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# Woman Into The Wild: Female Thru-Hikers and Pilgrimage on the Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails

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WOMAN INTO THE WILD: FEMALE THRU-HIKERS AND PILGRIMAGE ON THE  
APPALACHIAN AND PACIFIC CREST TRAILS

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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**Abstract**

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This thesis follows solo women hikers as they embark upon walking either the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail from beginning to end. By witnessing the ways in which the women hikers navigate the counter-culture of the trails, a critique of American society is revealed. This paper focuses on the differences between trail culture and normative culture, the transformations the hikers undergo, and how the hikes have affected the women's lives.

As I think forward to life after graduation on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 my mind swarms with the many opportunities I have the ability to pursue. I could dive right into a cubicle that comes with an annual salary, I could return to my parents home and waitress at night while I spend the sunlit hours applying to graduate school, I could begin my life-long goal of starting a subsistence garden, I could return to my previous summer job of working at a wilderness therapy program, the list goes on. There is one possibility that has been tugging persistently at my sleeve: I could thru-hike<sup>1</sup> a long distance trail, the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail, alone. The idea of undertaking a solo pilgrimage by foot has called to me for years, ever since I started spending more time in the great outdoors in high school. I feel a pull towards the raw, unforgiving qualities of the wilderness, yet as I seek to realize this calling I am constantly confronted with the societal opinion that the wilderness is a man's world, and that undertaking a long trip alone would be dangerous, foolish and over-indulgent.

Our society has revered men who have undertaken journeys of solitude for the sake of self-enlightenment. I grew up hearing reference to or reading about the expeditions of Thoreau and Emerson, and their contemporaries Edward Abbey, and Chris McCandless. These men have been lauded for their bravery, for their often-ornery nature, for the insights they achieve upon spending extended periods of time in solitude in the woods, the desert, or the glacial tundra of Alaska. Where are the women who undertake these adventures of isolation in nature?

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<sup>1</sup> A thru-hike is a term used to refer to the process of hiking a long distance trail from end to end. A thru-hiker is a person who is in the process of, or has completed, a thru-hike. On the PCT this entails hiking from Campo, California to Manning Provincial Park, British Columbia, Canada, or vice versa. On the AT a thru-hiker will journey from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin, Maine or vice versa.

When I conceptualize my own trip, I often imagine finishing the trail with a greater sense of understanding and appreciation for the way nature works, and a more comprehensive idea of where I stand as a woman in this world. I picture that, through spending time and energy on this journey, I will be able to experience epiphanies and theories about life that I would not otherwise be able to come to. The informed state I reach at the end of the trail becomes, in my daydreams, my own abstract and secular Mecca, the trail itself a pilgrimage. Unfortunately there does not exist a prevalent social space in which these adventures are discussed in such positive terms, trips with a meaning and a purpose. Instead women who undertake these arduous missions are often perceived as selfish or crazy, since society repeatedly informs women that they are supposed to be caretakers who put aside their own needs to help others (Maine Rose 1999:12, 17). Am I selfish and crazy for wanting to undertake a long-distance hike?

For my thesis I researched the following questions: why would a woman participate in a solo hiking expedition? What are her motivations? What does she hope to accomplish by hiking? Does a woman's identity as female affect her hike? What does she learn from her trip? Does her life remain the same after she completes a distance hike? If her hike has changed her life, how has it changed?

As I pondered these questions I thought of how a hike like this might change my own life. I have spent extended periods of time in wilderness settings before, on backpacking trips, working at a horse ranch, and on rock climbing expeditions. Each time I emerge from the wild my relationship with nature has shifted, I become more appreciative of its abundance, and yet more aware of its impending scarcity. I resonate with its powerful life source and fear for its human-wrought demise. I began to wonder

how a woman who has lived for so many months directly aware of her relationships with nature may alter her environmental views. Environmentally, our planet is suffering from the industrial, consumerist lifestyle patterns that are normalized by Western culture. Ever since the industrial expansion of factories and plantations in the late 1700s, American culture has revolved around the anthropocentric opinion that natural resources can be utilized by humans to no end without any negative repercussions. As scientists and environmentalists have realized the detrimental effects of this type of endless expansion on the environment, Americans are forced to reconsider their relationship with nature. No longer can we afford to be negligent about the natural world and how our actions impact our environment. At this pivotal point in history we must deconstruct and reconsider our lifestyles and attempt to ameliorate the circumstance of environmental degradation in which we find ourselves. After spending an extended amount of time in the non-urban, natural world, have women solo thru-hikers reconceptualized their standards of living in a way that the general public would benefit from learning about?

