

“Walking” to Maine: Romantic Myths in Appalachian Trail Memoirs

by

Renee S. Cantor

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This thesis was presented

by

Renee S. Cantor

It was defended on

April 20, 2022

and approved by

Jeffrey Aziz, Senior Lecturer, Department of English Literature

Troy Boone, Associate Professor of English, Department of English Literature

Geoffrey Glover, Senior Lecturer, Department of English Literature

Ian Marshall, Professor of English, Pennsylvania State University Altoona

Thesis Advisor: Amy Murray Twynning, Senior Lecturer, Director of Undergraduate Studies,
Department of English Literature

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In American cultural perspectives toward nature, there exist two entwined principal tenets—the romantic myth of wild nature and the myth of the self-reliant individual—which stem from the philosophy of American Romanticism and Transcendentalism. This project uses Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking” to establish the tenets of these cultural myths and then proves that they are more myth than reality by tracing their development with Appalachian Trail thru-hiking memoirs. Ultimately, these memoirs reveal how the two cultural myths of wild nature and individualism are coopted by capitalist culture, forming a uniquely American pilgrimage.

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Preface

Thank you to my parents (two engineers) for never questioning and always supporting me (their literature-loving, English-major daughter). Thank you to my friends—Rebekah, Ceci, Kaylin, and Priya—for showering me with love as I worked on this research. Thank you to Manny for being my go-to research confidant. Finally, thank you to Dr. Amy Murray Twynning for guiding me throughout this process and teaching me that my ideas are valuable.

1.0 Introduction

“I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks” (Thoreau 1). Henry David Thoreau shares this in what is perhaps his most famous essay, “Walking.” “Walking” began as a lecture that he gave at the Concord Lyceum in 1851. Over the course of the next nine years, Thoreau built upon this essay, which culminated in a piece he shared as a lecture ten times total. Upon his death in 1862, the essay was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. In it, he describes this “art of walking,” but also ponders many themes and ideas related to nature and the critique of society. As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau belongs to the wider Romantic tradition. Thus, his work can be used to understand the American Romantic walking tradition. In fact, “Walking” can be seen as a seminal text of American Romantic walking, in which the tenets, structures, and concerns of this tradition (as it existed in the 19th century) can be found.

With “Walking” in mind, one wonders how Thoreau would react today to the notion of a “thru-hike.” Thru-hiking involves completing a long-distance hiking trail from one end to another. Thru-hikes are often strenuous journeys during which hikers face many challenges and, ultimately, self-growth.

One of the most well-known thru-hikes is the Appalachian Trail, fondly nicknamed the “AT.” The AT holds a particularly special place in both hiking culture and broader American wilderness culture. The trail unfurls like a ribbon through fourteen states, with one end in Georgia and the other in Maine. Completion is no easy task, taking most hikers five to seven months. By the end, thru-hikers will have completed an elevation gain equivalent to climbing Mount Everest 16 times (Z. Davis 1).

With the existence of thru-hiking trails like the AT, perhaps today Thoreau would no longer be hard-pressed to find peers who understand the art of walking. In fact, in 2019, an estimated 927 hikers completed all 2,189 miles of the trail (Bruffey 1). This statistic only covers a fraction of attempted hikers: only about 25% of people who start the trail complete it (Bruffey 1). Despite being a small group when compared to the broader population, these hikers, who seem to adhere to many of the Romantic walking principles that Thoreau describes in “Walking,” greatly outnumber the one or two fellow walkers he mentions.

So, what happens when Thoreau meets an AT thru-hiker? Thoreau would be unfamiliar with the Appalachian Trail; the idea of the hike was conceived in 1920, and the trail was not completed until 1937, 75 years after Thoreau’s death. Yet, Massachusetts, where Thoreau was born, lived, wrote, and died, is one of the fourteen states that the AT traverses. Would he have found kindred spirits amongst those hiking the AT? Would he find that these thru-hikers belong to his walking tradition and adhere to his walking philosophy? Furthermore, although thru-hiking character cannot be generalized, the AT is rich with culture and traditions, ones that warrant their own vocabulary. A trail name, for example, is bestowed on a hiker based on a characteristic or a hiking story. A trail family is the group of people that a hiker finds herself spending the most time with. Trail angels, people not hiking the trail, perform acts of trail magic, from something as small as leaving water and snacks on the side of the trail, to something like allowing hikers to rest in their homes for a night. How would Thoreau have viewed this culture? Does it fit in within the tradition?

Spending time in wilderness, more specifically walking through the wilderness, undoubtedly holds a space in American culture. Although the vast majority of Americans will never thru-hike (and would not understand the art of walking, according to Thoreau), the trails

have still enchanted them. This is evident in the popularity of stories like Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods*, which describes his attempt at the AT, and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, an account of walking the Pacific Crest Trail, which was made into a popular movie starring Reese Witherspoon. Stories of the trails capture hearts and minds and captivate imaginations. This suggests that, although the height of Romanticism was in the 19th century, the Romantic walking tradition may not be a thing of the past.

Thru-hiking memoirs are a modern phenomenon that, in many ways, can be considered a genre of their own. Nevertheless, they follow patterns of organizing the writer-hiker's experience that echo to a greater or less extent Thoreau's writing strategies, principles, and/or mythologies in ways that suggest links to the Romantic walking tradition. Thus, in comparing these memoirs to Thoreau's "Walking," I consider the ways they connect the contemporary phenomenon of the thru-hike to early American conceptions of nature, of the individual, and of the founding opposition between nature and civilization central to two predominant American myths: the self-reliant or exceptional individual and the primordial wilderness. I consider the ways that each writer-hiker articulates the lure of the Appalachian Trail, how each represents the thru-hiker as an exceptional individual, and how each constructs the mythic and mystical wilderness through careful bracketing of the presence of modern life and modern technology. I will refer to Thoreau's "Walking" as a touchstone text to trace how each memoir uses his representational strategies to elevate the thru-hike to a heroic or spiritual journey while also examining how each memoir remains close to or strays from the essence of Thoreau's essay. This analysis will delineate traditions of AT thru-hiking literature. Overall, this work will be done as an attempt to understand how Appalachian Trail culture embodies an ongoing American relationship with the natural world and what it tells

us about some of the peculiarly American reconciliations of capitalist modernity with the environment.

The additional primary texts of this study are six thru-hiking memoirs, which have been chosen based on popularity but also in an attempt to represent different types of hikers. In order of appearance this research, these memoirs are as follows:

Becoming Odyssea: Adventures on the Appalachian Trail Jennifer Pharr Davis

The Unlikely Thru-Hiker: An Appalachian Trail Journey Derick Lugo

Where's the Next Shelter? Gary Sizer

Walking With Spring Earl Shaffer

Hiking Through: One Man's Journey to Peace and Freedom on the Appalachian Trail Paul Stutzman

Southbound: The Barefoot Sisters (Adventures on the Appalachian Trail) Lucy and Susan Letcher

1.1 Caveats

Within this thesis, the idea of the “typical” or “average” American will arise. This is an idea that is present in outdoor literature and the broader rhetoric of outdoor sports. It must be noted that this typical American is not truly representative of the United States’ diverse population. Hiking and thru-hiking are whitewashed activities and, in general, outdoor sports have historically been and unfortunately still are primarily White-occupied. There still exists the idea that the wilderness is a White space. This is due to the racist history of the US and the institutionalized

racism that currently exists within the country. Thus, the Romantic walking tradition and the thru-hiking tradition are predominantly White cultural traditions. There is a feedback loop between the cultural threads that are woven into Appalachian Trail literature and culture and the idea of the typical American. This loop is a mutually enforcing cycle that keeps these spaces inaccessible to people of color. Today, there are many movements that are working to decolonize and diversify the outdoors. This shows that nature is not apolitical, an idea that this thesis will touch on.

2.0 The Myths of the American Romantic Walking Tradition in Thoreau's "Walking"

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. (Thoreau 3)

In the very first sentence of "Walking," Thoreau establishes the two principal doctrines of what I treat as the American walking tradition in this thesis: the existence of wild nature and the self-reliant individual. The self-reliant individual connects to the man who is "part and parcel of Nature," as this individual can exist without the comforts and supports of society. I tease out the roots, characteristics, and contradictions of these doctrines that Thoreau offers in his writing. Thus, I begin this paper with an analysis of "Walking" to establish a foundational understanding of the Romantic doctrines (or myths) of wild nature and the self-reliant individual.

2.1 Wild Nature

Romanticism began as a response to the increased industrialization and Enlightenment philosophy of the later 18th century in Europe. In rejecting what they thought was an overweening attempt to understand and mechanize the world, Romantics turned to nature as a refuge from scientific rationality. To do so, the Romantics needed to simultaneously reconstruct nature as a space not encompassed by science, which they did by carefully managing their representations of

nature through imagery and a set of tropes that pose nature as an alternative to modern society by virtue of its mystery and ineffability.

Alison Stone, whose focus is on the “early German Romantics,” argues that they believed that modernity “estranged humanity from nature and ‘disenchanted’ nature by applying to it a narrowly analytic and reflective form of rationality” (Stone 4). To recover nature from modern consciousness, according to German Romantic theoretician Friedrich Schlegel, required the “per[ceptions of] nature as partly mysterious” and “to see its behaviour as partly magical, deriving from sources that are occult to us” (Stone 4). Thus, the Romantic construction of nature depends on a denial or deflection of its empirical knowability in favor of an emphasis on some essence that exceeds scientific knowledge and exists beyond modern industry and urban life. This reconstruction of nature as magical and enchanted is exemplified in “Walking.” Thoreau pushes back against modern science’s attempt to achieve absolute understanding of the world. He asserts that “there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy” (Thoreau 46). Not only does Thoreau re-enchant nature by describing it as inherently mysterious, but he also quotes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, directing readers to the scene when Hamlet has just seen a ghost, and in having this supernatural experience, recognizes that there is a limit to human knowledge. Just as a ghost is beyond human rationality, so is nature. Here, it is important to note that throughout “Walking,” Thoreau alludes to “Hamlet and the Iliad” as well as “the scriptures and mythologies” because in these texts he finds “uncivilized free and wild thinking” (Thoreau 35). Thoreau connects the creativity and mysticism he found in these texts to wilderness: “In literature it is only the wild that attracts us,” he writes, depicting nature as a store of creative—instead of rational—thought (Thoreau 35).

Thoreau further rejects rationality and portrays the limits of human knowledge when he writes, “Live free, child of the mist—and with respect to knowledge we are all children of the mist” (Thoreau 47). In using “we,” Thoreau refers to all of humanity and, in calling humans children, he refers to not only a lack of knowledge, but also a corresponding sense of wonder inherent to childhood. Knowing Thoreau’s interest in myth, it is also important to note the connection to classical mythology. In Homer’s writing, the mist, known as achlys, shades the eyes of humans, usually in moments of death. Thus, Thoreau implies that wilderness is unknowable to humans in the same way that death is. Yet, instead of bemoaning this lack of knowledge and unknowability, Thoreau celebrates it as something that allows humans to live free. The word “mist” resounds with mystic, mysticism, and mystery, and, overall, the state of unknowing figured in the word “mist” is elevated to a spiritual condition. Overall, he embraces an organic, instead of machine-like view of nature, an idea inherent to Romanticism.

Thoreau rejects a deductive view of nature in other ways as well, for example by likening nature to mythical places:

The island of Atlantis, and the islands and gardens of the Hesperides, a sort of terrestrial paradise, appear to have been the Great West of the ancients, enveloped in mystery and poetry. Who has not seen in imagination, when looking into the sunset sky, the gardens of the Hesperides, and the foundation of all those fables? (Thoreau 21)

It must be noted that “the West of which [Thoreau] speak[s] is but another name for the Wild” (Thoreau 27). At the surface level, by connecting the United States’ nature to these mythical lands, this quote implies that nature is mysterious. He asks the readers to use their imaginations to observe nature but to imagine mythological environments. This short-circuits any attempt to convert observation into scientific knowledge. Furthermore, Thoreau writes that the west, meaning the

nature of the United States, inspires in the same way that Atlantis and the garden of the Hesperides inspired “the ancients.” As previously explored, nature inspires writing and poetry. Therefore, the way to connect to enchanted nature is not through scientific thought, but through art and writing. The poet becomes a spiritual mystic. However, upon deeper analysis, it also becomes clear that these are carefully chosen allusions that reflect Thoreau’s transcendentalist philosophy. Atlantis, the beautiful island lost to the sea, exists within modern imagination and stories. Plato writes about it as an originally utopian society that grew corrupt and thus was sent sinking into the sea by the gods. Thoreau slips his belief that society is corruptive (as will further be explored in this essay) into this allusion. This is furthered by his mention of the Hesperides, nymphs of the evening, tended to the garden where Hera and Zeus were married and where golden apples grow. The garden is not just used in this context because it is beautiful and mythical. This garden and its apples call to mind the biblical garden of Eden and its forbidden fruit, which led to the so-called fall of man. Like Atlantis, this is an allusion that describes the corruption of man.

Thoreau also injects wonder into nature by describing it as art instead of an object of science. It is important to note that he does not describe nature just as an entity that inspires human-made art, but also as something that is inherently art. “Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him,” Thoreau writes (Thoreau 36). In that way, though, the poet is imagined as an interpreter of nature, perhaps a spiritual interpreter, or mystic. However, wild nature itself is an artist or work of art that humans are unable to accurately capture. Thoreau describes attempts to capture nature in literature as always falling short:

I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. I do not know where to find in any

literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted. You will perceive that I demand something which no Augustan nor Elizabethan age, which no culture, in short, can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything. How much more fertile a Nature, at least, has Grecian mythology its root in than English literature! Mythology is the crop which the Old World bore before its soil was exhausted, before the fancy and imagination were affected with blight. (Thoreau 37)

In this section, Thoreau once again reveals that he is interested in mythology because, of all human writing, it comes closest to capturing wildness (as opposed to English literature). Overall, however, nature remains uncapturable and unknowable, and thus enchanted. Once again, in this quote it is important to note Thoreau's elevation of nature over society. He writes that the soil from which myths—the wildest of literature—were grown is now “exhausted” and “affected with blight.” This destruction of the soil is caused by civilization: soil becomes exhausted when overworked and civilization is the blight that plagues on nature. It is civilization then, that prevents the poet/mystic from capturing nature in writing in the way that the ancient Greek writers did.

Nature is also made unknowable and thus enchanted through the sublime. The sublime, another essential characteristic to the Romantic myth of wild nature, is the idea that nature can be vast and awe-inspiring, to the extent that it rouses respect and even terror. Nature is not just (or always) calm and beautiful. Thoreau invokes the sublime when writing that “nature is a personality so vast and universal that we have never see one of her features” (Thoreau 49). This quote asserts that nature is beyond human understanding. The sublime inverts the power structure of human wielding power over nature; attempting to understand nature through science can be seen as an act of domination and creates a power dynamic between nature and society. But, the sublime, in

asserting that nature cannot be completely seen or understood, places the power in the hands of this nature.

Again, Thoreau's description of the sublime connects to the idea that nature is superior to society, an idea upon which the Romantic myth and valuation of nature rests on:

Here is this vast, savage, hovering mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man—a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit. (Thoreau 43)

The words “vast” and “savage” point directly to the sublime and, despite this savagery, nature is described as a caring mother, again, as in Christianity, God is described as a caring father. Thoreau is careful to retain the wildness of nature in this comparison by describing nature as a leopard, and thus a mother who is caring but still fierce. Thoreau also again alludes to myth when he invokes the image of the mythical founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, who were nursed by a wolf, when describes being “weaned” from nature. This early weaning from nature and push into society is seen as detrimental. Thoreau uses this allusion to Romulus and Remus throughout “Walking” to continually depict wilderness as the origin of greatness and strength, and civilization not only the opposite, but a degeneration.

Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every state which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the northern forests who were. (Thoreau 27 – 28)

Again, “vigor” and success are drawn from nature, not society. Thoreau includes a warning in this explanation of the fable when he describes how the descendants of Romulus and Remus, not having the same connection to nature, were overthrown; he points out to members of society now their own weakness based on their distance from nature. However, Thoreau’s descriptions come off as contradictory. He is clearly celebrating the effects nature (as opposed to civilization) has on man. Yet, he uses the construction of civilizations—the very establishment he bemoans—as proof of nature’s nourishment. This contradiction begins to point to the fact that wilderness can only exist in relationship to civilization and thus is more myth than reality.

