spirit, and if it can be found in every day experiences, then the natural response is to either sincerely seek it or to resign to the possible failure in actually finding it.\textsuperscript{285} Wallace, sometimes weary of the oppressive irony in the modern American’s need for continual amusement, uses this as a central theme in \textit{Infinite Jest} (1996,) showing the reader that entertainment becomes reality and reality becomes entertainment.\textsuperscript{286} The search for transformation is an idea that weaves its way through the narrative, signifiers revealing as addiction and strangeness in normalcy. From the substantial to the petty, nearly everyone in the novel wants to experience something that takes them beyond themselves. Wallace illustrates that the desperate search for the sublime can be found in the most mundane of circumstances. Or perhaps, the circumstances become mundane because of our constant desire for the sublime?

The transition from the romantic sublime to the postmodern sublime also includes the technological sublime. While this is not a linear trajectory of concepts, the postmodern sublime

\textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{286} Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram.”
can only come to fruition because of the technological sublime. It is the latter that allows for the recognition that human-made situations can produce sublime experiences. As for the discussion of digital technology, the reality of computers and the connectedness of the internet – and now mobile devices – delivers a very particular experience with the sublime that arrives out of the mundane. What exists is not a personal commuter or personal mobile device, but as artist Roy Ascott deems, an “interpersonal computer,” not only connecting people with each other, but with an imperceptible space of layered information, that by its very nature is infinite, vast, and overwhelmingly expansive. “Totally invisible to our everyday unaided perception,” Ascott writes, “is the underlying fluidity of matter, the interdeterminate dance of electrons…With the computer, and brought together in the telematic embrace, we can hope to glimpse the unseeable, to grasp the ineffable chaos of becoming, the secret order of disorder.” It seems as though the interconnected digital system turned out to be divine in its own right, out of the control of humans, though created by human hands. Not only is the system human made, but so is the content. Yet, the computer “will become invisible in its immanence, but its presence will be palpable to the artist engaged telematically in the world process of autopoeisis, planetary self-creation.”

The self-aware can experience the sublime in digital media and digital creation because the user sees beyond the device that taps into the (human made) divine.

In contrast, the unaware user will be pulled into the self-generating digital sublime, not participating in his or her own self-generating agency. This could be by choice – simply deciding to not pay attention to the vastness – or through ignorance. While Ascott offered his reflections at the end of the twentieth-century, now that we are well within the twenty-first it is more

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appropriate to assume that most Americans who use mobile and/or digital media understand its vastness. Turn on the evening news and one will hear the latest suggestion on how to avoid the perceived dangers of placing important information into the dark well that is the Internet. There is a simple choice to ignore it, otherwise the sublime would be overwhelming. For instance, there is little fear in placing all of one’s identity in the proverbial hand of the digital storefront or uploading image after private image of one’s family to the mysterious “cloud.” Hours and hours a week are spent communicating on digital social media platforms in lieu of in-person (or even telephone) conversation. Where people were skeptical of the downturn in face-to-face communication, it is now widely accepted – trusting that the person on the other end is actually who they say they are. I propose that submitting or viewing images of the natural world on digital devices is a way of dealing with the unease that comes with confronting the technological sublime in the digital abyss. This works because images of wilderness take on the nostalgia for an era “before” technology. Beliefs about what the world was like before digital media connected nearly all aspects of human interaction support this nostalgia. Instead of staring deeply into a figurative cavern of immense information on a digital screen, humans offer the “abyss” images of familiar and the once-sublime scenes that mask underlying fear inspired by the technological sublime. Additionally, images (moving or otherwise) of settings that are typically part of the romantic sublime are cropped and bound into the four “walls” of a screen, framed and manageable, moderating and softening a sublime experience. In other words, people utilize and alter the natural sublime in order to deal with the technological sublime at their fingertips.

Postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard wrote that twentieth-century aesthetic is one of “the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the
missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer the matter for solace and pleasure.\textsuperscript{288} Though we are definitively out of the so-called postmodern era, it is useful as a stepping stone to what is happening in twenty-first century experiences with the sublime. Eras do not turn “on” and “off” with the flip of a switch. There are hangovers, leftovers, and continuations that weave together with new ideas that directly respond to the previous zeitgeist. Next comes metamodernism, the framework in which many cultural theorists understand the digital age. \textit{Infinite Jest} might be one of the first texts to utilize the characteristic sincere irony of metamodernism and reject the grim deconstructivism of postmodernism. Metamodernism responds to digital technology’s ability to let people ignore stark reality and live in a blissful state of innocence (some say naiveté.) At its core is the desire to move between both modernist and postmodernist tendencies in order to experience all levels of truth. The Metamodernist Manifesto asserts that the era is one of “a pragmatic romanticism unhindered by ideological anchorage” that oscillates “between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons.”\textsuperscript{289} This is markedly a response to the decentralism that the Internet causes in the human psyche. It is a direct response to the sublime of the infinite, vast, space that engages us, that prods us from our workplaces, our homes, and even in our pockets through mobile technology. Mobile digital technology carries an immense universe within it, reminiscent of the Arquilian Galaxy that hangs around the neck of the feline Orion in Barry Sonnenfeld’s feature film \textit{Men in Black} (1997). In fact, viewers of the film would barely realize

\begin{footnotes}
\item[288] Jean-François Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge}, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 81.
\end{footnotes}
that the subtle anxiety-producing World Wide Web they connect to on the desktop computer in the corner of their living room would soon be available to them at every moment of their lives. The phrases “surf the web” and “going online” references a place that one must go to that is away from another place, but the digital universe will soon be a ubiquitous part of many Americans’ lives.

At some point the terrifying aspects of overt sublime is replaced with something else that fits nicely into everyday life – something that people can mentally and emotionally deal with on a day to day basis. The Dark Web might be a stew of lewd and terrible things, but the apparently “bright,” mainstream Web might also be unknowable, thus inspiring veiled fear. It can be like looking into the expanse of the Grand Canyon, but the message is that to fully experience it one must jump in or – at the very least – throw over one’s backpack, wallet, and rations to its depths.

Certainly, there are ways of dealing with the sublime since it is a part of the daily routine of much of the so-called developed world. Rather than look into the dark abyss, remarkable tactics emerged to ignore the sublimity facing viewers through the screen. Certain news headlines of digital white collar crimes saunter into the realm of the uncanny instead of sublime, inspiring a true fear of personal identity loss. What makes the internet a source of the sublime are the elements that support enjoyment: social media, consumerism, and entertainment. Though overshadowing the uncanny, some anxiety exists in which broad aspects of the population have decided to ignore. One curates a presence – an identity – on social media, presenting to “the world” an individual who has been nipped, tucked, altered, and transformed to fit a perfectly socialized being, acceptable for public viewing.
**Sublime Nature as Nostalgic Solution**

Though focusing on a very specific part of entertainment on the internet, Jørgensen clarifies one aspect of the larger movement to experiencing nature, or the nostalgic sublime, through technology. Central to the image is the cabin, whether a hauntingly aged building or a modern architectural accomplishment, situated against a sublime wilderness background. It is hard to tell which is the central feature – the cabin or its natural surroundings – since the existence of one enhances the other. It is the position of the building within the landscape that allows the viewer to picture herself in that landscape. Though very little evidence of modern civilization is evident in the image, such as power lines, often a soft glow from within the building captures the viewer’s eye, welcoming engagement. The “disembodied architecture” of the cabins “seems to be a form of nostalgia, where the dream of the cabin becomes an arena for resolving an ambivalent relationship to technology and all the bothersome things of modern life.”

By “disembodied,” Jørgensen identifies an “oasis” of technological comfort in the wilderness. “The picture triggers a form of recognition in the viewer,” he writes. The natural world thus becomes the visual vehicle to alleviate anxiety inspired by the technological sublime. Another method is by reading the reflections of a hiking blogger.

It is difficult to quantify, or even qualify, the individual experiences drawing our attention to the natural world, particularly through a figurative detour like the Internet. Burke, Kant, Lyotard, and Tuan attempted to measure this attraction in understandable terms this experience. Like detecting the wind, it is calculated by the effects on other things. Uncovering the affinity for nature in the psyche is only possible through detecting its influence on the ways

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290 Jørgenson, 560.
291 Ibid., 566.
292 Ibid., 560.
people interact with the rest of the world. Scholars even attempt to measure what makes a
landscape particularly aesthetically pleasing, or inherently valuable.\textsuperscript{293} While it may be
impossible to concretely draw a line from the way one uses the internet to the belief system of
millions, understanding more about what we experience on the internet will illuminate our
relationship to the natural world.