This research paper is organized both chronologically and ideologically. I present information about thru-hiking as it occurs, first before the hike, then during, and finally after the hike. However there were too many thematic connections that appeared sporadically within each phase of the hikes to limit this paper's organization to time. Thus, chapters are organized by themes as they relate back to the framework I use, and then placed under one of the three time-oriented headings. The layout for this paper is as follows:

Chapter 1: Research Process. In this chapter I introduce my methodology, positionality and framework. I detail how I went about procuring the information used in

this thesis, how my own circumstances might affect that research, and the specific concepts I used to analyze my research. In this chapter I also give a short history of the trails, an introduction to their geography, and what a thru-hike entails. I use a subsection to highlight the common perception the public has of women's interaction with the natural world.

Chapter 2: Before. In this chapter I present what my research produced about women's experiences with thru-hiking before they actually began their hikes. Here one can find information about the reactions these women received from friends and family when they revealed their decision to thru-hike alone.

Chapter 3: Liminal Establishment and Identity. This is the first chapter that addresses a thematic issue that arises during the hike. This chapter discusses the ways in which the women questioned and reconsidered their own identities while hiking. This chapter looks at how the women began to identify a difference between trail life and the life they left behind. Chapter 3 addresses how the women changed on the trail, how they changed their behaviors, their names and ultimately ended up relating more with trail culture than the culture they knew before their hike. I specifically researched women who chose to thru-hike alone since I was interested to see how this independence affected their sense of self, especially as a woman. This chapter looks at how the women thru-hikers tackled hiking alone, and how they thought through their feminine identity while hiking. The combination of these numerous mechanisms of reconsidering individuality ultimately affects the women's confidence in her own hiking technique.

Chapter 4: Communitas. This chapter discusses the culture on the PCT and the AT as it relates to the cultures of pilgrimage that have previously been studied by



anthropologists. As will be introduced in Chapter 1, a number of anthropologists have discovered a type of culture that is specific to a transitory population. This chapter analyzes the women's trips in terms of pre-existing academic writings on this phenomenon.

Chapter 5: Tourism. This chapter addresses the difference between thru-hiking and the other types of hiking that occur on the trails. Utilizing theories about pilgrimage versus tourism, this chapter uncovers the ways thru-hikers perceive their own experience as profoundly different from that of the average hiker.

Chapter 6: Spirituality. Chapter 9 looks at the way that mystical events are regarded on the trail. Many events and interactions occur on the trails that seem to belong to a unified mysticism, with these events commonly referred to as "magic." This chapter addresses how women thru-hikers navigate this sphere of their hikes.

Chapter 7: No Rain No Rainbow. Thru-hiking is a physically demanding act. In this chapter I present the ways in which women navigated the physical realities of the trail, so vastly different from the physical realities they were accustomed to off of the trail. This chapter examines how, after experiencing limited physical comfort, the women's conception of luxury versus need begins to shift. This chapter details the trials and tribulations that the women come across on their journeys, what they are, and how they overcome them.

Chapter 8: After. This chapter discusses the women's lives after the trail, once they have finished their hikes and returned to their homes. This chapter focuses on the difficulties they come across as they attempt to integrate their transformed selves into their former lives. This chapter covers the lessons the women feel they learned on their

hikes, and how they integrate these lessons into their day-to-days. Finally, this chapter highlights the importance of these types of journeys. In conjunction with the following conclusion this chapter will reiterate why it is important that these trips be acknowledged.