Thoreau’s elevation of nature over society takes other forms as well. For example, he refers to human construction, like ‘the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees,’ as “man’s improvements, so called,” and asserts this “deform[s] the landscape, and make[s] it more and more tame and cheap” (Thoreau 11). He introduces and then rejects the common idea that infrastructure is an improvement and instead prefers and celebrates nature: “Hope and future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps” (Thoreau 30). First, Thoreau inverts the idea that the future takes place where there is less nature and more infrastructure. Then, he not only rejects towns and cities, but also the pastoral. Instead, he celebrates the swamp, which is more commonly seen as dank and gross nature, a place to be drained and destroyed. Thus, he implies that nature has inherent value that is unrelated to how it serves man (as opposed to lawns and farm fields). These are acts of redefinition that are essential to Thoreau’s construction of his myth of wilderness.

This elevation of nature over society is essential to the Transcendentalist view of religion. In most cases, religion is seen as directly connected to society. However, this association is another that Thoreau—and Transcendentalists in general—seek to disconnect by placing society and

religion in opposition. Thoreau begins doing so through his religious allusions. Furthermore, Transcendentalism builds upon the Romantic idea of nature as sacred by seeing nature as conduit to religion. To first gain an understanding of this philosophy before turning to how it appears in Thoreau's work, we turn to Ralph Waldo Emerson's quintessential Transcendentalist text, "Nature." Emerson writes, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith...I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (Emerson 3). Transcendentalist religious philosophy posits that God exists in every person. This ubiquity of God is notably different from the notion that one must go to a house of worship to be connected to God. It is no coincidence that Emerson accesses this personal connection to God in the woods. Instead, the woods are what allows him to do so. As a "transparent eyeball," that "can see all," Emerson can read nature, almost like it is a religious text. Nature reveals and nourishes a relationship with God, while society hides or corrupts it. It is worth noting that Emerson's use of the word "reason" refers to enlightenment rather than rationality.

Thoreau similarly describes nature as a spiritual space: "I enter a swamp as a sacred place, -- a sanctum sanctorum" (Thoreau 32). In using the phrase "sanctum sanctorum," Thoreau identifies nature as his holiest space, his temple. He calls upon wild nature with a religious fervor and yearning that mirrors a congregation calling upon God: "Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!" (Thoreau 32). Furthermore, walking in nature is a specifically spiritual act: "I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit" (Thoreau 10). Thus, his "art of Walking" is not just physical, and Thoreau establishes walking as a religious experience in nature.

A description of Romantic view of nature would be incomplete without a recognition of the view of nature as healing and a source of renewal. Nature as a place of mystical transcendence

also extends to its healing powers. In “Nature,” Emerson describes how in “the woods” he “feel[s] that nothing can befall [him] in life, --no disgrace, no calamity...which nature cannot repair” (Emerson 3). Nature can be used to heal physical, mental, and spiritual health. For Thoreau, nature, specifically walking in it, is a daily health practice, like taking vitamins: “I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements” (Thoreau 6). Again, both physical and mental health (“health and spirits”) rely on time in nature and away from “worldly engagements,” meaning civilization. It is important to note that, for Thoreau, spending time walking in nature is not optional, as “a man’s health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck” (Thoreau 32). Muck refers to nutrient rich soil useful for growing crops. Thus, “acres of meadow,” or nature provide essential nutrients to humans. This idea echoes Thoreau’s previously explored idea that those raised in nature, such as the mythical Romulus and Remus, are more nourished and stronger. Again, wilderness is a myth that requires a negative relationship to civilization. Thoreau risks rendering nature a utilitarian object (like vitamins). To continue to elevate nature against this sense of utility, he reinscribes the utility itself as uncivilized by comparing it to something unrefined, like muck.

A tradition that belongs particularly to American Romanticism and Transcendentalism is the patriotic valuation of wilderness. Thoreau sees the American landscape as a point of pride for the United States. He directly references patriotism when he writes, “As a true patriot, I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in his country” (Thoreau 26). Here, the nature of the US is compared to that of the Garden of Eden, which is notable not just for its beauty but also for its ability to provide all that is needed to survival. This paradise-like quality is something Thoreau is proud of. Other

appeals to patriotism are less direct but just as strong. For example, Thoreau writes about American nature as superior to that of other places: “Where on the globe can be found an area of equal extent with that occupied by the bulk of our States, so fertile and so rich and varied in its productions, and at the same time so habitable by the Europeans, as this is?” (Thoreau 22). A baselevel analysis of this quote reveals that Thoreau sees the US’s nature as special for a variety of reasons. First is its vastness. Second is its varied natural resources and produce. However, a deeper analysis reveals the mythical nature of Thoreau’s wilderness. Despite Thoreau’s criticism of society, he celebrates how the nature of the US has varied productions, which seemingly are the productions that support civilization. Furthermore, he values how it is a place where Europeans, who come from places of tamed or controlled nature, can live. This moment seems contradictory. Thoreau, as has been seen, values so-called wilderness, yet here he is celebrating wilderness for being habitable. This contradiction points to how Thoreau’s wilderness is built on certain constructions and myth making that require a carefully managed set of oppositions to distinguish it from society.

This section has demonstrated that the Romantic tradition—as represented by Thoreau’s “Walking”—portrays and discusses wilderness in a particular way. In “Walking,” Thoreau works to shift his reader’s image of the natural environs, to construct a myth around wilderness and the act of walking in wilderness (the Romantic Walking tradition). Thus, the essay is an act of mythologization. Thoreau depicts walking in nature as a vital, spiritual activity that is more than the act itself. He also carefully distinguishes it from other forms of perambulation; the person using their feet to get from place to place is not engaging in the same act. He works to place wilderness and civilization on opposite sides of a spectrum, conveniently ignoring the fact that absolute wilderness and absolute civility do not truly exist, and he then strives to position the reader on the side of wilderness. Yet, it seems that the spectrum with wilderness on one end and society on the

other is an inaccurate representation. Instead, society lies under the myth of wild nature, as a support. Wild nature only exists in contrast to civilization; without human civilization, there would be no other from which to distinguish wilderness.

Furthermore, as asserted by eco-critic Greg Garrard, the idea of wilderness “suggests that nature is only authentic if we [humans] are entirely absent from it” and “such ‘purity’ is often achieved at the cost of an elimination of human history” (Garrard 77). For example, he describes how in Yosemite, the idea of wilderness erases the history of the Ahwahnechee tribe that inhabited the land, a problematic and neocolonial perspective. Similarly, Garrard continues, describing how “the ideal wilderness space is wholly pure by virtue of its independence from humans, but the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there” (Garrard 78). If wilderness is truly what it is most often described to be—pure, uninhabited, untouched—humans would remove its wildness simply by existing in the space. As much as Thoreau would strive to hide this idea in his myth making, he reveals it; In writing about nature as separate from politics, he describes how “in one half hour,” he can walk to “some portion of the earth’s surface where a man does not stand from one year’s end to another, and there, consequently, politics are not” (Thoreau 13). This place is removed from politics because it does not house men. But by being there, Thoreau, a man, inherently brings politics. A human experience in so-called wilderness counters the idea of wilderness. Thus, wild nature is a myth created by cultural productions that becomes a stage for certain acts to play out; Thoreau carves out a space in his readers’ imaginations for thinking about walking in nature as a mystic appreciation of and engagement with wilderness. Wild nature, then itself is a product of political framework. Within the American Romantic walking tradition, wilderness must be made to exist to fuel another myth: the myth of the self-sufficient individual.

2.2 The Self-Reliant Individual

With this stage of wild nature established, figures are needed to play on it. This is where the hero of Romanticism—the individual—comes into play. Romantic philosophy places value in the independent individual who is self-reliant and thinks and expresses themselves freely. These thoughts and actions are important and, fittingly, the individual has intrinsic value. Just as Romanticism elevates nature over society, the individual is thought to be stronger, more enlightened, and superior to society. This connects to the rejection of rationalism by pushing against society's rules and groupthink and instead celebrating people being their authentic selves. Thoreau's walker is the exceptional individual who uses nature as a stage upon which to prove their individualism.

We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk.
(Thoreau 4 – 5)

Here, Thoreau asks the reader to see walking as not just moving from one place to another, but instead as a noble act, and thus to see the walker as a hero. In describing embalmed hearts, Thoreau alludes to the medieval European act of heart burial, which was often done by higher class members of society when a body was far away from home. In calling this home a “desolate kingdom,” Thoreau depicts society as devastated and, as has been explored, destined to fail, as opposed to the nature within which walkers adventure. In this quote, not only is the walker—the individual—considered heroic and superior, he is also alone. Solitariness is required to begin the

journey, which then becomes an act used to measure individuality. It also means to cut ties—for example, by paying debts—with society. Yet, it is important to note that Thoreau’s walker does not abandon society without a care for its structures; debts are paid instead of ignored and a will is created, which implies that the walker is not completely removed from society. As much as Thoreau values the individual and wilderness over society, he does not suggest that one disregards societal structures. So, although Thoreau establishes the idea that one’s individuality—and thus enlightenment—can be measured by distance from society (and closeness to nature), he cannot fully erase this presence of society. This begins to reveal the mythical nature of the individual too.

Thoreau also dedicated much space on the page to crafting the walker as superior to others: To come down to my own experience, my companion and I, for I sometimes have a companion, take pleasure in fancying ourselves knights of a new, or rather an old, order—not Equestrians or Chevaliers, not Ritters or Riders, but Walkers, a still more ancient and honorable class, I trust. The Chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to have subsided into, the Walker—not the Knight, but Walker, Errant. He is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People. (Thoreau 5)

Here, Thoreau describes the walker as a new form of knight. The use of the word “errant” is notable. This could allude to the walker “moving about aimlessly or irregularly,” or to the walker “straying outside the proper path or bounds” (*Merriam-Webster*). The latter suggests that the walker is straying from what society considers to be the proper path, and instead forges an individual path. However, Thoreau once again is unable to truly leave society behind; in describing the walker as a “fourth estate” that exists in the same realm as the three other estates (the “Church and State and People”), he ties walkers to the society of the three. Knights are part of civilization,

whether errant or not, and they can only appear as separate from society because this form of civilization seems quaint.

In evoking the image of the walker as a “chivalric and heroic spirit,” Thoreau describes and celebrates rugged individualism. The rugged individualist trope is a particularly American form of individualism. The rugged individualist is self-reliant and independent, able to survive on their own particularly outside of society. This character is connected to the existence of the so-called American frontier; those who journeyed into the frontier where there was no established American society were the original rugged individualists. Even today, they are celebrated as heroes of American stories and are at the heart of many American ideals, such as the idea of pulling yourself up from your bootstraps. The term “rugged individualist” brings to mind a specific image: a man who is outdoorsy, strong, and rough around the edges. Being removed from society, he is likely a bit unrefined. He is valued for self-reliance, bravery, and strength, and he does things others cannot do, making him stand out as an individual. Just like Thoreau’s walker, a rugged individualist is seen as honorable.

Although Thoreau does not specifically use this phrase, the rugged individualist is found in his writing, for example, with the previously described idea of the walker as heroic. His idea of a walker also mirrors the image of a rugged individualist: “Living much out of doors, in the sun and wind, will no doubt produce a certain roughness of character—will cause a thicker cuticle to grow over some of the finer qualities of [the walker’s] nature” (Thoreau 9). This description creates a physical image of the walker, but also shows Thoreau’s attempt to explain the coarser character of a walker (and rugged individualist). Here, again, Thoreau’s inability to completely shrug off society appears; he feels a need to justify this coarse character, like he is apologizing for the

tarnished “finer qualities” that society values. Overall, however, Thoreau describes the walker as honorable and rare, even if coarse.

An element of the Romantic valuation of the individual that has not yet been explored is the interest in personal emotion. The focus on individual emotions places importance on the individual’s experience, as demonstrated by Thoreau’s writing: “Walking” establishes a tradition of intense emotion being inspired by spending time in—specifically walking in—nature. Specifically, he writes about the joy nature inspires within him. This joy is best represented by a passage from the end of “Walking,” when Thoreau describes a walk he took with a friend:

We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening. (Thoreau 54 – 55)

Thoreau’s description of light is careful and artful, and its purity and strength represent the purity and strength of his joy walking in nature. His joy is further communicated when he describes walking to Elysium. This is yet another allusion to Greek mythology, where Elysium is a land in the afterlife. It is a resting place for the heroic, a place of happiness. Thus, Thoreau constructs nature as his land of happiness and the walker as a hero. The gentle herdsman can be read as an allusion to Jesus, who was a shepherd, and thus aids in Thoreau’s connection of walking in nature to religion. It also references a ballad from the 1765 collection *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* called “Gentle Herdsman, Tell to Me: Dialogue Between a Pilgrim and Herdsman.” This collection strove to combine ancient poetry and “old heroic ballads,” which notably inspired many Romantic poets. In referencing this text, Thoreau again connects walking and ancient storytelling, which he

found to be rooted in the wild. It is also important to note that traditionally, ballads were delivered by travelling minstrels, and therefore are connected to the act of walking. Walking becomes a mystical, artful act. Also important to note in this allusion is the fact that the ballad features a pilgrim, which begins to suggest the idea that walking in nature is a pilgrimage.

As has been discussed, the Transcendentalist view of religion relies on individualism, as every individual is thought to carry a piece of God. Based on this view, each person can have a personal relationship with God. Thus, the individual's experience and spirituality are important, rather than the religious practices of the collective. Furthermore, nature serves as a place for the individual to cultivate their own religiosity. Walking in nature in particular is a religious experience, where the individuality of the walker is important. When combined, walking and religion becomes a pilgrimage, in this case, a Romantic pilgrimage. In working to describe walking as a spiritual and mystic experience, Thoreau depicts "the art of Walking" as a pilgrimage, specifically mentioning pilgrimages multiple times. This is another example of him carefully managing the image of a walker. He first does so when explaining the etymology of the word saunter:

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for SAUNTERING, which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la Sainte Terre," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean.

(Thoreau 3 – 4)

The act of walking in nature is directly likened to a pilgrimage. Furthermore, this is an instance of Thoreau fabricating distinctions between different types of walkers and visitors to nature. The “saunterer,” or one who understands the art of Walking, is distinguished from “mere idlers and vagabonds.” The former is the superior individual, someone who walks the mythical walk. Furthermore, just as pilgrims have a religious calling, so do walkers. As Thoreau has been asserting, not everyone can be a walker, and thus the walker is individualized and mythologized. Finally, in understanding Thoreau’s walk as a pilgrimage, it is also important to note that a pilgrimage is a journey, not a permanent state of being. As Thoreau describes, he is not constantly on a walk, nor does he remain in the woods. Instead, he makes “occasional and transient forays only” into nature (Thoreau 48). Although this may contradict Thoreau’s rejection of society, it does further classify the American Romantic walk as a Romantic pilgrimage, specifically one that centers the individual, allowing them to prove their individuality.

It has been shown that individualism—specifically, rugged individualism—is a key tenet of American Romanticism and the American Romantic walking tradition. These “iconic human agents” are the heroes on the stage of wild nature (Ziser and Sze 385). Analysis of Thoreau’s writing reveals the mythologizing that goes into crafting a specific image of the walker as an enlightened, superior individual. Furthermore, the existence of the self-reliant individual relies on the existence of wild nature; through being (and walking) in wild nature, one proves individuality. Consequently, the challenges the individual’s experiences in nature affirms the space’s wildness. Because wild nature must be defined based on its relationship to society, the individual is connected to the society from which it is supposed to be removed. Thus, individualism is an act of social production. Overall, both wild nature and the self-reliant individual are unstable cultural myths that rely on each other, instead of being based in reality. In “Walking,” Thoreau constructs

these myths as important cultural doctrines, leaving a legacy for future American nature writing and American nature culture.