Experiencing nature through a digital screen is like the self-reflexive, self-conscious
metawatching explained by Wallace in 1993, reducing the cynicism “required [of the ] Audience
in order [for television] to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours
a day.”\textsuperscript{294} In other words, the technological sublime rooted in the sensation of watching and
being watched – watching the massive influx of information, and the reduction of wide
expansive spaces onto a small screen – is suppressed in lieu of hours of viewing experience. The
natural sublime evident in images shared on the Internet is suppressed in the service of masking
the technological sublime manifest in the web experience. The \textit{Cabin Porn} website strictly
shares images of the subject and offers very little commentary. Communication rarely occurs
between the facilitator of the website and the viewer. Bloggers, on the other hand, write with a
known audience, whether it is for their family and friends or for thousands of readers. Indeed,
much of the current hiking blog content is not only about the hiking experience, but about the
experience of blogging the hiking experience. The elephant in the room is the device or platform
between the writer and the reader. Whether about wireless access in order to “log on” the
Internet, battery power for the devices, or that the blogger is “catching up” on several days of

\textsuperscript{293} Terry C. Daniel, “Whither scenic beauty? Visual landscape quality assessment in the 21\textsuperscript{st}
century,” \textit{Landscape and Urban Planning} 54 (2001), 267-281; Andrew Lothian, “Landscape and
the philosophy of aesthetics: is landscape quality inherent in the landscape or in the eye of the
beholder?” \textit{Landscape and Urban Planning} 44 (1999), 177-198.

\textsuperscript{294} Wallace, 171.
hiking in one post, the blogger responds to the reader’s experience with the blog. Additionally, the Internet goes beyond Wallace’s “metawatching” television practice because the Internet is inherently interactive. Users create the content as they “surf” the web, read, watch, listen, and respond to one another.

The Final Question

Nature scenes are increasingly popular on social media platforms, including blogs, and this brings complicated feelings to those who wish to promote and protect wilderness spaces in America. Like Edward Abbey railing against so-called Industrial Tourism in service of increased enjoyment of natural spaces, current nature writers (and photographers) have mixed feelings in the Abbey tradition. In 2017, nature photographer Brent Knepper, in his provocatively-titled article “Instagram is Loving Nature to Death,” laments the rush of visitors to “wilder” spaces off the beaten path from other major natural landmarks.  

Famed social media photographers on that platform can geotag locations as they post remarkable shots that relate closely to the online cabin image phenomenon. Boxed in by the Instagram frame, one sees a mystical place, an enchanting landscape that reflects the miraculous. “How is it a place like this exists? I must go see it,” thinks the Instagram follower. What comes next is an onslaught of sightseers to take their own social media photographs – to document their visit, of course. “Social media gets blamed for everything,” muses Knepper, “but this time, it really is Instagram’s fault.” Aside from the fact that the National Park Service must accommodate the new travelers in order to maintain safety and cleanliness, thus altering the landscape and removing the “wilderness” fascination, my

fascination is with the *reason* for the onslaught of visitors who not only experience the landscape, but document their visit on digital platforms.

The action of following a social media-famous photographer to a wilderness site is akin to a modern pilgrimage, taking the visitor out of the normal routine and into an enchanted space, all while simultaneously taking a turn back to the cultural world which brought them there. The ambiguity between the developed cultural world and the wilderness space is found in the social media “selfie” against a wilderness backdrop. Hashtags like #natureselfie and #instatraveler gather both serious and ironic images of individuals spending time in green spaces. Those who attempt thoughtful images present themselves as having deep experiences with the landscape. Ironic images portray individuals who lightheartedly connect themselves to the too-serious social media (pseudo) star, almost in jest. In both cases, one component is clear: there is a need to document the experience for others to see, confirming once again Walker Percy’s prophecy of authenticity. There is also a consequent effect of shrinking the word; that is, taking wilderness sites that are almost always removed from heavy population traffic, and bringing them into the digital realm of the immediately available. The potential effects of this on vulnerable places is hard to gauge, but unsettling to ponder.