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### Chapter 1: Research Process

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In this chapter I introduce my methodology, positionality and framework. The framework presents the concepts I used to analyze the research I conducted. This chapter contains a brief history of the establishment of the two trails.

#### *Methodology*

A core component of anthropology is the process of ethnographic research, in which the anthropologist collects empirical data about a culture by immersing him or herself in the culture they study. To narrow the scope of my study from simply researching any woman who has spent any amount of time alone outdoors, and because I have a personal interest in distance hiking, I decided to focus on women who have thru-hiked the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail from terminus to terminus. When I made the decision to study a transitory group of women I knew my options for ethnographic research were shot, especially given that those who have thru-hiked do not conveniently move to the same suburb after completing their hike. I toyed with the idea of interviewing women who have thru-hiked long distance trails. I located the contact information for five different woman who thru-hiked one of the aforementioned trails through friends and the internet and reached out to these women asking if they would participate in my thesis research. When four weeks passed and I had only heard back from one woman, I was faced with another roadblock: typically, it seems, those who

enjoy recreating or living in rural areas can be difficult to get in contact with. I began to ponder pursuing my thesis research based only on reviewing written materials.

Ultimately I realized that by researching memoirs women have written about their thru-hikes, scouring online trail journals<sup>2</sup>, and analyzing content on online hiking forums, I will still be able to collect substantial amounts of information. Since thru-hikers do not, unfortunately, live together on a commune, online communication and printed word is the most realistic way for information to travel within their community and to simultaneously spread to anyone with a curiosity about thru-hiking. Thus there exists a wealth of knowledge about thru-hiking that is easily accessible in print and online.

My research focused primarily on autobiographical accounts of women who have backpacked the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail. Kelly Winters wrote her memoir, *Walking Home: A Woman's Pilgrimage on the Appalachian Trail* (2001) about her 1995 thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Diane Soini's autobiography, *Piper's Flight: A Solo Woman's Journal on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2008) details her experiences hiking the Pacific Crest Trail in 2008. Soini's book contains less of a narrative style, as she simply compiled the pages from a journal she kept while hiking. Her account contains less reflection than the other books used for this project, which, written in hindsight, contain a more comprehensive analysis. Unlike Soini, Julie Urbanski wrote

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<sup>2</sup> Trailjournals.com is a website that was created in 1998 by Mat "Leif" Olsen after he completed his thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. The website contains over 376,000 entries and 674,000 photographs of both PCT and AT thru-hikers (<http://trailjournals.com/about>). An overwhelming number of thru-hikers on both the PCT and the AT keep trail journals at trailjournals.com. Thru-hikers will post entries when they stop in resupply towns with internet access, detailing their experiences for friends, family, and other hikers to read. Trail journals allow past thru-hikers to communicate with current hikers by commenting on their entries with advice and encouragement. Aspiring thru-hikers can gain useful insight and inspiration by reading the journals of current hikers. Current hikers can track one another's progress, gain information about the trail that lies ahead of them and arrange meet-ups using information posted on trailjournals.com (Piper 2008:118, Stopwatch 2011:72).

*The Trail Life: How I Loved It, Hated It and Learned From It* (2011) about her 2007 thru-hike of the PCT completely in retrospect, utilizing the time that passed between her hike to compile her book in a “lessons learned” format. Her book is less chronological and is laid out in a manner that highlights her largest takeaways from hiking the PCT, with the explicit hopes that readers will be able to benefit from what she learned while hiking.

Jennifer Pharr Davis wrote her autobiographical account, *Becoming Odysa: Adventures on the Appalachian Trail* (2011) about her 2005 thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Amy Allen’s memoir about her 2006 thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, *Summoning the Mountains: Pilgrimage into Forty* (2012), highlights her process of coming to terms with aging and her role as a mother. With the exception of Soini’s book, these autobiographical accounts included a facet of retrospect that allowed me insight into the ways the women regard their hikes as pivotal, life-changing experiences.