3.0 The American Romantic Walking Tradition in Thru-Hiking Memoirs

With the establishment of the American walking tradition's two main tenets, the myths of wild nature and the self-reliant individual, this tradition can be explored in Appalachian Trail thru-hiking memoirs. To elevate the AT to a space of wilderness adventure despite its palpable connection to the modern world and its existence as a mediated natural space, the thru-hiker must manage their imagery through the conscious or unconscious denial, deflection, and reshaping of the thru-hike both during the journey and in the recapitulation of the hike in their memoirs. Each thru-hiker engages in the mythologizing of the AT to, in turn, elevate themselves and (sometimes) other thru-hikers above the average modern citizen. This mythologizing is different for each hiker; just as Thoreau has his walking philosophy and constructs these myths to fit his philosophy, so does each of the thru-hikers. Each thru-hiker has their own idea regarding what a thru-hike is (that is to say, their own art of walking) and what wild nature and the self-reliant individual looks like. These philosophies answer tangible questions like whether a thru-hiker must pass every white blaze that marks the trail and what gear can be used, but also questions like why the trail exists, who it exists for, and the purpose of thru-hiking. In this section, I will explore what wilderness and the self-reliant individual are to each of the thru-hikers studied for this research.

3.1 *Becoming Odyssea: Adventures on the Appalachian Trail* Jennifer Pharr Davis

Jennifer Pharr Davis' thru-hiking experience and her account of it are notable for their extreme rendition of the myth of the self-reliant individual. Pharr Davis decided to hike the AT

after graduating from college, specifically framing the adventure as a manner of searching for identity in the face of change. Thus, from the very start of her journey, Pharr Davis centralizes her individual experience and identity. Throughout the rest of the memoir, Pharr Davis dedicates the recollection of her journey to the creation of her own idea of the virtues of the exceptional, self-reliant individual and to proving herself to be the most exceptional amongst these paragons.

From the very beginning of her thru-hike, Pharr Davis prioritizes what she deems solitude. On the trail, she “seek[s] out solitude” and celebrates feeling “more independent than at any other time” (Pharr Davis 39, 23). Being alone allows her to prove her self-sufficiency. This mentality contrasts with the mindset of many other thru-hikers, who seek out groups of companion hikers. Pharr Davis also puts a lot of effort into highlighting the exclusivity of completing the trail, as it is “something that most people couldn’t dream of doing,” particularly because of the strength of body and mind it requires (Pharr Davis 239). She is interested in using the trail to prove her spot in this exclusive superior group. For Pharr Davis, the Romantic individual who is receptive to spiritual enrichment of nature is stripped down to the doggedly self-reliant individual: someone who is physically able to complete a difficult physical feat through sheer determination. This is evident in Pharr Davis’s analogy between the thru-hiker and the athlete-as-hero. When hiking through North Carolina, near her family’s home, Pharr Davis spends an evening at home watching a televised basketball game with her father. While watching, she draws comparisons between the players and thru-hikers:

It was strange to think how much vocal support and enthusiasm surrounded these athletes when, back on the trail, I knew that I would have to push my physical limits and athletic aptitude in solitude and silence. (Pharr Davis 59)

Although the thru-hiker is likened to an athlete, thru-hikers pursue their sport without an audience and its support, removed from society. Somewhat ironically, considering that this reflection is a response to watching a game at home with her family in the middle of her hike, she depicts this lack of support as something that elevates the thru-hiker even above other athletes; to complete the feat “in solitude and silence” without the cheerleading other athletes get further proves the self-reliance and perseverance of the thru-hiker. Furthermore, hard work and self-testing (represented by pushing “physical limits” and “athletic aptitude”) become essential to Pharr Davis’ experience of hiking and her image of a thru-hiker. Not only does she emphasize the idea that a person must have specific abilities to be a thru-hiker, but she also pushes back against a common image of a backpacker (as a thru-hiker is a backpacker) as a free spirit who is avoiding settling down and facing life responsibilities; instead, she emphasizes the work and discipline that goes into thru-hiking. Overall, the image of the trail as hard work (as opposed to a vacation of sorts) is essential in Pharr Davis’ hiking philosophy, as she uses this hard work provided by the trail to prove her exceptionalism.

If the thru-hiker is an athlete, then the thru-hiker can perform well or poorly on the trail. During her first thru-hike (which her memoir details), Pharr Davis set the record for the fastest AT thru-hike completed by a woman. Four years later she returned to the trail and completed the fastest AT thru-hike recorded. If the trail is a sport that can be won, then Pharr Davis strives to be a winner and expects a prize; she describes how she “expected some reward from the trail: a gold star or a medal of honor” and that she “was entitled to a red carpet to Katahdin” because of the speed of her hiking (Pharr Davis 269). Thus, if walked the right way, according to Pharr Davis’ philosophy, the thru-hike becomes a proof of speed, endurance, and self-reliance for the thru-hiker. Thru-hiking becomes less of a journey to find oneself (as Pharr Davis originally depicts it when citing her

reasons for beginning her hike) and more of a journey to prove oneself to be superior. Pharr Davis's exceptional individual is a far cry from the Romantic individual who leaves civilization for spiritual self-discovery and instead reflects the encroachment of civilization in her competitive and consumerist approach to the hike. Traversing the AT is measured in the consumption of miles. The individual's exceptional journey is an extended competition. Overall, she paints the act of thru-hiking as a capitalist endeavor that values hard work and, for those who work hard enough, has a "victory road leading to Katahdin" (Pharr Davis 269).

In order to depict the trail as a space that provides hard work, Pharr Davis measures wilderness in its separation from the comforts and amenities of society that make living easier. For example, she displays her aversion to fancy hiking gear when she stops by an outdoors store and is surrounded by gear:

But though the products were supposed to help people enjoy the great outdoors, it seemed like many of them, like the four-hundred-square-foot tents, blow-up camp beds, and solar-powered radios and TVs, would prevent people from truly experiencing nature. (Pharr Davis 192)

Here, Pharr Davis consciously manages what types of experiences in the outdoors can be considered wilderness experiences. Because she considers this gear as making the thru-hike easier, Pharr Davis sees experiences in nature that include its use as not a true wilderness experience. Discomfort (which the thru-hiker with simple gear experiences) is inherent to the wilderness experience, as existing in discomfort allows the thru-hiker to prove their individuality. Furthermore, the more intricate gear is an attempt to reconstruct society within nature; "four-hundred-square-foot tents," mirror the construction of houses in civilization and the radios and TVs bring the noise of civilization to the trail. For Pharr Davis, gear represents society invading

wilderness. It must be noted that no thru-hiker tackles the trail without gear produced by modern industry. Shoes, clothing, water storage vessels, backpacks, and all the other accoutrements that Pharr Davis might consider “the basics” are not only products of civilization but are highly engineered to make hiking long distances possible. Thus, Pharr Davis’s disdain for certain gear is predicated upon an unexamined line between luxury and necessity that assists her self-mythologization. Moreover, each thru-hiker draws this line for themselves because the affordances of certain items must be balanced against their weight.

Pharr Davis’ rejection of gear seems to continue the Romantic walking tradition’s elevation of nature over society even to the extent of ignoring the role of manufacture in clothing and other items. However, although she may appear to engage in this tradition, she twists its manifestation in a way that does not actually align with Romantic and Transcendentalist philosophy; she uses it to aid in her depiction of the thru-hiker as an exceptional athlete. The traditional Romantic walking tradition’s philosophy (and Thoreau) reject society because it is considered corruptive. However, for Pharr Davis, connection to society is not corruptive, it just undermines the thru-hiker’s attempt to prove their athletic individuality. It is as if connections to society are performance enhancing drugs that the honorable athlete-thru-hiker cannot use and does not need. This remains to be true even at the cost of a thru-hiker’s health. When describing the physical toll hiking the AT has on her body, Pharr Davis writes, “For the first time in my life, I was experiencing real pain. And even though it hurt, it made me feel more alive than I did in the controlled comfort of society” (Pharr Davis 126). The pain caused by the trail is proof that Pharr Davis is working hard. Even if she could use gear to alleviate her pain, she would not, as she practices a “no pain, no gain” sort of mentality. In describing her pain on the trail as “real,” she implies that any pain in society is not true pain. And her description of “the controlled comfort of society” begs the question of who

controls the comfort. She insinuates that in society, people are deprived of true experiences. In contrast, on the trail, Pharr Davis breaks free from these confines. This freedom is worth it, even if it means feeling pain. The traditional American walking tradition's philosophy does not place value in the walker based on athletic ability or based on the pain overcome, and thus, Pharr Davis strays from the purposes of the tradition, despite continuing some of its tropes.

In addition to constructing wilderness as removed from societal comforts, Pharr Davis describes it as a place outside of human control, not in order to emphasize its sublimity but in an attempt to further depict hiking the trail as an extreme athletic endeavor. "The Smokies offer untamed wilderness that makes you feel subject to the environment, not in control of it," Davis writes of the part of the trail that traverses the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee (Pharr Davis 43). For Pharr Davis, the Smokies are wilderness because of their removal from the control and comforts of society and therefore, in these mountains, the thru-hiker is subject to nature, which provides the hard work. In doing so, she is continuing the tradition of the sublime. However, this is a more modern form of the sublime that places the focus on the individual instead of all of humanity. In more modern times, increased scientific discoveries make nature more knowable, and increased civilization makes nature less vast. By emphasizing the contrast between the individual and nature, these broader scientific advances are left out of the conversation, thus allowing the sublime to continue to exist. Here, the sublime makes the thru-hiker into a hero; despite facing this vast, unknowable wilderness, the thru-hiker makes it through, like a hero completing a journey.

Therefore, Pharr Davis not only strives to portray the thru-hiker as an athlete, but also as a hero. Her trail name furthers this point. A trail name, a quintessential thru-hiking tradition, is the

name that a thru-hiker goes by while on the trail, often bestowed by a fellow thru-hiker based on a characteristic or experience. Pharr Davis describes the origin of her trail name:

I was a Classics major in college, and over the past four days, I had compared the Appalachian Trail to Homer's *Odyssey* several times. One hiker suggested that my trail name should be Odysseus. But I didn't want to be a guy; there were too many guys out on the trail already. So I decided to re-gender the name and call myself Odyssa. (Pharr Davis 28)

It is important to note that even though her trail name is bestowed on her by another thru-hiker, Pharr Davis plants the seeds for the name by comparing the trail to *The Odyssey*. Her influence over her trail name is just one example of her managing the symbolism of the trail and her image as a thru-hiker. In likening herself to perhaps the most famous hero in Western literature, Pharr Davis is aware of her mythologization of the thru-hiker as courageous, resourceful, enlightened, and self-reliant. She is aware that in alluding to classic myths, she is depicting thru-hiking not as simply moving from one place to another, but as a heroic, mythic act (just as Thoreau does). Pharr Davis furthers this heroification of the thru-hiker through further connections of thru-hiking and stories: "I realized that I was a small traveling vessel in the depths of an ancient mountain chain that was rich with stories" (Pharr Davis 25). Here, she specifically works to connect nature to ancient myths (further removing it from society, like Thoreau). Then, having established this stage of wild nature, she places the thru-hiker, the "small traveling vessel" directly into the image. Again, she engages with the sublime by describing the wilderness as vast and ancient, and the hiker as small, dramatizing the experience of the thru-hiker, while ignoring the ways that modernity makes wilderness small.

Pharr Davis' extreme individualism that depicts her as the hero also presents her as superior to others. She practices hiker elitism, a phrase I created when reading these AT thru-hiking memoirs to describe a phenomenon in the texts: the idea that some thru-hikers are better—or more elite—than other hikers or other people, continuing the idea that not everyone can be a walker. Although hiking elitism is found in many of the thru-hiking memoirs, Pharr Davis engages with it the most, as displayed when she has to share the trail with other hikers:

There were several day- and section-hikers on top of the mountain as well. They seemed to be enjoying the view too, but something about coming all the way from Georgia gave me a sense of ownership. I felt connected to these mountains in a way that the other tourists could not understand. They were looking out over the same vista that I was, but I was certain that it struck me with a beauty and significance that they were unable to appreciate. I had worked really hard for these views, and the feeling of accomplishment I had on top of Franconia Ridge was more stunning than the scenery. (Pharr Davis 250)

Here, Pharr Davis again carefully regulates the depiction of thru-hiking. She uses other hikers as foils of her own achievement and heroism. A day-hiker is someone hiking on the trail for just a day, and a section-hiker is someone who strives to hike the whole trail in sections over a longer period of time. Although day-, section-, and thru-hikers all do the same thing—put one foot in front of the other on the same trail—Pharr Davis contrasts herself with them and constructs thru-hiking as a completely different experience. Through her capitalist lens, Pharr Davis has worked harder than these other hikers and thus is more valuable, making her into a hero. In a capitalist system, hard work leads to more ownership, and Pharr Davis' compensation for her work is a sense of ownership over nature. Her compensation for her hard work and heroism is a more poignant experience (on the very same trail) and a sense of ownership over nature. The idea of a person

owning the land undermines any assertions of its wildness, as wildness is meant to be measured by separation from people. Thus, although she strives to depict trail as wild, Pharr Davis undermines this construction. It is also important to note how her sense of accomplishment based on her hard work is more beautiful to her than the view itself.

Pharr Davis furthers the idea that the thru-hiker's experience in nature is superior to that of others through her depictions of nature, in which she aestheticizes nature through color: "The sky was lit up with hues of orange, pink, and yellow that could never be duplicated in manufactured colors. And when the sun set, the mountains shed their shades of blue to reveal a majestic coat of blue" (Pharr Davis 88). The focus on color as a visual quality of nature connects to Pharr Davis' assertion that she, as a hard working thru-hiker, she has a better ability to see nature's beauty when compared to others. It is as if she is seeing colors that others cannot. She further stresses the importance of color in nature when she writes about the "dehumanizing gray of our daily existence" (Pharr Davis IX). As an enlightened individual, Pharr Davis gets to exist in the world of color, as opposed to this daily "gray." It is important to note that her aestheticization of color connects to the Romantic walking tradition's idea that nature is inherently art; when she describes how the colors of nature cannot "be duplicated in manufactured colors," she mirrors the Romantic assertion that nature cannot be captured by a human artist, and thus remains mysterious and enchanted. This idea is also evident when Davis writes that "the entire sky was glowing with radiant, rose-colored hues and bright orange highlights" and asserts that the sky "seemed painted with an artist's touch" (Davis 224). Here, the artist is nature. Yet, she uses this tradition and her own form of the constructed myth of wild nature to further her sense of hiker elitism.

Also essential to Pharr Davis' iteration of the myth of wild nature is the view of nature as a superior alternative to wearisome and unfulfilling society, and life in nature as more peaceful and gratifying. When reflecting on how her life on the trail differs from her life off it, Davis writes:

The trail allowed me to feel a strong sense of freedom. And it helped me to see the oppression of a busy schedule and the way we multitask in civilization. I no longer saw what was civil about filling my life with commitments if I couldn't stop to watch the sunset or listen to the birds sing. (Pharr Davis 236)

Pharr Davis recalls Thoreau's opening of "Walking": "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil..." (Thoreau 3). Both connect nature to freedom and distinguish this freedom from a political definition of freedom in society. However, for Pharr Davis, this is not a freedom from the corruption of society (as it is for Thoreau and the traditional Romantic walking tradition), but more so from the pace and obligations of society and the demands they make on her personally. While Thoreau uses the word civil to describe an organized state of society and laws, Davis plays with the words and seems to refer more to the use of civil to describe politeness and graciousness. Thus, it seems that Davis elevates nature over society because it offers a better lifestyle, which differs from a traditional Transcendentalist distrust in society. So, again, although her writing can be misconstrued as a version of Thoreau's philosophy, Pharr Davis strays from the Romantic Walking tradition.

An essential part of Pharr Davis' attempts to separate the trail from society, thus depicting it as a place of wilderness, is her removal of the digital world from the trail. One could argue that, just as it arose to push back against industrialization in the late 18th century, the myth of wild nature, when employed by Pharr Davis, seeks to push against the growth of the digital world today, when society also exists online. Pharr Davis seeks to construct this separation when she writes,

“That such a footpath even exists in our modern cyber world is a testament to the visionary who conceived it in the early twentieth century (Pharr Davis IX). Davis characterizes the Appalachian Trail as a space that exists outside of the connected cyber world and as something pushing back against the oppressive digitality of present day. However, upon further investigation, the connection is not that simple. In the way that it exists today, the trail is connected to the internet; many hikers share photos and writing about their thru-hike online, particularly via Instagram and YouTube. The digital space has become a community space for thru-hikers, drawing more and more people to the trail. The trail itself has a digital footprint, instead of being removed from the digital world, or society. This contradiction demonstrates how the wilderness myth has had to shift to account for society’s growth and digital manifestation, which is nearly impossible to remove from most natural spaces that people visit.