Of course, there is a long tradition of taking photographs of one’s trip, stereotyped in the camera-wearing, vacationing middle-class American trope. What makes social media images different is that the photographs are either immediately shared with followers, shared shortly thereafter with followers, or at the very least, shared with the suggestion that the photographer (and individual in the portrait, if different) is really there, at the moment of posting. Hashtags affirm the present, the existing, the here and now, and do not allude to a planned, pondered over scenario. In addition, consider the relationship of the landscape to the “self” in the self-portrait
(or portrait.) In western culture, is an artistic convention to utilize a landscape in the creation of a portrait that alludes to a broader message about the sitter. Colonial American painter Thomas Smith’s *Self Portrait* of the late seventeenth-century exhibits a seascape and naval battle that connects Smith’s history as a naval captain (and the Christian “battle” against Islam) with a skull and spiritually-themed poem in order to convey messages of high moral character.\(^{296}\) British painter Thomas Gainsborough portrayed *Robert Andrews and His Wife* (c. 1750) as a conversation piece with the wide expanse of the Andrews estate taking up the majority of the canvas.\(^{297}\) By utilizing a landscape or seascape in the background of a portrait, the artist can convey particular messages about the sitter that can only be reflected in the iconography evident in the natural world. Tuan theorized why humans are drawn to particular aspects of the natural landscape and what it is, specifically, about the natural world that inspires such admiration and aversion. With consideration for cultural variances, “Certain natural environments have figured predominately in humanity’s dreams of the ideal world,” writes Tuan, “they are the forest, the seashore, the valley, and the island. The furnishing of an ideal world is a matter of removing the defects of the real one.”\(^{298}\) Each culture – every generation, it seems – applies different meanings to the natural world, but it is always within the boundaries of defining the ideal one. An “ideal” natural landscape is perfection embodied, whether it is groomed like a pastoral Arcadia, or it is the wild expanse in which Emerson had his mystical experience. A typical Thomas Cole signature mark on a painted landscape is the dead tree stump in the foreground, symbolizing mortality, and perfectly representative of the romantic mentality of the artist. On the other hand,
an axe-chopped tree stump in *The Lackawanna Valley* (1855) by American painter George Inness nervously symbolizes technology’s progression – even dominance – over the natural landscape. It is only destructive if the understanding of landscape perfection is one full of living trees.

In the twenty-first century, the wild landscape holds symbolism that visitors desire to apply to themselves in self-portraits (selfies) on social media. Tuan contends that whether a space is “open” or “closed” signifies particular meanings, “freedom, the promise of adventure, light, the public realm, and unchanging beauty,” and “the cozy security of the womb, privacy, darkness, biologic life,” respectively. A simple assessment of selfies in the landscape context will show that the majority of the images utilize a wide, expansive landscape. Intimate scenes are certainly available, but the magic, it seems, is in the vastness. If Tuan is right, many visitors to national parks who pose before canyons, on mountain peaks, or on beaches seek the portrayal of freedom, adventure, lightness, the public, and beauty. The visitor also experiences the sublime. However, in the act of cropping the image to fit a mobile screen (the original intention for Instagram), the photographer cuts out the fear and the sublime. The result is a curated visual representation of freedom and adventure for followers on social media, with firmly established roots in nostalgic memory. Memory affirms meaning and values. Nostalgia sentimentalizes those values. The image is no longer of nature, but a second version: the hyperreal nature. It is this which makes the wilderness image no longer what it used to be (the dangerous or sublime), but a safe space to engage with technological sublime.

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299 George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1855, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
300 Tuan, 27-28.
CONCLUSION

It is my intention that the reader concludes this dissertation with a better understanding of the ways that Americans use ideas about nature. I assert that these ideas are active components to the ever-evolving performance that forms the foundation of a society’s belief system. Certainly, this process is not limited to North Americans. Yet, by controlling the focus of research we can gather specific characteristics that find home in a particular society. The reason this works so well with American beliefs is because, since its civic origins, the government of the United States, descendants of settlers, and even oppressed people forcefully brought here or moved around the land, used the wilderness as a touchstone to describe a national character. The North American landscape inspired creative thinking and deep desires, so much that the ideas placed on the landscape by these populations became intertwined with the image of landscape itself. As such, wilderness and nature ideas evolved to serve whatever function the human mind desires of it. Thus, the nature idea can be used to help develop personal and national identities while simultaneously taking on nostalgic elements in an increasingly technological age.