I acknowledge that these women often end up hiking sections of the trail, both large and small, with other travelers. My criteria for what constitutes a solo hike is that these women have set out with the intention of hiking on their own, without having arranged partner hiking in advanced, and that they regard this journey as a personal, individual one. I also read a number of online trail journals kept by women solo hikers of the PCT and AT. Online trail journals are heavily utilized by hikers of both the AT and the PCT as a mechanism for sharing their experience with other hikers and with family and friends back home. There also exist a number of online forums dedicated to giving women advice about hiking alone, often written by females who have gone solo backpacking by themselves already. Each of these pieces, either written by women solo thru-hikers or about them, will aid in the completion of my research.

When reading these memoirs and trail journals I looked for repetitive details and descriptions between the documents that would suggest a cohesive, and distinct culture amongst thru-hikers. I was curious to know in what ways female thru-hikers experiences were similar, and in what ways they differed from one another. I wanted to know how these women viewed themselves as different from other hikers who were simply out on the trail for a day, or a week, or a month. I wanted to know how these women felt they changed during their trip, if they felt they even changed at all. If they did change, I was curious to see how these women incorporated that change back into their daily life.

Of the memoirs read there were two women who thru-hiked the PCT, and three who thru-hiked the AT. I will refer to each woman by her trail name, the significance of which will be described in chapter 2. To avoid confusion, I will also cite the women's books using their trail names. Julie "Stopwatch" Urbanski and Diane "Piper" Soini were the two women who hiked the PCT, Jennifer "Odysse" Pharr Davis, Kelly "Amazin' Grace" Winters, and Amy "Willow" Allen were the three who hiked the AT. These books are all autobiographical accounts of the each woman's thru-hike. Another book that was extremely helpful in my research process was, *Women and Thru-Hiking the Appalachian Trail* (1999). The book's author Beverly Hugo, who refers to herself throughout the book by her trail name, Maine Rose, completed her solo AT thru-hike in the early 1990s. Hugo compiles quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and questionnaires about women who have solo thru-hiked the AT. Though I gathered additional information about solo female thru-hikers from online journals and magazine articles, these six books are the sources I know most intimately.

### *Positionality*

The social sciences have seen a long history of contention over the concept of positivism, whether or not the social sciences can be studied objectively like the natural sciences. With the aim of reporting the most accurate account I can, I must be forthright about my positionality, the ways in which my identity shapes my research. As a woman who has been active in the outdoors, and who aspires to complete the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail by myself in the future, I must acknowledge that I have a tendency to be overly defensive of what I regard to be the noble pursuit of wild solidarity.

I must be aware that I not try to read too far into these women's stories, in an attempt to legitimize my own. I also need to be careful not to project the goals I have for myself upon completion of such a trip onto what the women feel they have achieved. I am a woman writing about the gender I identify with, and must take into account different nuances of gender as they may appear within the memoirs I read from as objective a stance as possible. I also come from a background of hiking and pursuing outdoor activity. I will need to bear in mind each woman's own prior experience, and thus comfort level, with wilderness activity as I read her personal account.

### *Framework*

Due to the transitory nature of thru-hiking, I decided to employ a framework composed of anthropological studies of a similarly migratory cultural phenomenon. The study of pilgrimage seemed to mirror the same curiosities I had about the trail communities. In conjunction with trying to find an anthropological framework to use for this research paper I also found that a number of the women thru-hikers whose memoirs I

read referred to themselves as pilgrims, and to the trail as a pilgrimage, with two of the books I researched using one of those words in their title. Maine Rose was finishing writing her book on solo female AT thru-hikers when she picked up a brochure on pilgrimage and saw the similarities between the adventures of the women she had just written about and the pilgrims in the pamphlet. Hugo comments that thru-hiking is comprised of all of the qualities that make up a pilgrimage (Maine Rose 1999:133). The anthropological study of pilgrimage questions the composition of pilgrimage. What constitutes a pilgrimage? Do all pilgrims undertake their journey for the same reasons? If no, are there other ways in which the pilgrimage can still be regarded as a unifying experience? Throughout my research I used anthropological theories of pilgrimage to tie my findings together.