As a space removed from the digital world, Pharr Davis also constructs wilderness as removed from the media, and thus as an apolitical space. For example, she describes not listening to the news while hiking:

As for the everyday news, I didn’t miss it at all. Politicians running smear campaigns, erratic Wall Street trends, the demigods of professional sports, celebrity gossip—even though I hadn’t paid much attention to mainstream media when I was still at home, I began to realize how much it had pervaded my life. (Davis 126)

For Davis, the trail is removed from the inundation of media. Although she tries to remove herself from media when not on the trail, she asserts that it is not truly possible to ignore media when in society; media and society are tied. Although she describes multiple forms of media in in this quote, her removal from politics is most notable. She writes about the trail as a space where this news is not relevant or important. This removal of the trail from politics appears in a few of the

other memoirs as well. For example, Sizer writes, “Social status does not matter in the woods and mountains The trail is a great equalizer” (Sizer 57). This statement does not seem inherently related to politics, but in erasing social status and asserting that the trail is a space of equality, Sizer removes questions of identity and related sociopolitical issues from the trail. This is a deliberate act of omission in the creation of the idea of wild nature. However, this begs the question of if it is a privilege to be able to ignore the news and to see the trail as a space of equality. The validity of this idea is questionable: just to name a few examples, people from low-income backgrounds may struggle to even get to the trail. Minorities, including hikers of color like Lugo, certainly have different experiences on the trail, especially because nature has been coopted as a majority white space.

3.2 The Unlikely Thru-Hiker: An Appalachian Trail Journey Derick Lugo

Of all the thru-hikers represented in this research, the one who differs most from Pharr Davis in hiking philosophy and iteration of the Romantic walking myths is Derick Lugo. Despite never having been hiking or camping, Lugo, a comedian from New York City, decides to hike the Appalachian Trail after learning about it in a book to experience a completely new adventure.

Lugo characterizes his pre-trail self as a thoroughly metropolitan man, and although this changes during his thru-hike, the contrast between the metropolitan world of his pre-trail self and the world of the Appalachian Trail is essential to his construction of wilderness. The very title of the book lets the reader know that as a Black man from New York City, Lugo is an “unlikely thru-hiker.” When he tells a friend his plan to hike the Appalachian Trail, she responds, “You are the

most well-groomed, metrosexual black man in New York City. You in the woods, without your mirror, your beauty products, or your designer clothes? *Please!* How will you shower?” (Lugo 2). Lugo characterizes the mirror, beauty products, and designer clothes as representative of society and in contrast with life on the trail. Thus, Lugo measures wilderness, in part, based on its difference from his life in New York City, specifically based on nature’s lack of the products (or comforts) of society, like Pharr Davis. He also constructs wilderness as a place that is psychologically different than society. Although he does not go as far as to depict cities as corruptive in the way that Transcendentalist philosophy does, Lugo finds peace and joy in nature that he does not experience back in New York. He describes how on the trail, he experiences “no burdens, no worries, just [him] and nature” (Lugo 28). This implies that cities and society are the spaces of burdens and worries, an idea that Pharr Davis constructs too. By the end of his thru-hike, Lugo prefers nature to his metropolitan home:

The inner peace I’ve found on the trail, and the affection I feel for it, differs from what I feel about New York. I miss my city friends, but I’m not so sure about the city itself. Will I quickly revert to the hectic pace of the Big Apple, or will I retain some of the serenity I found on the trail? (Lugo 171).

In constructing his form of the myth of nature, Lugo engages in the Romantic walking tradition’s elevation of nature over society. He continues the Romantic traditions of depicting nature as peaceful and a source of personal peace. Furthermore, he presents it as home to a better way of life, an alternative to the overwhelming lifestyle of society. Thus, it is because of (as opposed to in spite of) his city roots that Lugo notices and celebrates the trail’s difference and removal from society.

Lugo's depiction of the trail and nature as a superior way of life relies on his construction of the trail as a communitarian space in a way that traditional society is not. "It's the people that make this trail truly special," he writes (Lugo 30). For Lugo, the people, as opposed to the nature, the removal from society, or the ability to prove oneself to be a heroic athlete (like Pharr Davis) are the most important part of his thru-hiking experience. He reports that people treat each other better on the trail. For example, thru-hikers rely on each other for moral but also physical support. They also rely on trail angels, people "who provid[e] assistance or food to thru-hikers," or who otherwise help them complete the momentous task of walking 2,200 miles (Lugo 57). Thus, although a thru-hike comes off as an individual feat, no thru-hikers are completely self-reliant or alone. Community is the scaffolding that enables the act of thru-hiking the AT to exist. In his depiction of the thru-hike, Lugo elevates his focus on the community. At first, he is surprised by this community:

So forgive me if I'm a bit taken aback on the AT, where I find myself surrounded by unreserved affection with seemingly no hidden agendas. I'm beginning to realize that the rules of humankind are different out here. In fact, the instant I stepped foot on the AT, my perceptions began a slow conversion from doubt to belief. Belief that not all strangers are schemers, that gift from an unknown person can be just that, a *gift*, not some covert plan to separate me from my possessions. (Lugo 109).

In writing about "the rules of humankind," Lugo asserts that the Appalachian Trail has its own social code that differs from that of society. The "hidden agendas" and "covert plan" belong to the society from which he came. In contrast, the trail is a space where people are kinder, even to strangers. Thus, for Lugo, wilderness (as represented by the trail) is not defined by the lack of people in it, as it traditionally is in the Romantic walking tradition. Instead, it is defined by this

social code that is superior to that of society. Lugo experiences a “conversion from doubt to belief” as he learns to trust the kindness on the trail. The religious diction implies that thru-hikers learn the dogma of the trail and become members of a sort of trail religion. Therefore, Lugo constructs wilderness to be a morally superior space and thru-hiking to be not just walking but an act of becoming morally superior.

After becoming a convert to the beliefs of the Appalachian Trail, Lugo goes on to preach the trail’s doctrine:

I wonder how I can bottle this outflow of generosity and bring it out into the real world. Or *is* the AT the real world? If it isn’t, it should be. It has taken some time, but I’ve stopped questioning why strangers embrace us like close friends and leave trail magic for thru-hikers. Now my question is: Why can’t the rest of the world follow suit? (Lugo 109).

At first, when Lugo identifies society—and not the AT—as the real world, he echoes the opinions of society, that the trail is a place for a fleeting visit, like a vacation, or a space for people trying to escape reality. This represents his opinion before thru-hiking, the opinion that took time to unlearn. However, in revising this definition of which space is the real world, Lugo asserts that the world of the trail is superior to society. Again, he elevates the AT based on how people treat each other on it. At the end of the passage, Lugo seems unsure of whether society could change to be more like the AT, as he asks “why,” as opposed to “how.” Thus, he depicts the trail as having qualities that society cannot have in its current state of existence. Nonetheless, the trail enables the thru-hiker to understand himself as a part of a community, a sensibility that he can bring when he goes back into society, even if all of society cannot immediately follow suit. This idea that wilderness can improve society is also found in Thoreau’s work, as he writes, “A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it than by the woods and swamps that surround it” (Thoreau 32).

Thoreau provides a more direct connection between wilderness and the saving of society, while Lugo inserts the thru-hiker as the intermediary between the two, someone who learns how to help society in nature.

Because Lugo centers community in his construction of the Appalachian Trail and his myth of wild nature, it may seem that he does not continue the myth of the self-reliant individual. It may seem that, although he constructs his own myth of wild nature, he breaks the cycle by leaving the individual behind. However, this is not the case. Lugo's version of the individual relies on personal discovery. His focus on the experience of the individual, then, is not antithetical to community. Instead, the trail allows a person to practice individualism through connection to community. This idea is represented when Lugo reaches the top of Mount Katahdin, the end of the trail. He is surrounded by people who have made his journey special and supported him throughout it. However, ultimately, the end of the thru-hike is a personal moment; the book ends with Lugo writing "I did the AT, I whisper to myself as I sit on top of the world" (Lugo 205). This moment centers Lugo as an individual. He does not say "we did it," although he is with others who have hiked with and helped him. He focuses on his own achievement and paints an image of himself as a superior individual who is above the world. This is an example of an act of individuality that is framed and supported by community. The AT allows a person to be an individual based on their connection to community. Lugo's individual, therefore, is not actually defined by self-reliance; the trail is a place where one can trust and rely on others. Thus, his hiking philosophy is the opposite from that of Pharr Davis, who celebrates the modern capitalist individual. Even though Thoreau's philosophy is not capitalist, his idea of the individual provides groundwork for Pharr Davis' more extreme individual. So, Lugo's idea of the individual is even further removed from capitalist ideology than Thoreau's, in which capitalist ideology lies nascent.

Although Lugo leaves behind the self-reliance that is traditionally inherent to the American Romantic walking tradition's mythical individual, he retains the specialness of the individual. As has been explored, the AT community allows for thru-hikers to complete the journey that proves them to be extraordinary individuals. Furthermore, as parts of the world of the trail (as opposed to the inferior world of "real life" or society), thru-hikers are superior individuals. Lugo writes that "the collective AT community helps to resonate a unique energy, a different way of being" (Lugo 119). This different way of being separates thru-hikers from others. Lugo constructs the thru-hiker as someone who is not just walking, but is existing in an enlightened way, and thus is a notable individual when compared to larger society.

Lugo's individual has other qualities as well. Of all of the writer-hikers, Lugo is most generous in sharing his emotions, particularly his intense joy:

Today's hike takes me through a green meadow and then through farmland with young, short stalks of corn that turns into endless fields of golden wheat. Larger areas of green surround the soft, grassy trail I follow. When the trail opens up like this—whether into farmland, a meadow, a pasture with grazing cows, or a bald mountaintop—it evokes a childlike joy in me. It could be because I'm from the city, where space is limited and my daily views are of buildings, but my head seems to erupt in revelry whenever I step out from the dense woods into the openness of the world. I'm tempted to drop my pack and run out into the field swinging my arms, happy to be alive. (Lugo 157).

Not only does this passage reveal Lugo's continuation of the Romantic walking tradition's elevation of the individual's intense emotion, it also further reveals the cyclical nature of Lugo's iteration of the two myths: nature (the trail) causes Lugo's intense emotion ("revelry" and "joy"), which is essential to his idea of the individual. Lugo's writing of joy is often physical, as

demonstrated by the image of spinning in the field. Furthermore, he continues his elevation of nature over society here, as again, it is his city roots and comparing the trail to the city that makes nature even more special to him. Furthermore, his description of “childlike joy” recalls Thoreau’s mentions of “children of the mist,” suggesting a sense of wonder (and a lack of deduction) being important to experiences in nature (Thoreau 47). It is interesting to note that he evokes both the pastoral and wilderness here, which further reveals questions of how much of the trail is truly wilderness, an idea that will be explored later.

Lugo’s individualism also manifests in his ability and dedication to hiking the way he wants while remaining uninfluenced by the hiking philosophies or views of others (perhaps unlike Davis, if her desire to break hiking records is at all based on societal recognition).

When alone, there’s no one to observe whether I’m fast or slow or tired or hungry. I can be any hiker I please. One moment I’m a hiking machine, storming up and down mountains with ease; the next I’m a student of nature, studying clouds as they drift slowly across the sky. (Lugo 80).

Despite his love for community, Lugo finds freedom in his solitude and his ability to choose the kind of hiker he wants to be at that moment. The trail provides him the space and flexibility to be in touch with his individual needs and desires. This contrasts with Pharr Davis’ strict adherence to a schedule and constant look forward towards the end of the trail. Lugo is more focused on his unique journey and process. Again, Lugo’s hiking philosophy exists opposite Pharr Davis’.

As has been seen, Lugo places little importance on the speed that Pharr Davis values, instead opting to take his time. It is interesting to note that like Pharr Davis, Lugo calls thru-hiking a sport. However, the sentiment is very different: “Being first is not the goal in this sport; it’s about reaching the final destination” (Lugo 29). Instead of seeing thru-hiking as a race to the finish, Lugo

sees reaching Mount Katahdin in his own time as the goal. He stops when he wants, in a way that Pharr Davis would label as indulgent or a waste of time: “I could try to resist the allure of a hot cheesy, delicious pizza, a shower, and a soft bed, but why? One of the greatest things about the trail is that you can go with the flow and change up plans as you please” (Lugo 158). It is important to note that the pizza, shower, and bed for Lugo do not undermine the wildness of the hike, as they would based on the traditional Romantic walking tradition. Lugo depicts thru-hiking as an exploratory journey that involves being in touch with and following your individual needs (such as eating pizza or changing plans) and thus emphasizes the individual process of knowing oneself. In complete contrast to Pharr Davis, Lugo even deliberately draws out his hike. When he is nearing the end, he describes “sit[ting] on a boulder, in no rush to move on” in order to “milk this day, these last few hours, these final miles” (Lugo 203). Lingering is an essential part of his experience of and connection to the trail, which aligns with his enjoyment of the trail as a way to escape the fast pace of society off of the trail.

At one point his journey, Lugo adopts the opposite mentality, when he attempts the Four State Challenge. This is an AT tradition in which hikers attempt to hike from the end of Virginia, through West Virginia and Maryland to Pennsylvania (42.9 miles) in 24 hours. This is one of his lowest moments on the trail:

Frustration and confusion build. I wonder how much of it has to do with the fact that I’ve been hiking for 40 miles straight and have not slept for more than 36 hours. Thinking of it in those terms makes it all feel so absurd. In fact, this whole four-state challenge goes against my reason for hiking the AT. When I decided to thru-hike, I left behind the need to race against time. On the whole, my hike has been one good experience after another. Then I tackle this challenge, and it all goes awry. (Lugo 147).

In this passage where he goes against his more relaxed hiking philosophy, Lugo's characteristic sunny disposition and joy are lost. He depicts racing against time as something that belongs to his civilized world and not the trail. Bringing time to the trail undermines his own idea of the act of walking. This suggests that, for each hiker, there is a wrong and right way to hike. Lugo is very aware of his own philosophy and spells it out clearly:

For me, this journey is not about the miles, but the act of moving forward while carrying everything I need to live on. It's not about getting to the end but the process it takes to get there. It's the sense of strength, endurance, and accomplishment that makes this experience worthwhile... Then again, who am I to set the standard in AT thru-hiking? (Lugo 90).

For Lugo, the process of walking is more important, while the outcome is Davis' focus. However, this quote reveals that self-testing, although less intense than it is in Pharr Davis' hiking, is not absent from Lugo's philosophy. He still values the "strength, endurance, and accomplishment" that the hardship of the hike requires. The trail still serves as a way for him to prove individualism. Finally, Lugo's addendum of the words "for me" and his rhetorical question at the end of the passage are very important. They prove that although Lugo knows his own hiking philosophy, he does not believe that it should be imposed on others. He embodies the thru-hiking idea of "hike your own hike." Overall Lugo constructs the thru-hiker and his mythic individual as someone who completes a journey for themselves: Lugo's thru-hike is a journey of self-fulfillment and self-knowing, not a journey that strives to earn the hiker recognition from others.

Although Lugo's individual hikes for personal reasons, he also characterizes the individual as someone who shares stories from the thru-hike. Storytelling is at the heart of the American tradition of outdoor adventures, with swapping tales over a campfire as a common tradition. Storytelling is a tool of the individual; thru-hikers use storytelling to share their wild adventures

and construct themselves as a superior, self-reliant individual. All the writer-hikers included in this research partake in this tradition, as they have written memoirs sharing their thru-hiking experience. Storytelling also functions on a smaller scale on the trail, as thru-hikers share tales with each other and others they meet while hiking. Of the writer-hikers, Lugo characterizes storytelling as particularly important to his idea of the thru-hiker.

I tell the story using hand gestures and a physical reenactment. Am I sensationalizing events? Perhaps, but I'm only reflecting the effect this day had on me. Campfires and storytelling are two of the things we treasure most out here. Watching the smiles on the faces of my fellow hikers, I finish the tale of the wicked beauty of the Great Smoky Mountains and our brawling love. (Lugo 67).