I begin this dissertation with a look at the historical ways Americans used the nature idea in forming identity, specifically through gender performance. I deliberately selected a gender lens because it is the most material way an individual presents identity in American society. Undoubtedly, other social designations also contain elements of identity performance, but none so ingrained in the hierarchical structure. Performance of social class, for instance, changes depending on regional location, political, or even religious beliefs. Racial performance is indeed a significant factor, but is usually preceded by and predicated upon the pre-existing tension between forced and self-established identity. Indeed, gender, class, and race are intertwined and cannot function independent from one another. So, at the very least, this research required a
decision as to what identity performance would be most useful to illustrate the argument. Gender is a performance that is very likely to be the active result of individual decision and is asserted in the most material and discernable manners.

The first half of this dissertation exhibits precisely that point, first by illustrating the emergence of the nature idea through the presentation of masculinity and the origins of land management. Following this, I show gendered use of nature through what I call the feminine wilderness idea, culminating in ecofeminist ideologies. Both approaches to and uses of the nature idea demonstrate just how easy it is to take one fixed “object” – nature – and use it in service of very different philosophies. The purpose of the first two chapters is to reveal that nature, especially wilderness, is an idea to be used by people. No matter how much individuals believe that humans can be passive receivers of benefits in the natural world, we come to it with preconceive notions about what we will gather there. These beliefs are formed through long-established ideas embedded with nostalgia of an idealistic bygone era of human-nature tranquility. This is not that far removed from the European fantasy of the pastoral Arcadia. It is this nostalgia for an ideal nature-human relationship, signified in the actions of masculine and feminine users, that allows the nature idea to be manipulated in service of contemporary needs. In the twenty-first century, American digital technology users take the image of nature, modify it within the literal frame of the digital screen, and surround it with nostalgic yearnings for an idealistic human-nature relationship. It is only through the practice of using nature in service of identity formation that makes this type of modern use possible. As a result, the nature image becomes a pacifying force in the face of the ever-changing technological sublime.

What you read in this dissertation matters a great deal because it reveals key details about how humans think about their relationship with the natural world. In an era where climate change
concerns are increasingly grim, any insight into human perspectives will provide more information on how to assemble the public for real action. While this research does not address climate change, specifically, it is a preliminary work that will highlight nuances in hard-to-locate ideologies. In fact, similar studies can be conducted on other global communities to determine why some are more apt to welcome climate change solutions while others are not. The practical implications of what is demonstrated here will not only be in service of the climate conversation, but can extend even to the ways Americans think about modern anxiety and technology use. Finally, and most simply, my work helps to understand the interwoven history of nature images and American culture, from the nineteenth century through the twenty-first, thus showing a continuation of a bond that is not likely to end any time soon.

There are lingering questions after this study. First, it would be compelling to locate other areas in American cultural works where the human-nature relationship is explored freely. What are the other perspectives beyond the masculine and feminine? How do race, ethnicity, and class distinctly come into relationship with the nature idea? What differences or similarities exist with the perspectives studied here? Additionally, the internet is a vast resource, offering content to explore beyond the limited scope of the online blog. For instance, a quantitative study of social media accounts that focus on nature and wilderness would be valuable to assess the popularity of nature images in conjunction with other cultural elements. As more individuals use smartphones, does the number of social media accounts about nature increase? What about users or followers of these accounts? How do the numbers compare to other popular topics? What are the specific ways the National Park Service, state, and local municipalities deal with the apparent influx of tourists to remote areas? Does social media create more informed individuals regarding natural spaces or is it doing harm? Finally, the biggest question that I see going forward has to do with
climate change research. How does a possible increased interest in the nature idea on digital technology platforms impact the human understanding of climate change? Unfortunately, these questions were definitively out of the scope of this research, but are valid areas for future study. What is presented here already provides a solid base to move forward on the ways Americans see themselves as humans within a natural world and what that relationship means.

Perhaps it will be with additional humanities work that will shift the tide of acceptance toward climate change research in America? By connecting hard science to the human experience – in more ways than with anecdotal stories, but by uniting to the inherent relationship people have to the natural world – there is possibility for greater understanding that extends beyond the political. Our personhood is intertwined with the ideas that we created – the stories that we wrote and currently write – about nature. Locating ourselves in this narrative will create empathy toward the natural world, something we desperately need right now.


Richard Hardack, “‘A Woman Need Not Be Sincere:’ Annie Dillard’s Fictional Autobiographies and the Gender Politics of American Transcendentalism,” *Arizona Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (Autumn 2008): 75-143.


CURRICULUM VITAE

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Selected Publications

Selected Presentations