Hundreds of millions of people participate in religious and secular pilgrimages each year worldwide (Morinis 1992). The act of pilgrimage is ancient and, though as a practice it is currently dominated by the world religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, pilgrimages have been documented in societies anthropologist would consider “tribal,” such as the Huichol, the Lunda, and the Shona societies (Turner 1969:2). Despite its longevity and mass participation, anthropology has only recently begun to produce scholarly publications about pilgrimage. Anthropology was originally interested in studying pre-industrial cultures that were rooted to a physical space (Winzeler 2008:155). Pilgrimage is certainly transitory and more commonly acknowledges journeys of peoples from post-industrial societies, which may be why pilgrimage was not initially a subject of interest to anthropologists. Pilgrimage is also

sporadic and inconsistent, while anthropology tends to focus on the commonplace activities of everyday.

The act of pilgrimage is a centuries-old tradition that spans a number of geographies, cultures and religions. Pilgrimage in Japan dates back to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, while historians trace the origins of Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem back to the fourth century (MacWilliams 1997:375, Bartholomew and Hughes 2004:44). Due to the diverse expression of pilgrimage, the definition of place and participation of pilgrimage is not fixed, allowing it to apply to persons of different faith and location. No matter how loosely one defines pilgrimage there are certain core attributes that classify the act: a pilgrimage requires a journey to a different place, a physical destination (Dubisch 1996:67). Pilgrimage is a process rooted in physical movement from one place to another, from a beginning to an end, with the expectation that extraordinary events will occur along the journey or at the final destination. As stated by pioneer pilgrimage anthropologists Edith and Victor Turner<sup>3</sup>, “all sites of pilgrimage have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again” (Dubisch 1996:70). Tales of these miraculous events perpetuate the existence of pilgrimage, encouraging others to endure the same journey. What are the types of miracles that are believed to happen on the trails?

### *Tourist v. Pilgrim*

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Turner began studying pilgrimage in 1966. He authored his first book alone, and afterwards his wife helped coauthor a second book on pilgrimage in 1978. When The citation is a singular Turner, I am referring to a theory Victor produced before his collaboration with his wife, Edith.



Within the past forty years the anthropological study of pilgrimage has risen, in part thanks to the rise in the anthropological study of tourism. In a world in which transportation and mass media are moving millions physically and mentally out of localization, the tension between social structure and *communitas*, an unstructured group of equality, is being amplified. Thru-hikers are not the only people who hike the PCT and the AT: there are people who enjoy day hikes, weekend vacations, and extended multi-week trips on both trails. Though to many the hikes of a thru-hiker and a non-thru-hiker may seem remarkably similar, perhaps indistinguishable aside from the difference in distance travelled, I wanted to know if women thru-hikers saw themselves as unique amidst other hikers. Do other hikers see thru-hikers as similarly unique? Before I asked these questions of the texts I read, I researched the academic distinction between pilgrim and tourist.

The importance of this distinction between pilgrim and tourist lies in the social significance they carry: a pilgrimage is viewed as an act of religious commitment, whereas tourism is thought to be an indulgent extracurricular. Scholars have found a number of ways to differentiate between the concepts of pilgrimage and tourism. Some academics claim that the most important difference between tourists and pilgrims is the amount of time the participant spends in the visited place, with the pilgrims usually outstaying the tourists (Ivakhiv 2003:99). Another divergence is that the tourist travels for pleasure, and thus they have a shallow experience and see only what they want to see – they are therefore not open to the miracles of the pilgrimage. Tourists overseas are distinct from foreign pilgrims in that they do not attempt to know the language and have superficial knowledge of the place they are visiting. Supposedly, tourists are generally

less flexible, expecting the locals to adapt to them, not vice versa. Through this process of alienation, the tourist always remains an outsider. Anthropologist Cohen (1992) states, “the tourist is transitory, spending only a short time in any one place. The tourist is looking for the ‘exotic’, and seeks the sensation of difference rather than wishing to experience its depths” (50). The flippant relationship that the tourist has with their surroundings differentiates them from the pilgrim who seeks to learn from and adapt to their environs.