Here, the thru-hiker becomes an entertainer. It must be noted that the validity of the story is not what matters. Instead, Lugo prioritizes communicating how the events made him, as the centralized individual, feel. Yet, the need to sensationalize further reveals the mythical nature of the self-reliant individual. Through sharing this story, Lugo proves to his audience, his "fellow hikers," that he is a heroic individual. Thus, the hiking community serves as a place to proliferate stories of and prove individualism, as is essential in Lugo's construction of the myth of the individual.

This passage also reveals Lugo's use of nature as paper upon which these stories are painted. This construction of wilderness to prove his individuality is seen also in his storytelling to the reader, through his writing:

Rays of sunlight only penetrate the trail at openings in the dense forest. I look up when I reach a break in the canopy overhead and let the sun shine on my face. Towering trees lean over me like sentries guarding an entrance into the woods. Fallen trees covered in green

moss litter the forest floor. The ones laid across the trail have been cut to make way for hikers. At one point, I hike under a dead tree. Its bare branches, several yards long, are shaped like the skeleton of a prehistoric beast. There's a poetic beauty in fallen trees. When these great perennial plants die, they nurture the ground they fall on and give life to other plants. Where else is the end of life so impactful, or so graceful in appearance? (Lugo 62).

Lugo employs a variety of techniques to make nature into a place of intrigue and legends. First, Lugo uses the sunlight to invite the reader into the "dense forest" and to illuminate this scene. In this description, wilderness is a place that is contrasted with society in that it is hard to enter; not only is it dense but it is guarded by sentries. Furthermore, while Lugo does not include the specific mythical allusions that are characteristic to the traditional re-enchantment of nature, he does describe the wilderness as connected to that which is ancient and mythical when he compares a tree to a prehistoric beast. Finally, Lugo finds fallen trees to be inherently poetic, mirroring the Romantic walking tradition's assertion that nature is inherently poetic art. However, it is important to note that at the end of this passage, Lugo shifts to a slightly scientific tone when describing how fallen trees act as nourishment for the forest. The evocation of the scientific, however removed from explicit scientific description, seems to contrast Thoreau's attempts to distance science and nature. This suggests that, although these writer-hikers represent re-enchanted nature in a similar way, with increasing modernity has come a shift in the representation of the myth. Overall, in addition to a space where people treat each other better and live a better life, Lugo constructs the wilderness of the trail as a place where stories are grown. These stories are used to prove the thru-hikers individualism, which then in turn, reasserts the wildness of nature. Thus, Lugo continues the cyclical pattern of the two myths of the Romantic walking tradition.

An analysis of Lugo's text would be incomplete without a recognition that the Appalachian Trail and the thru-hiking genre are mainly white spaces. In this research, Lugo is the only person of color represented. He recognizes this lack of diversity in his writing:

Back home in New York, I'd thought surely there are other persons of color who have the wild notion of living in the woods for months. Turns out I was wrong. Like watching *The Andy Griffith Show* and not realizing how few blacks are onscreen, it didn't occur to me that hiking in general is a predominantly white pastime. I've come to discover we're a rare sight out here. Diversity has not yet reached the AT, although the trail does seem already wide-eyed, and with open arms. (Lugo 69).

In this section, Lugo seems to address Pharr Davis and Sizer by pointing out that other hikers do not see how race affects hikers of color. It is important to note that Lugo discusses the topic of race on the trail with a sense of hope and the belief that the trail is ready to welcome a more diverse cohort of hiker. He builds his own narrative of nature as a space that is not yet one of equality but can become a place where the racial divide is transcended: "Yeah, I have dreadlocks, café con leche skin, and Afro-Puerto-Rican-ness running through my veins. It doesn't mean diddly-squat. I'm no different from my friend Overdrive, standing right next to me, hiking the same trail with the same goal" (Lugo 70). Despite his positivity and hope, he does still describe the microaggressions he experiences on the trail, such as being "asked about ganja several times, a topic that "is getting old" (Lugo 75). Overall, Lugo more so seems to see himself as different from other hikers on the trail based on his identity as an urbanite rather than his race.

Lugo's commentary on the trail as a future space of equality aligns with his beliefs regarding who the trail exists for, beliefs that contrast with Pharr Davis' extreme individualist view. Throughout the memoir, he describes how important the people he meets while hiking are

to him. He is excited by seeing different types of hikers (thru-hikers and day-hikers alike) and different types of people on the trail. For example, when he encounters “a group of senior day hikers,” he “stand[s] aside, giving them room to pass,” and is pleased to see that a woman, who needs the help of a cane to hike, is still on the trail (Lugo 57). It is hard to image Pharr Davis stopping to allow a group of older hikers to pass. As has been discussed, Lugo also sees the trail as a place for people of all different races and backgrounds. In his hiking philosophy, the trail exists as a space for anyone and everyone interested in it: “This wonderful trail is for everyone, including you” he writes (Lugo 209). As mentioned, Lugo is very aware of the lack of diversity on the trail. Yet, with a sense of hope, he constructs an image of the space as one that has potential to be more diverse. This construction is an example of a writer-hiker engaging in their own mythologizing of wilderness.

Overall, Lugo’s hiking philosophy is based on community and respect, with less focus on the individual (unlike Davis’ extreme form of individualism). If Davis represents a capitalist/consumerist view of the trail, then Lugo’s philosophy is more socialist and communitarian. Yet, he continues the legacy of the myth of the self-reliant individual and wild nature and their cyclical nature.

3.3 Where’s the Next Shelter? Gary Sizer

For Gary Sizer, “Green Giant,” hiking the Appalachian Trail is a dream that he sees to fruition when he quits his job to begin his journey:

It was impossible to be ready. Never mind that I’d spent the past three weeks scrambling to prepare. Never mind that I’d spent the past three years saving, planning, and

daydreaming. Never mind that I'd spent the past three decades feeling the pull of the horizon.... (Sizer 5)

Straightaway, Sizer mythologizes his thru-hiker as someone who is discontent in society and feels drawn to the trail. However, he does not seem drawn to the AT because of nature (like Thoreau, who feels a “magnetism in Nature,” does) (Thoreau 17); Sizer first hears about the trail decades earlier from “an old girlfriend,” to whom he then says, “You’re telling me that there’s a trail that goes all the way from Georgia to *Maine*? No fucking way. Has anyone ever done it all at once?” (Sizer 1). Here, the trail sparks his interest in its apparent impossibility. He centers individual feats when asking if anyone had hiked the entire thing. Thus, his interest in the trail seems more similar to Pharr Davis’ approach than to Thoreau’s, in that Sizer is interested in how he can use the trail to prove his own exceptional qualities. Despite this mythologizing, Sizer also pulls back the curtain that other writer-hikers use in their mythologizing of the thru-hiker. More than the other writer-hikers, Sizer describe the difficulty of leaving life behind for a thru-hike. He reveals the financial planning required, the preparation that never feels like enough. In describing the thru-hike as a dream that went unfulfilled for thirty years, he shows that becoming a thru-hiker is not as simple as being chosen by God (like Stutzman writes) or following the desire for a new adventure (like Lugo). However, driven by his desire to prove his exceptionality and a corresponding restlessness in society, Sizer makes the thru-hike happen:

There was no question it was the right thing to do, though my timing sucked. I told Katie over the phone about five minutes after I emailed my resignation to my boss. Katie and I both had known something big was up, just not what. I'd been staring at my resume for weeks and having ‘what if’ conversations with Katie... I had enjoyed a long, successful run consulting for a software firm that did quite well—well enough that we were swallowed

up by a whale of a company... some people gain comfort from that kind of setting. They welcome the anonymity of the corporate herd. Me, I get restless. (Sizer 13)

Here, in describing his dissatisfaction with and restlessness in society's corporate world, Sizer distinguishes the thru-hiker from the regular person. He distinguishes the thru-hiker as an individual who rejects the "anonymity of the corporate herd," unlike most people. This individuality compels Sizer to leave his job, even though his timing was not good. By describing this decision as "the right thing to do," Sizer depicts this decision as more of a necessary act than a choice; as the distinguished individual drawn by the call of the trail, he could no longer stay in society. In this quote, it is important to mention Kate, Sizer's wife. By including her, he frames his need to hike the trail as one that supersedes the commitments of the common middle-class man.

In constructing his exceptional individual, Sizer is more frank about the affordances of modern gear.

I showed off my 'Schnozzle bag,' possibly my favorite piece of gear. Besides being a waterproof pack liner keeping my sleeping bag and camp clothes dry, it also works as an air pump for the mattress. You just hold the corners and flap it to scoop up air, pinch it shut, and connect its nozzle to the air mattress. Presto! (Sizer 65)

The "Schnozzle bag" is just one example of Sizer's intricate gear. Although it does make trail life easier—providing a more comfortable bag and keeping his other items dry—Sizer's interest in the gear emphasizes the bag's ability to serve multiple necessary functions. This means that while he is less apparently Spartan than Pharr Davis, he still holds a prejudice against luxury that also echoes the Romantic value of freeing oneself from the deadening comforts of civilization. Therefore, while the traditional Romantic walking tradition might characterize this gear as bringing society into wilderness and discounting the individual's self-reliance, Sizer's emphasis on the gear as an

ingenious approach to necessity still shows traces of the original untenable opposition between nature and civilization.

Sizer's interest in functional gear connects to his desire to bring efficiency to his thru-hike through systems. For example, he brags that when it starts raining, he can "take off [his] pack, find the pack cover and secure it, put the pack on, and resume walking, all in under 30 seconds" (Sizer 173). Furthermore, he writes, "Almost everything I could possibly need while on the move can be reached without breaking stride," and goes on to describe the function of all of his pockets (Sizer 172). These carefully thought-out systems allow Sizer to hike more smoothly. They enhance his experience in nature. Having the ability to organize and adhere to these systems then proves Sizer's capableness and self-reliance on the trail, thus contributing to his status as the self-reliant individual.

Not only does Sizer allow his thru-hiker to use gear, he is also not a purist hiker (a concept I will discuss in the section that concerns ...Stutzman) and does not believe that a true thru-hiker must pass every white blaze while holding their gear:

There is a school of thought that if you don't carry every piece of your gear from start to finish, your hike somehow doesn't count. Hiking even a single step without your full kit is 'slackpacking.' Most people don't care, and I count myself among them. 'Don't give me this 'slackpacker' crap. I'm still walking from A to B and that's all that really matters,' I said (Sizer 8).

First, Sizer recognizes the existence of different hiker philosophies, in describing the purist view of hiking as "a school of thought." He then rejects purist hiking, describing it as ridiculous. Thus, he is less exclusionary in his construction of the thru-hiker. When Sizer must skip a part of the trail when he gets Lyme disease, he has to adjust his views of thru-hiking to become even more relaxed.

He originally worries that he is not a real thru-hiker because he is not hiking all of the trail, but Sizer is able to shift his mindset with the help of a friend who says “See, man—you’re doing it right. You aren’t missing anything on this hike. You’re doing it all” (Sizer 216). Sizer shifts to an understanding of the trail as more of a journey and experience than a checklist.

In defining the thru-hike as a journey, Sizer centers the thru-hike as an experience of hard work and self-testing.

I wanted to know what it felt like to give everything I had and just barely make it. I wanted the feeling of accomplishing something I hadn’t thought I could do. I wanted to be humbled and crushed by this (Sizer 104).

Although he does not emphasize the hard work of the trail as much as other thru-hikers, like Pharr Davis, for Sizer, the hardship (which is provided by the nature of the trail) is rewarding. It allows Sizer to prove himself. Sizer describes being “humbled and crushed” by the thru-hike. Thus, he constructs the thru-hiker not as someone who is the most athletically capable of overcoming the challenges of the trail, but as someone who is good enough to finish, someone who keeps going even if they must put everything into the trail and “just barely make it.” The ability to persevere through hard work becomes an essential quality of Sizer’s mythic individual. Furthermore, the effort required to complete the trail contrasts with the banality of Sizer’s life before the trail in the corporate world. In providing an escape from this banality, the trail provides a space for the thru-hiker to be their true self. “Actually, it was all those years on the corporate ladder that changed me,” he writes. “The trail simply put me back where I needed to be” (Sizer 319). Here, Sizer describes his thru-hike as a return to himself. In connecting his true identity with nature, he depicts society—as represented specifically by the corporate world—as corruptive of truth, similar to Transcendentalist thought. Thus, he portrays the trail (and nature) as a space that the thru-hiker

uses for a search of their true self, an act of individuality. He engages in the tradition of elevating nature over society here, but specifically represents society as the corporate world.

What is it about nature that enables this to happen? What does this elevation rely on? First, wilderness is a space removed from the arbitrary deadlines of society: “The concept of ‘ahead’ and ‘behind’ schedule were no longer in my vocabulary” (Sizer 14). But, Sizer’s elevation of nature over society mainly relies on lifestyle and doing what makes one happy.

All I could think of was that I loved hiking. Naïve thoughts from the early days came back: *I live outside now. Whatever the weather throws at me...bring it on!* Did I love swearing and kicking rocks all day? Did I love having my will sapped from the bite of crawling parasites that might bite me again? / Actually, I did. I was in the Vortex, and I loved it. Not the one that sucks you into a town and holds you there, but another kind, the spin cycle of life (Sizer 219).

When he is hiking, Sizer is spending his time doing something he loves, even when it is difficult. His use of the word “Vortex” differs when describing the trail versus the town (society). For the trail, the vortex of the trail is something Sizer cannot resist, as again, he is drawn to the trail. He does not want to resist. In contrast, the vortex of town entraps people and prevents them from living the life that they want.

Sizer seems to think that he has spent too much of his life in the vortex of society instead of the vortex of the trail. He writes about this when he meets another thru-hiker, Chad Denning, who has dedicated much of his life to thru-hiking.

I took a breath and meditated upon the last few years of my own life, sifting through random memories. Quite a few involved mountaintops or waterfalls, but the majority took place in gray, windowless conference rooms, featuring men in neckties arguing over ones and zeros.

Based on what little I knew of Chad, it seemed that if you chose a random sample from his life, there was a strong probability that he was on a trail or atop a mountain, doing something that he loved – most likely *with* someone he loved. That was where the hint of jealousy came from. The respect came from realizing that he had increased that likelihood on purpose. Chad Denning engineered a life that kept him surrounded by everything he loved most. And in doing so, he not only followed bliss, but became a source of it (Sizer 274).

Again, he depicts life in society, where people argue “over ones and zeroes” as banal and unimportant. Describing society as banal echoes the Romantic walking tradition; Thoreau reports being “astonished at the power of endurance” of “[his neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and years almost altogether” (Thoreau 7). As someone who is drawn to nature, the walker (and the thru-hiker) cannot remain in the dull standstill of society. In sifting through his memories and taking a random sample of Chad’s, Sizer forces the reader to do a playback of their own life and consider whether they have spent it doing what they truly love or whether they too were sucked into society. When describing how Chad “engineered” his life, Sizer calls to mind his interest in efficiency and systems, which enable one to live a fulfilling life. Overall, Sizer constructs nature as a space where people live a more happy, meaningful life, as contrasted with the dullness of society. The individual, then, uses this constructed nature to escape society. However, it is important to note that Sizer and many of his fellow hikers do not consider the world of the trail to be the “real world.” “You guys used to work together back in the real world, right? Think you’ll go back?” a friend asks Sizer on the trail. He responds “I don’t know, man. I still have some time before I need to decide. But I do know this...I am grateful for today” (Sizer 275). Just like how he reveals the challenges of leaving life to start

the trail, he reveals the challenges of staying on it. Through emphasizing the difficulty of starting and staying on the trail, Sizer throws his own exceptional individuality into relief.

He also recognizes wilderness to be a construction/myth (even though he constructs the trail as a mythical place). First, he acknowledges that the trail is not truly untouched and pure, as wilderness is said to be. Instead of occulting the fact that the nature of the trail has been damaged by human activity in an attempt to maintain the myth of wilderness, he reveals this damage.

One of my final camping spots in New York was a place called Nuclear Lake. The lake is so named because it was once the home of a nuclear research facility. In 1972 an explosion threw plutonium powder into the surrounding area. The government spent millions cleaning it up, and the labs have been razed. We know that the area is perfectly safe now, because the government has been testing it for decades and they said so. But just in case, there are signs all around warning against drinking the water, and forbidding camping altogether” (Sizer 233).

Not only is Nuclear Lake not untouched, it is actually toxic due to mankind’s actions. Although he writes that the area is “perfectly safe,” the reader can sense not only his distrust, but also the fact that the place is not truly safe, as indicated by the warnings. This destruction of nature inhibits the thru-hiker, who cannot camp there. Surprisingly, although Sizer clearly depicts the pollution as bad, he does not write with much disdain for the government’s actions. This same resigned disappointment in mankind appears when he writes of another part of the trail, “We really logged the shit out of this place, didn’t we?” (Sizer 97). Although he reveals the truth behind the myth of wild nature, he does not include a specific call for change.

Sizer also mentions mankind’s attempts to physically reconstruct nature. An example can be found in the American chestnut. This tree became virtually extinct after being wiped out by a

blight from a tree brought to the United States from East Asia. In an attempt to save the tree from extinction, Sizer describes how scientists have “been crossbreeding the American with the Chinese to get the gene that resists the blight” and then “cross[ing] the offspring with a pure American, and again and again, until they have a tree that’s like ninety-nine percent American chestnut but it won’t die to the blight” (Sizer 97). In an ironic chain of events, mankind destroys nature and then works to construct wilderness again, although by nature of man’s involvement. What the United States depicts as wilderness is, in reality, a construction, just like the Romantic walking tradition’s myth of wild nature.

Additionally, Sizer reveals that the apparent separation between the Appalachian Trail and society is not as large as many thru-hikers mythologize it to be either.

We were in the Shenandoahs, a national park less than 100 miles west of Washington, D.C. The Blue Ridge Parkway had turned into Skyline drive and both the trail and the road wound through the park. At least three times each day we would cross the road and I had started to hike with headphones and music to drown out the constant sounds of RVs and motorcycles. We seemed to pass pay campgrounds with electricity and plumbing every ten miles, and each day featured multiple opportunities to have a sit-down meal at one of the park’s many ‘waysides’—combination burger joint gas station/gift shops. / Initially I was bothered by their frequency; the sense of wilderness adventure had been shattered. I relaxed my opinion after devouring a hot cheeseburger and a black raspberry milkshake for second breakfast on our first day in the park (Sizer 178).

Here Sizer describes the section of the Appalachian Trail that goes through Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. He represents American wilderness in the classic way that the average American experiences it; through national and state parks. These parks are accessible by car and surrounded

by infrastructure that supports tourism. Sizer explicitly recognizes that this is not wilderness, though he is not bothered by it, and instead enjoys the comforts of the infrastructure. Other thru-hikers, such as Stutzman and Pharr Davis would bemoan this intrusion of society onto their thru-hiking experience. In fact, they do not spend as much time describing these spaces, in attempt to maintain their image of the Appalachian Trail as wilderness. However, the dynamic that Sizer represents here is perhaps what the American brand of wilderness is today: a slice of nature between pieces of society that is accessible by car, instead of the sprawling, pristine, solitary spaces that the myth of wild nature traditionally describes. Therefore, if wilderness and society (civilization) are seen as opposite on a spectrum, the AT is closer to the side of society than the original Romantic walking tradition describes and more so than one would imagine based on how the trail is mythologized by many writer-hikers. The trail's connection to wilderness in modern day imagination seems to be a myth. In fact, it seems that as time passes and the world grows more and more modern, this theoretical spectrum shrinks, wilderness and society becoming closer together (or perhaps wilderness being pulled towards society).

Not only is wilderness closer to society than it may seem, it is also used by society. Gatlinburg, the town that most tourists stay at when visiting Great Smoky Mountains National Park, is another example. Sizer describes the town as “a shining beacon of commercialism in the middle of a vast wilderness” (Sizer 76). Here, he although he does define the Smoky Mountains as a “vast wilderness,” he reveals its proximity to society. In describing with a sensational overload the town's “flashing neon lights, expensive parking, and animatronic bears playing harmonicas and trying to sell you beef jerky and imitation moonshine,” Sizer characterizes this “Gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains” as the antithesis to the nature is apparently leads to (Sizer 76). Thus,

not only is the American brand of wilderness accessible through and fueled by society, but it also seems to be sold by society, coopted by capitalist culture.

Overall, Sizer engages with the myths of wild nature and the self-reliant individual and forms his own versions of the myth that are still reliant on each other; nature provides the individual with the space to do what makes them happy in a way that society cannot. The individual's happiness then reaffirms the wildness of the nature. However, Sizer's writing is unique because although he continues these myths, he reveals that they are indeed constructed myths, when many of the other writer-hikers choose to hide this fact. His demystification, though, aids him in elevating his own exceptional individuality; his ability to see through certain illusions paints him as special. Furthermore, the fact that he does not call for action seems to depict him as someone who is above the situation, like someone who uses his superiority to call things as he sees them, but who, being removed from the situation, does not act upon the situation.

3.4 *Walking With Spring* Earl Shaffer

Earl V. Shaffer, who completed his thru-hike in 1948, was the first person to hike the entirety of the Appalachian Trail and is considered to be the first thru-hiker. By the end of his expedition, Shaffer became a legend of sorts to the people following his journey and retains this celebrity status within the thru-hiking community to this day. In fact, the thru-hiking community has mythologized Shaffer, crafting an image of who he is, almost like the crafting of a thru-hiker origin story. This is the romanticization of the thru-hiker. In the foreword to Shaffer's memoir, *Walking with Spring*, Maurice J. Forrester, Jr. contributes to the creation the legend of Shaffer.

We exchanged only a few words on that occasion, and Earl spoke with that way he has of looking onto the distance while he talks to you, as though he is just waiting for an opportunity to break away and head off by himself to the mountains. I thought at the time that he was merely being polite and was eager to finish our conversation; later I learned that it was his style. Of course, he really does want to be back in the mountains, but that is because he is Earl Shaffer. Earl is a loner, a poet and a singer; he is also part of the song.

(Forrester v)

Forrester describes Shaffer as a character, depicting him as someone who belongs in nature, as he is mentally elsewhere, in the mountains. An explanation for why Shaffer wants to be in the mountains is not provided, other than “because he is Earl Shaffer,” and thus this wildness is described as inherent to Shaffer’s state of being. In fact, in calling Shaffer “part of the song,” Forrester places Shaffer more in the world of mythic nature than reality. Shaffer seems to be “part or parcel of Nature,” as described by Thoreau in the opening of “Walking” (Thoreau 3). For Forrester, Shaffer is not just the father of thru-hiking, but a mythical figure who is mysterious and hard to pin down.

The other writer-hikers included in this study are aware of Shaffer and see him as a mythic legend as well. For example, when at an AT convention, Letcher describes seeing Shaffer. When he was introduced, “an expectant hush came over the crowd” and “cheering went on and on,” as “here was the person responsible for all of this” (Letcher 177). Shaffer is a celebrity to other thru-hikers, a revered father of the AT community whose story has been made into a sacred origin story for thru-hikers.

The fact of AT culture’s awareness and reverence of Shaffer places him alongside Thoreau as one of the mythmakers whose influence can be traced through AT memoirs. In some ways, it is

possible to see Shaffer as a more direct inheritor of Thoreau's Romantic individualism. In fact, since the Appalachian Trail was not originally meant to be hiked continuously, Shaffer's thru-hike itself inscribes the self-reliant individual into the Appalachian Trail. For Shaffer, however, the thru-hike was not goal-oriented as much as it was an outgrowth of Shaffer's retirement from society. In fact, of all the thru-hikers, Shaffer aligns most with the image of the rugged individual. In the foreword to *Walking with Spring*, Forrester describes Shaffer as a little rough around the edges. "Earl had drifted in earlier in the day—in a way that I later learned was typical—unannounced and unexpected," Forrester writes (Forrester v). He describes Shaffer as late and almost in his own world, even when at public events, qualities that are not considered to be polite. In a way, Forrester almost apologizes on behalf of Shaffer for these qualities, echoing Thoreau's warning that a walker may have a "thicker cuticle" over some of their "finer qualities" (Thoreau 9). Forrester contributes a lot to the romanticization of Shaffer's antisocial and almost derelict nature as "part and parcel" of his exceptional qualities.

We can see the roots of the snobbery of some thru-hikers in Shaffer's disposition toward the gear involved. He hikes alone and prides himself on his ability to survive with little. For Shaffer, a thru-hiker should "carry as little as possible but choose that little with care" (Shaffer 9). For example, he made it through the whole hike with one pair of boots that he continuously mended, although it is typical for thru-hikers now to replace their boots multiple times on the trail. Shaffer's assertion that the thru-hiker (and self-reliant individual) does not rely on much gear does not stem from the idea that gear is representative of disruptive society (like Pharr Davis' philosophy) but on the idea that the wilderness is the individual's natural environment. For example, Shaffer describes two other hikers at the end of the day who "headed immediately in the direction of Tapoco Lodge, a deluxe tourist haven, as if they couldn't wait to escape the forest,

while [he] was loathe to leave its solitude” (Shaffer 28). Shaffer, as a thru-hiker, does not require the comforts of society as a break from nature, unlike other visitors to nature. In fact, here Shaffer distinguishes the thru-hiker—who belongs in nature—from the tourist, who requires society as a way to recover from time spent in nature. Furthermore, although the idea of trail angels had not yet been created, many people from the areas surrounding the trail offer Shaffer help during his hike. However, whenever he is off the trail, he feels drawn to return: “I got that faraway look in my eyes and said lots of miles lay ahead and I already tarried too long” (Shaffer 23). The “faraway look” reveals that even when he is with other people, Shaffer is being called back to the trail, to nature. When he has the opportunity to remain in the comforts of someone’s home for a night, he rarely accepts: “Mr. Handy said I should stay for the night, “or a week for that matter,” but I told him the Spring weather was moving north and I was going along” (Shaffer 58). The name of Shaffer’s memoir stems from his plan to follow Spring, which marks Shaffer’s hike as an extension of the natural world. Thus, the self-reliant individual may be antisocial, but that is just a result of a deep tie to nature.

Despite his antisocial behavior, Shaffer becomes a celebrity during his hike, as people learn of his (at the time unheard of) attempt to complete the entire trail. There are times when he becomes a spectacle alongside nature: “Sightseers stared at me as much as at the scenery...I felt detached from them, like a stranger in a far country” (Shaffer 61). Shaffer positions himself with nature and apart from the sightseers, once again inscribes the thru-hike as a journey that distances society. This quote also reveals his original aversion to being a trail celebrity. When he is interviewed for the newspaper and radio as more and more people hear of his journey, Shaffer is at first an unwilling participant. This publicity disrupts his solitariness, especially as people start recognizing and anticipating him as he is walking. But Shaffer comes to accept it and even embrace it. Thus,

Shaffer constructs the thru-hiker as someone who is solitary, yes, but who, based on their specialness, is celebrated by others. By the end, there are people anticipating his completion of the trail, and Shaffer is aware of the potential gap between myth and reality when it comes to celebrities:

No one was expecting anyone like me. It would be someone six and a half or seven feet tall, with bright red shirt and hobnailed boots, carrying a high and mighty pack. Actually, the real woodsmen of American history, Boone, Crockett, Carson, Wetzel, and others were of average size and appearance. (Shaffer 147)

Shaffer corrects the image of the thru-hiker as heroic individual, but his allusion to Boone, Crockett, Carson, and Wetzel, all famous frontiersman that have been legendized in American history, is important. All of these men are traditional rugged individualists, and thus in this comparison, Shaffer portrays the thru-hiker as a rugged individualist and as a potential future legend in American nature culture. Despite describing the frontiersman as “the real woodsmen,” implying a more modest achievement for thru-hikers, he is also drawing the comparison in instructive ways. Thru-hikers do not have the same status but instead are offspring of these woodsmen. It is important to dwell on the allusion to Lewis Wetzel in particular. Although all these men likely partook in racist or problematic actions, he in particular is remembered (and even celebrated) for his violence towards and murders of Native Americans. This reveals the history of racism and violence in American nature traditions. Shaffer’s reference to Wetzel (without an acknowledgement of his violence) becomes more problematic when put alongside Shaffer’s interest in Native American culture and history. Various times throughout his journey, Shaffer mentions legends from different tribes. For example, when in New Hampshire’s White Mountains, Shaffer writes, “The Indians called the White Mountains ‘Agiocook,’ ‘Mountains of the Showy

Foreheads” (Shaffer 121). Not only does he fail to mention a specific tribe, he uses this culture without decrying the violence that was inflicted against Native Americans or mentioning that the land of the trail traditionally belongs to different tribes. Instead, in an act of cultural appropriation, Shaffer attempts to align himself with Native American culture to further the idea that he belongs in nature.

Overall, Shaffer constructs the myth of the individual as someone who prefers to exist in nature but is celebrated by society. For Shaffer, this is an exclusive identity. Not everyone has the potential to be a thru-hiker or the mythic individual. Again, he draws the distinction between hikers and other visitors to nature many times:

I kept apart, being oriented to the wilderness, poignantly aware of the difference between the world of nature and the feverish holiday atmosphere of crowds who seem to dread venturing far from automobiles, restaurants, and deluxe cable cars. (Shaffer 124)

Again, as a true hiker, Shaffer is connected to the wilderness and belongs to “the word of nature” in a way that other visitors to nature do not. Just like Phar Davis, Shaffer sees his interactions with nature as superior to those who access it through cars and cable cars and who eat dinner at a restaurant at the end of the day instead of next to a campfire on the trail. For Shaffer, the other visitors do not even get to earn the title of hiker: “The people were tourists, not hikers” (Shaffer 129). Thus, he represents the hiker as a special individual who interacts with nature in a deeper way. Not only are the tourists unable to truly interact with nature, but according to Shaffer, they lack the knowledge required to do so, as depicted by his assertion that “warning signs are places at timberline” for these people (Shaffer 131).

Shaffer also depicts thru-hiking as a gendered act. For example, when he passes a campsite where “a group of girls was in residence,” he avoids them like a plague, writing that “one hasty

glance was enough to send [him] off, practically at a lope” (Shaffer 98). Later, he tries “to sleep while huddled under the poncho, no shelter, no supper, no nothin’ except definitely misogynistic thoughts” (Shaffer 98). Shaffer is repelled by the women, and he writes about them as they have invaded nature, a place where they are not meant to be. Furthermore, he would rather experience discomfort than camp near the women. Thus, Shaffer clearly constructs the thru-hiker and self-reliant individual as a man.

In accordance with other writers who celebrate self-sufficiency and individualism, particular Ernest Hemingway, Shaffer writes in a stripped-back style. Yet, Shaffer is artful in his depictions of nature and thus, in his construction of his own myth of wilderness. In fact, despite his frugality in choosing gear, Shaffer carried a journal to record his experiences and to compose poems about nature. In his descriptions of nature, Shaffer centers gaze and visual perspective. For example, in describing the view from Mount Katahdin, at the end of the trail, he writes:

In every other direction was spectacular scenery... below and as far as the eye could reach was a region of lakes, seen as though from an airplane... someone has said that a giant mirror was broken over Katahdin and the lakes are the pieces. The glory of Katahdin is its dual beauty: to look at, and to look from. (Shaffer 141-151)

Shaffer’s ocular diction seeks to give the reader a view of Katahdin but also to place the reader on Katahdin. Furthermore, in describing the mountain’s “dual beauty,” Shaffer constructs wilderness as a space that strikes glory and delight in the thru-hiker based on its visual appeal. It must be noted that the focus on vision does imply that the viewer—Shaffer—is separate from nature (as does the airplane, which flies above nature), contradicting Shaffer’s descriptions of the thru-hiker as belonging to nature. However, this separation here provides a sense of scale to the scene that

elevates the sublimity of Katahdin, the grand finish to the thru-hike. This allows Shaffer to characterize the trail as a grand, special space.

Shaffer frequently uses the sublime to construct wilderness. This is where self-testing comes into play in his narrative. For example, he writes “The highlands of New Hampshire have a bleak ruggedness that commands the respect of the hardest mountaineer” (Shaffer 121). Although Shaffer can survive in nature, he reminds readers that it is rugged and to be respected. It is even dangerous, wilderness is inherently, according to Shaffer: ““Yet these are a part of the free wild way of the wilderness, the natural hazards” (Shaffer 120). Shaffer seeks to characterize the trail as wilderness and as dangerous, and in doing so, he constructs the trail as a place where few can survive. Thus, again, it is a space where the individual can prove their superiority, just like the so-called frontier for the frontiersman he references.

Despite this danger, Shaffer also characterizes nature (and the trail) as a space of healing, similar to traditional Romantic philosophy. However, for Shaffer, the trail is a space of psychological healing. Shaffer hikes the trail after returning from fighting in World War II and the thru-hike becomes a healing journey.

This was the threshold of my great adventure, long delayed by World War II and without my trail partner, who had been killed on Iwo Jima. Those four and a half years of army service, more than half it in combat areas of the Pacific, without furlough or even rest leave, had left me confused and depressed. Perhaps this trip would be the answer. (Shaffer 8)

The trail partner he mentions was his childhood friend he had planned to hike the trail with. Shaffer only describes his emotions sparingly and does not spend much time further exploring the psychological toll of war, other than describing how he was “confused and depressed.” Yet, the war is a shadow over his whole walk. He meets other people who were also affected by the war:

He meets other veterans or people who lost loved ones. He sees violence on the path. For example, when he passes the Mason Dixon line, he reflects on it as an “invisible line drawn to settle a dispute that brought on a war” (Shaffer 78). Although he does not directly address his emotions often, his emotions appear on the trail. Thus, for Shaffer, nature can reflect a person’s emotional landscape, or become an emotional landscape. The trail does prove to be a healing process; when he talks to a veteran who “had been in the Pacific too,” Shaffer’s “spirits beg[*in*] to rise” (Shaffer 107). Furthermore, he is able to grieve his late friend: “I thought of my old-time buddy, lost in war... Was he walking with me now, in spirit?” (Shaffer 38). Thus, wilderness is not just a space to prove individuality, but also a place for the individual to heal.

Finally, similar to Lugo, Shaffer depicts the trail as representative of a better way of life. However, while Lugo celebrates life on the trail and in nature because of its community and kindness, Shaffer prefers the trail to life in society for the adventure, solitariness, and separation from “city clutter” (Shaffer 152). While hiking, Shaffer writes that “the doings of the outside world no longer interested [him]” and that “only the Long Cruise [his thru-hike] was important now” (Shaffer 22). Furthermore, as the end of his hike nears, he writes, “Trail-hiking had become my way of life. Civilization seemed like a sham” (Shaffer 152). Shaffer prefers the way of life on the trail as opposed to in society, and thus continues the tradition of elevating nature over society. However, this is a way of life is not one that he thinks should be implemented for others, like Lugo. Instead, Shaffer constructs nature as a personal space for himself to live life in a better manner. Shaffer’s relationship to the AT recalls Thoreau’s musing that “we should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return— prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms” (Thoreau 4-5) with the difference that Shaffer’s journey seems sparked by a desire to find heart in the world. His memoir demonstrates

the availability of the myth of the self-reliant individual for purposes of individual self-re-discovery while it also demonstrates the power of the myth of the wilderness to define an individual's existence.

3.5 Hiking Through: One Man's Journey to Peace and Freedom on the Appalachian Trail

Paul Stutzman

After losing his wife to cancer, Paul Stutzman quit his job as a restaurant manager to hike the Appalachian Trail. Stutzman was raised as a Mennonite and although he did not continue this lifestyle as an adult, his thru-hike is centered around Christianity. Stutzman intends his hike to be a religious experience from the start, as is evident in his trail name, which he chooses for himself when he begins the journey: "I'd chosen Apostle, not only because my name was Paul, but because the definition of *apostle* is 'one sent forth on a special mission'" (Stutzman 42). Thus, Stutzman's characterization of the thru-hike as "a special mission," a religious journey for which he has been specifically chosen by God, echoes the Romantic walking tradition's idea that the true walker is an individual who experiences the spiritual dimension of God-in-nature. However, as an apostle is someone who evangelizes, Stutzman's "special mission" is not just walking, but spreading the form of religion he practices while on the trail.

While Stutzman's emphasis on the hike as a religious practice echoes the Romantic idea of nature, his memoir can be read as an evangelizing reappropriation of the Romantic spirituality that elevates nature to the sublime. Stutzman renders the trail and nature as a space where he can grow in his devoutness because it is an inherently religious space: "I was just a solitary hiker wandering down God's trail through His great outdoor cathedral" (Stutzman 170). Not only does Stutzman

assert that the trail belongs to God, he also describes nature as his place of worship. Metaphorizing nature as a cathedral has appeared in other Romantic literature. This metaphor also allows Stutzman to simultaneously depict nature as a better place of worship than traditional churches of society and to claim nature as a Christian space:

The perimeter of our cathedral that Sunday morning was the distant horizon, and the ceiling reached to the sky, where scattered puffs of white drifted against a blue background. An artist greater than Michelangelo had painted the ceiling of this chapel. (Stutzman 216)

Again, Stutzman describes nature as belonging to God, specifically as an artistic work of God. Nature is not just a space where one can be religious, but is actually inherently a holy space. In depicting nature as a holy space, Stutzman continues a Romantic tradition and technique in enchanting nature. Stutzman's elevation of beauty of the trail over the Sistine Chapel, in Vatican City, is also important, as it implies that nature is even holier than what is considered to be one of the holiest places. He also depreciates Catholicism. Furthermore, the Sistine Chapel depicts scenes from the Book of Genesis, which explains God's creation of the world and mankind's relationship with God, and establishes the idea that God provides salvation. Nature, then, is a more beautiful chapel as instead of representing the God's creation, it is God's creation. Again, while he continues the Romantic tradition of deeming mankind's relationship to God as best found in nature, he also establishes a direct connection between church worship and time in nature. Thus, Stutzman intensifies the Romantic and Transcendentalist religious philosophy and intensifies it, reappropriating it to a more orthodox religious view. He centers religion in his thru-hike in a way that the Romantic walking tradition does not.

While traditional Transcendentalist thought posits that society corrupts the individual's relationship with God, Stutzman seems to believe that society distracts from the individual's

relationship with God. Thus, he depicts the trail as a space that is (or should be) removed from the noise and distraction of everyday life, providing more space to be present with God:

Out here in the woods, this toy [radio] was destroying my newfound freedom. I no longer heard my footsteps on the pine needles or the birds singing or the wind rustling through the trees... somehow I was being robbed of the present. I had traded the joy of nature and conversing with God for a little radio (Stutzman 272).

Here, the toy radio represents society. It interferes with nature, disrupting the sounds of nature. For Stutzman, the nature's removal from distractions like the radio provides him with freedom from society and the ability to live more in the present. This removal freedom from society is what enables him to be closer to and communicate with God. Thus, Stutzman too elevates nature over society, particularly based on the connection to God that the peace of nature provides, which, in society, is drowned out by noise.

This connection of human and God through nature also appears in Stutzman's assertions that he can speak to God through nature: He writes, "I thought I could hear the soft voice of God in the music of the brook. *Apostle, did you see Me today?*" (Stutzman 86). Stutzman constructs nature, in this case a brook, as a conduit through which one can connect to God. Thus, he represents a much more personal relationship with God than is typical. Not only does he have personal conversations with God, but he does also not require a religious leader, a church, or a religious community to form this connection, tools that are usually typical in Christianity in maintaining religiosity. This personal relationship with God reflects Transcendentalist religious philosophy and, thus, the traditional manifestations of the Romantic walking tradition and the myth of the self-reliant individual as someone who can connect with God on a personal level. However, again, Stutzman presents a more intense relationship with God than the Romantic walking tradition does.

For example, although Thoreau finds religion in nature, this connection does not define his walk. For Stutzman, religion is the most important element of his thru-hike. Furthermore, Thoreau does not attempt to spread religion the way that Stutzman does.

Stutzman further continues the Romantic walking tradition's myth of wild nature in describing nature as a space of healing and the thru-hike as a journey of healing. As mentioned, he decides to hike the Appalachian Trail after the death of his wife. His plan arises after spending a weekend hiking: "I once again experienced the soothing and healing power of nature...on the flight home, I considered the balm brought by just two days of hiking and wondered if a much longer hike might translate into continued healing" (Stutzman 24). According to Stutzman, a shorter trip into nature—not just a hike on the Appalachian Trail—has the same healing effect. However, the length of the trail provides a more complete healing journey. By the end of the trail, this longer journey, Stutzman has achieved the healing he seeks. When he is atop Mount Katahdin, he writes "I dropped my backpack and laid my poles across it, then grabbed the base of the sign, tears falling, and thanked God for safety and healing" (Stutzman 322). He directly attributes his healing to God, not the nature, but the trail is what enabled God to provide the healing. The fact that Stutzman thanks God for not just healing but also for safety is notable. Stutzman implies that although the trail is a space of healing, thru-hiking is also dangerous. Even though he does not engage much with the sublime, Stutzman still characterizes the trail, based on its wildness, as a space of self-testing.

Overall, Stutzman depicts the thru-hike as an emotional journey of healing in addition to a physical journey of walking. Stutzman's wilderness is space where God is found, where the individual can pursue an intimate relationship with God, and where this relationship can be used for emotional healing. His individual, then is not characterized by athleticism (like Pharr Davis')

or self-reliance (like Shaffer's), but instead by personal religiousness. Stutzman's individual is the religious pilgrim:

Every year, several thousand believers answer the call to make a pilgrimage from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to another mountaintop 2,176 miles away. Of these thousands, only several hundred are chosen to finish. Chosen? Yes. If you are ever one of those solitary Appalachian Trail thru-hikers and you somehow survive three hundred daunting mountains, precarious river crossings, difficult rock climbs, discouraging illness and loneliness, and punishing weather, and you stand at last as the summit of mighty Mt. Katahdin, then you will indeed know what it is to be one of those chosen few. (Stutzman 33)

Stutzman is clear in describing thru-hikers as pilgrims. However, only those who actually finish the trail are the superior, actualized individuals. This exclusivity stresses the individuality of those who make it to the end. The idea that successful thru-hikers are the ones who are chosen (it is implied, by God) directly reflects Thoreau's assertion that the walker requires "direct dispensation from heaven" (Thoreau 5). The phrase "chosen few" refers to a concept from Puritan and Calvinist religion and refers to the idea of predestination, or that some people are chosen by God to be saved and go to heaven while others are damned from birth. Thus, Stutzman mythologizes the successful thru-hikers as people who were predestined to complete the trail because they are chosen to receive God's grace.

As he shares his journey as a pilgrim and his personal connection with God, Stutzman's memoir becomes a Christian testimony, chronicling his relationship with God. He seems to become a believer of a new form of Christianity while hiking, the Christianity of the trail, which has different practices and beliefs:

As I hiked that Sunday morning, I had my own church. It was not a religious experience at all. As a matter of fact, I was losing my religion out here. And what I lost in religion, I gained in spirituality. (Stutzman 201)

Although Stutzman claims to be losing his religion, it instead seems that he is learning a different type of religion, one where believers practice in nature rather than a church, and one where the individual can connect with God on their own. Spirituality refers to this personal relationship with God that the trail enables one to have. Instead of losing his religion, Stutzman joins the religion of the Appalachian Trail. Here, it is important to remember that as an apostle, as he labels himself with his trail name, Stutzman has the mission of sharing this religion. Towards the end of his journey (and the end of his memoir), when he has become a believer of the trail's religion, Stutzman seeks to evangelize his readers:

So just between you and me, has God spoken to you? If He did, would you recognize and listen to Him? Do you have the courage to follow His wishes, even if what He asks seems totally irrational?... If you want a life of real freedom, then listen to what God is telling you. (Stutzman 209)

Stutzman aggressively addresses the reader, no longer allowing them to passively read about his religious journey and discovery of the religion of the trail. He recognizes that it may seem irrational to hike the Appalachian Trail (and follow its religion), but he also asserts that this is the "path to freedom" (Stutzman 260). Again, for Stutzman, thru-hiking is not just a physical journey, but a religious one. He even reports that God told him to share his religious message through the memoir: "*Paul, I want you to take this message to others: I am coming soon... You're writing a book, aren't you? Put this message in your book*" (Stutzman 259). Thus, the thru-hiker, Stutzman specifically, is not just a believer of the trail's religion, but an apostle (evangelizer).

Although religion is by far the most important aspect of Stutzman's thru-hiking and his version of the Romantic walking tradition's myths, there are other elements to his thru-hiking philosophy. For example, Stutzman is an example of a purist hiker, someone who believes that to truly hike the Appalachian Trail, one must pass 'every white blaze' on the trail (Stutzman 77). Stutzman holds on to this philosophy, even at the point of danger. For example, at one point in his journey, a part of the trail has been redirected to blue blazes, or a trail that is taken via boat. Stutzman decides to wade through a river that the white blazes cross despite knowing "it was foolish and dangerous" (Stutzman 319). After, he celebrates: "I'd done it! Yes, I was still a purist hiker" (Stutzman 319). For Stutzman, the true thru-hiker faces danger, even when there is another option. This is another characterization of Stutzman's individual.

Furthermore, in constructing his myth of the individual, his thru-hiker, Stutzman leaves out women. He depicts women as a hindrance to his fellow male thru-hikers and seems to believe that the trail belongs more to men than women. While he does not explicitly state this opinion, he implies it in his writing. For example, multiple times he places hiking and women in opposition. When Stutzman meets a hiker and his girlfriend on the trail, he describes the girlfriend's complaints: "'But you didn't tell me about the rocks and roots,' said she... 'The floor's too hard'" (Stutzman 22). Stutzman describes the woman as needy and even a little foolish. She is preventing her boyfriend from enjoying his time camping. Similarly, he meets another thru-hiker who complains about having to call his wife. When Stutzman suggests that the man does not call, he responds "'Da missus wud skin me alive'" (Stutzman 227). Once again, the wife is a hindrance to a thru-hiker. At one point, he describes his friend Litefoot's interest in Bubbles, a female thru-hiker: "Every curve was in its proper place, and Litefoot was entranced by the whole package. No, no, no Litefoot! It's a trap! You must resist the spell!" (Stutzman 143). Not only does Stutzman

describe Bubbles as a trap that will hurt Litefoot's progress on the trail, but he also objectifies her. Finally, Stutzman has a woman in his life who puts his progress on the trail at risk: when his wife gives birth to his grandchild, Stutzman is uninterested in her request that he come home to meet the child. Even though he describes the trail as "the great equalizer," it is clear how Stutzman does not see the trail as a place for everyone, specifically not for woman (Stutzman 57). Instead, women are in opposition with the trail and completion.

Therefore, Stutzman constructs a myth of the individual as a religious man who has strong personal relationship with God. Fittingly, he constructs wilderness as a place that reveals God. Therefore, the cyclical nature of his version of the myths relies on religion: nature allows the thru-hiker to prove his religious individuality.

3.6 *Southbound: The Barefoot Sisters (Adventures on the Appalachian Trail)* Lucy and Susan Letcher

In *Southbound*, sisters Susan and Lucy Letcher, known as "Isis" and "jackrabbit" on the trail, describe their journey hiking the Appalachian Trail together after Susan graduates college. However, their thru-hike is unique in that they decide to complete it barefoot, earning them the nickname "the Barefoot Sisters."

The decision to hike barefoot defines the Letcher's thru-hike and their construction of the individual. Because of the dangers and also the slower pace that accompanies barefoot hiking, the Letchers are considered crazy by the people they meet. When other hikers hear about the sisters' lack of shoes, they think it is "a practical joke" (*Southbound*...38). The Letchers recognize that their decision seems irrational. At the beginning of their journey, jackrabbit describes how a

passerby would view them, as “two tall women in black pants and teal Gore-Tex jackets, wisps of blond hair plastered to the sides of [their] faces, bulging packs, bare feet. Crazy” (*Southbound...1*). The sisters even come to embrace the label crazy as a part of their thru-hiker identity: “Of course we’re crazy. We’re the Barefoot Sisters” (*Southbound...304*). However, whether or not the Letchers are “crazy” is not the important aspect of their decision to hike barefoot. Instead, not wearing shoes is their version of Pharr Davis’ extreme individualism, Sizer’s maverick-ism, and Shaffer’s co-optation of the ‘natural man.’ The Letchers carefully manage their idea of who the exceptional thru-hiker is. They define what it means to exist in nature, specifically what gear is necessary and what is unnecessary. For them, boots are an intrusion into the wilderness experience, just as how Pharr Davis would see Sizer’s ‘Schnozzle bag’ as an intrusion. The Letchers come off as crazy because everyone has their own idea of what gear is necessary and what gear is a luxury. Most people consider shoes to be necessary.

The sisters’ reason for barefoot hiking reveals why, in their opinion, shoes hinder the individual’s connection to nature:

We had decided to try hiking barefoot because it was the way we had always walked, since we were kids, in the mountains near our home on the coast of Maine. We loved the sense of connection to the ground that barefoot hiking gave us. Every surface felt different underfoot: granite, shale, pine needles, thick mud. We didn’t want to sacrifice that link with the earth. (*Southbound...3*)

Hiking barefoot gives the Letchers a connection to nature, a literal “link with the earth.” The physical connection of skin to earth is important to them, even if it is more precarious. The connection is a physical one, and the Letchers seem to experience nature in a more complete way when they are barefoot. But it is also a spiritual connection, as they describe there being

“something religious about walking barefoot...but not martyrdom, kind of the opposite” (*Southbound*...90). In describing this spiritual connection, the Letchers portray thru-hiking as a spiritual experience, not just a walk, that is strengthened by being barefoot. By contrasting the religiousness of barefoot hiking with martyrdom, they reassure the reader that they are not motivated by the pain or suffering of being barefoot. Instead, it is enjoyable for them.

Every stretch of trail has a different texture; spruce needles feel soft and a little springy, like a carpet, moss is even softer, like walking on feathers, and the granite backs of mountains—when the sun warms them, it feels like you’re walking on the scales of sleeping dragons. (*Southbound*...91)

By being barefoot, the Letchers see themselves as being able to enjoy nature and the sensations it causes in a more complete way than those who wear shoes. They almost seem to have an extra sense or understanding of nature, as they can identify the qualities of different surfaces with ease. When the Letchers describe how mountains feel like “the scales of sleeping dragons,” they join the Romantic walking tradition’s act of creating a mystique around nature through connecting it to myth and tales. Thus, they depict the thru-hiker as someone who is physically and spiritually connected to nature, and nature as a mythical place that can provide these spiritual experiences.

Not only is the thru-hiker connected to nature, the Letchers also define the thru-hiker as more connected to nature than society, similar to Shaffer. “I feel like I belong to a different culture now. An older, nomadic one. I feel like I belong to the woods and stars and not at all to the houses” Isis writes (*Southbound*...186). By existing in nature and being closer to “nomadic,” the Letchers see themselves as returning to mankind’s roots (though, with the addition of Gore-Tex). The mention of an “older” culture mirrors Thoreau’s celebration of ancient myth for being more connected to nature. The placement of houses—which are typically seen as places where people

feel the most at home—in contrast with nature and the thru-hiker appears later as well: “We belonged to the woods, the night, and the rain: the very things those house walls had been built to keep out” (*Southbound*...240). Thus, society is not just the opposite of nature, but it is constructed to keep nature out. The Letchers imply that the thru-hiker is one who can escape these constructed boundaries. Furthermore, the descriptions of belonging to the woods echoes Thoreau’s look at man as “a part of parcel of Nature,” which many of the writer-hikers allude to (Thoreau 3). Thus, when they describe the thru-hiker as belonging to nature, the Letchers join a tradition of mythologizing the walker.

Overall, a learning of the “different culture” that exists in nature leads to a forgetting of life in society, and thus a removal from society. The Letchers become uncomfortable in society. For example, they cannot “come up with any response” to a man off of the trail as “the language he was speaking of job markets and computers and casinos, seemed so alien” to them (*Southbound*...60). On the trail, they lose the language of civilization. At another point, the Letchers are in a town when the day draws to a close. Isis tells jackrabbit, “I don’t want to get lost in a town at night. In the woods, at least, we can find a place to sleep” (*Southbound*...241). Here, they reverse the typical fear of getting lost in the woods at night. The woods, instead of being dangerous, become their safe place while the town becomes the place where they fear getting lost. In this forgetting of society, they Letchers even seem to forget their societal identities. When reading a birthday card on the trail, jackrabbit writes, “It was strange to see my real name. Even stranger, I realized I had forgotten my birthday entirely” (*Southbound*...397). On the trail, she does not identify with her name or birthday, which are usually seen large part of a person’s identity. However, both are representative of her pre-trail self. If the pre-trail and trail self are seen as different, the trail-name can be seen as representative of transformation: “Susan could have doubts

and second thoughts, but jackrabbit was thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail” (*Southbound...4*). Therefore, the Letchers mythologize the thru-hiker as not just separate from society, but also as different from one’s societal self. The thru-hiker is not just someone who goes on a walk and then returns to society, but someone who joins another culture and transform as a result of it.

In addition to connecting them to nature, hiking barefoot also makes the Letchers into trail celebrities. They represent the tradition of the thru-hiker being crafted into a legend, though on a smaller scale than Shaffer’s elevation as a trail legend. Throughout their hike, the Letchers are recognized by other thru-hikers or trail angels who have heard about the Barefoot Sisters. Their reputation both hikes ahead and lingers behind them on the trail, as people marvel at (and question) the act of barefoot hiking. One passerby says, “It’s an honor, a real honor. Y’all are famous. I been hearing ‘bout y’all since I got to Maine...Listen, would y’all mind if I got a picture?” (*Southbound...50*). Another exclaims “Boy, this’ll be part of my campfire stories for years. I’ll tell the grandkids about you” (*Southbound...218*). The Letchers—because of their bare feet—become celebrities and legends that will be passed down through shared stories. Therefore, the thru-hiker is a romanticized individual who is worth celebrating and remembering. Again, storytelling becomes a tool for sharing stories of the individual and thus proving their individuality, as it is for Lugo.

The trail—nature—provides the space where this romanticization can occur. The Letchers describe nature as beautiful, as do all the other thru-hikers, but they also describe it as dangerous. This allows them to elevate the self-testing in their narrative. The Letchers’ memoir more than any of the others included in this research is a survival narrative. Themes of survival arise when they are winter hiking. Most thru-hikers tackle the trail in the spring and summer to avoid the dangers of winter hiking, but jackrabbit finds herself hiking in the dead of winter. At one point, Letcher

hikes through a blizzard with a small group of thru-hikers. A fellow hiker describes it as “the hardest thing [she had] ever done in [her] life” (*Southbound*...329). Jackrabbit reveals that this part of the journey is not just hard, but dangerous. “I wondered if this path would lead to shelter—or to someone’s frozen corpse,” she writes, without any hint of humor (*Southbound*...331). Hiking through the blizzard is not just a physical challenge but a psychological one as well, as jackrabbit describes:

Part of me was safe. The rest of me was still out there, struggling against the wind and the chest-high drifts, the life-sucking cold. Distantly, I felt pins and needles finally creep into my hands and feet as the blood flowed back into the tissue, but a different kind of cold took up residence inside my ribcage. The realization settles like a hard seed of ice: *We could have died out there. Easily we could have died*” (*Southbound*...334).

Even when the blizzard has ended, jackrabbit struggles with the psychological effects of having a near-death experience. The nature she describes here is not beautiful or enjoyable, like how other parts of the trail are described, but “life-sucking,” something to be feared, something that is stronger than the thru-hiker, something sublime. In this moment, jackrabbit realizes that. Suddenly, the trail does not seem like a fun walk in the woods. It can mean life or death. Yet, she does not stop. Thus, the thru-hiker accepts challenges of self-testing, even to the point where it is life-threatening. This is, again, an example of individuality being proven in nature.

Even though the Letchers report that they hike barefoot for enjoyment, it is a form of self-testing as well:

As long as it’s comfortable. As long as it’s fun. Barefoot hiking hadn’t been comfortable for a while now, as the temperature dropped and the trail became more and more gravelly. As for fun, there were times when I loved the sensation of floating over rocks, knowing

exactly how my feet would land and form themselves to the surfaces. For the most part, thought it felt like a job. It wasn't a question of fun; it was what I did. (*Southbound...271*)

Here, the terrain and temperature remove the joy from barefoot hiking. However, in an act of self-testing that she does not want to let herself give up on, jackrabbit proceeds barefoot, despite the pain and slower pace. To give up would be to give up on the parameters (what gear a thru-hiker can use, specifically) that prove her individuality. However, she does end up hiking with shoes for a section of the trail. Instead of truly undermining her individuality, jackrabbit's decision to use shoes reveals that man cannot overcome nature. Thus, the Letchers depict wilderness as a place where the thru-hiker belongs, but not because it is comfortable or kind. It is still wild and dangerous.

Despite constructing this myth of wilderness around the trail, the Letchers are, like Sizer, willing to point out the fact that wilderness can be a myth. They too provide a look into mankind's ironic attempts to reconstruct nature where they have previously destroyed it. For example, the trail journeys through a zoo:

Two days after Isis's birthday, on the last day of September, we found ourselves in one of the strangest sections of the Trail yet: the Bear Mountain Zoo. Throngs of children and their harried-looking parents filled the asphalt walkways. (*Southbound...169*)

Shortly after, jackrabbit finds herself reflecting on the experience: "There are all the species that used to live around here. I wonder how many are left" (*Southbound...169*). Although the trail is often depicted to be wilderness, this section is a poor simulacrum for wilderness that seems more representative of society, with its walkways and crowds. Jackrabbit points out the irony that the animals that used to live in the woods the trail traverses (and, if the area truly is wilderness, should still live there), now mainly exist in captivity in the very same area. Human action caused this lack

of natural wildlife, and human action then attempts to bring the animals back to the space, but in a controlled manner. This is just one example of the Letchers revealing the lack of true wilderness on many parts of the trail and of them calling out society for the destruction of wilderness. Like Sizer, they describe Nuclear Lake. They also detail their visit to a superfund site that the trail passes through:

Farther along the ridge, the trees gave way to blasted stumps and the rocks took on a blackened cast. The trail, a yellowish-gray gravel, was the only hint of color in the funereal landscape. It curved along the top of the ridge ahead, vanishing into mirages before it touched the horizon. (*Southbound*...203)

Jackrabbit does not hold back in describing how this space has been ravaged by hazardous waste from humans. She describes a lack of color, which contrasts with her usually colorful descriptions of the trail. In describing the space as funereal, she implies that the destruction of nature should be mourned. The funereal diction repeats throughout the text:

In an ecology course in college, I had studied the effects of air pollution on the Southern fir forests. The trees, weakened by acid rain and ozone damage, were falling victim to an introduced insect species, the balsam wooly adelgid. It was one thing to read about it, though, in dispassionate scientific journals in a library almost two thousand miles away, and quite another thing to see it firsthand. I felt as though I was walking through a city of ghosts. (*Southbound*...417)

Here, in contrasting the “dispassionate scientific journals” with her emotional experience of seeing ghosts on the trail, jackrabbit characterizes the thru-hiker in particular as a mourner of the death of nature. Her thru-hiker, in becoming part of nature, gains an emotional attachment to nature and therefore ecological conscious that scientific study does not necessarily provide. Thus, the

Letchers' memoir becomes a manner of sharing this consciousness, as if they, like Thoreau, are "speak[ing] a word for Nature" (Thoreau 3).

Overall, the Letchers reveal that even the spaces that are not immediately fringed by society (unlike the zoo or Shenandoah National Park, for example) are not all pristine. In revealing the ways so-called wilderness of the trail is not actually wild, both the Letchers and Sizer blame humans. However, the Letchers practice more of an active outrage when compared to Sizer's resigned disappointment. When the sisters are at the zoo on the trail, jackrabbit shares her emotions when viewing two taxidermized passenger pigeons:

It was disturbing to think how easily that remarkable abundance had been reduced to two moldering relics in a museum. I thought about the endless crowds outside: my species, co-opting the world with our extraordinary capacity for destruction. (*Southbound*...169)

The Letchers are unafraid to call out humanity for "co-opting" nature for humanity's own benefit. Again, like all of the other writer-hikers, the Letchers continue the Romantic walking tradition's cyclical myths of wild nature and the self-reliant individual. Their version centers self-testing. However, like Sizer, they make their readers more aware of the act of mythologizing and the damages of this mythologizing, specifically how it can be used to cover up man's destruction of nature. Thus, these myths are not only constructed differently (and are fluid), but also can be used for different purposes.

Overall, with their increased environmental consciousness and their desire to feel the ground beneath their bare feet, the Letchers depict themselves as connected to nature, perhaps even "part and parcel of Nature," as Thoreau describes (Thoreau 3). Their removal from society, including forgetting their real names, seems to mirror Shaffer's inability to exist in society. However, upon further analysis, this image unravels. Like Pharr Davis, the Letchers seem to

replace a connection to nature for self-testing, especially during the winter and when barefoot hiking becomes painful. Thus, modern consciousness and capitalist competitiveness sneak back into their narrative, even if they are not the most aware of it.

4.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I have first developed an understanding of the Romantic walking tradition and its two main myths: the myth of wild nature and the myth of the self-reliant individual. These myths exist cyclically. I developed this framework through a close study of Thoreau's essay "Walking." Then, I studied and proved the legacy of this tradition and its two myths in American culture by tracing and tracking the myths in modern American wilderness texts—Appalachian Trail thru-hiking memoirs. This tracing reveals that the Romantic walking tradition is not rigid. Although each of the writer-hikers include the two myths in their texts, they do so in their own ways. Thus, although many of the writer-hikers may seem to continue Thoreau's philosophy and traditions, they only do so superficially. Instead of embodying the beliefs of the Romantic walking tradition alongside the continuation of certain tropes, each writer-hiker constructs their own idea of wilderness and their own idea of the self-reliant individual in order to support their own goals and philosophies while thru-hiking. Therefore, these myths are fluid.

Because of increased modernity and the growth of civilization since the birth of the original Romantic walking tradition, these myths would not be able to still exist if they were not fluid. However, as a result of this fluidity, the two myths can be co-opted to support different ideas, not just Transcendentalist and Romantic thought. The writer-hikers are not the only people continuing and capable of coopting these myths. Broadly, in the United States, the myths are co-opted to support capitalist ideology. As has been explored, in so-called wilderness, the thru-hiker—and other adventurers—can reconstruct the competitiveness and individualist mindset of capitalism; as is represented with Pharr Davis, being a better hiker and completing the hard work

of existing in nature better than competitors (other hikers) allows one to prove individual superiority.

Capitalist ideology uses nature in other ways too. For example, because of nature's healing capabilities (an idea that originally belongs to Romantic and Transcendentalist thought), hiking and any type of nature vacation (such as a weekend spent camping or a visit to a national park) allows people to recuperate. After recuperating, they can then return to work as well-rested and re-invigorated members of a capitalist society. Thru-hikers, most of whom return to a more conventional lifestyle after their hike, represent this cycle. Furthermore, thru-hikes and other nature vacations are not truly void of work or restful, but actually rely on hard work, which is valued by capitalism. Hard work comes with the reward of the beauty of nature and the ability to enjoy it more, according to thru-hikers like Pharr Davis and Shaffer. Other potential rewards are memories and stories to tell. In fact, the writer-hikers use their reward of stories to write thru-hiking memoirs. The thru-hiking memoir demonstrates how consumerism is tied into the AT, as writing a book about the experience is capitalizing on the experience. Finally, consumer culture co-opts the myths of wilderness and the self-reliant individual by carefully crafting the myths into images that can be sold. Several companies, including ones that sell outdoors gear but also others that sell items like clothing, stickers, and more, curate their products so that they rely on a wilderness aesthetic. Thus, wilderness and the person who spends time in wilderness become carefully crafted images that can be sold for profit.

In revealing the mythical nature of wilderness and the self-reliant individual—the two defining elements of the US's nature culture—and the way that these myths can be coopted, this research calls for a more discerning look at how nature is represented. This discernment is especially important in the US, which may outwardly seem like a country that values and preserves

its nature (and takes patriotic pride in doing so) based on its celebration of wild spaces such as national parks. However, this contrasts with the reality in which nature valued for how it can serve as a resource or a tool for humankind. Overall, my conclusions ask one to question how nature is constructed and used versus how it actually exists.

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