Victor Turner, on the other hand, point out the similarities between pilgrims and tourists when he states, “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist. Even when people bury themselves in anonymous crowds on beaches, they are seeking an almost sacred, often symbolic, mode of *communitas*, generally unavailable to them in the structured life of the office, the shop floor, or the mine” (Turner 1969:20). The Turners found a subtle convergence of pilgrims and tourists: they believe that tourists seek *communitas* as an escape from the mundane routine of structures life, just as pilgrims do. Do thru-hikers relate to other non-thru-hikers? Do they feel that they are all hiking for the same reasons? Do thru-hikers give that much thought to non-thru-hikers at all? I used these anthropological theories about tourism and pilgrimage to dissect the way thru-hikers perceive their own identity with regards to other hikers.

### *Liminal Communitas*

Morinis asserted that one embarks upon a pilgrimage to discover solutions to problems, and that they are fueled by the belief that beyond what we know there is a power that can elucidate difficulties that appear unsolvable right now (1992:1). Pilgrims

seek a truth and understanding in their travels that is beyond their reach in the routine of their everyday lives. By studying pilgrimage anthropology has the opportunity to bear witness to the epiphanies pilgrims arrive at on their travels, revelations that might take the anthropologist longer to arrive at when focusing only on stationary culture. Unlike the anthropologist, the pilgrim has the distinct advantage of knowing their own culture thoroughly before removing themselves from it to observe it more critically. Perhaps it would be useful, then, for an anthropologist to know the pilgrim. To know a pilgrim is to see their culture through critical eyes: through the creation of *communitas*, pilgrims design a counter-culture that imagines a more perfect world. The thru-hiking community studied for this thesis is comprised of hikers, pilgrims, predominantly from the United States of America. These individuals inhabit a liminal sphere in which their previous cultural norms and identities do not exist; they are able to make up their own culture. What do they bring with them? What do they leave behind? In what ways does this *communitas* reflect or reject American society? The study of the pilgrim's arrival at certain conclusions, enlightenment, or creation of *communitas* can lend insight into the anthropological world with regards to criticism of culture and potential reconstructions of society.

Victor Turner was most intrigued by the bond formed between individuals who undertake the same pilgrimage. Turner asserted that pilgrimage serves an “anti-structural” and “liminal” function within societies (Ivakhiv 2003:98). A pilgrimage is anti-structural in that it does not abide by the normal routines of the life the pilgrim leaves behind. A pilgrim is not running through their usual day of work and familial obligations as their culture would dictate. Although a pilgrim is not abiding by normal

routines, they will not continue this anti-structural behavior after their journey. They are, in this way, inhabiting a liminal space, an in-between their former and future selves, and their former and future ways of life. Pilgrims engage in the experience of losing their old identities as a crucial part of their rite of passage of their journey (Coleman 2002:355). The liminal space allows room for the pilgrim to reconceptualize their own identity removed from the confines of their society, and additionally creates a space in which pilgrims can critically examine the society from whence they came (Turner and Turner 1978:2). Do women thru-hikers undergo a change in their identity? Do they view the trail as a liminal space in which they are able to act, neither as a former nor future self but as a new individual all together?

Turner did not believe, however, that pilgrims were alone on these liminoid paths. Rather, he claims that pilgrims create *communitas*, which he defines as, “a spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings, stripped of structural attributes” (Turner 1969:216). In 1978, with his wife Edith Turner, Victor Turner published *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, in which they refined their definition of *communitas*, including that *communitas* transcend historical, social, and geographical boundaries and transition away from mundane structures and social interdependence into a looser commonality of feeling with fellow pilgrims (Coleman 2002:356). In this newer description the Turners state that *communitas* are the result of a voluntary, rather than socially enforced, removal of the everyday world. Though pilgrims resist formal, everyday structure, without that structure *communitas* would not exist, since *communitas* exist in opposition to those formal, everyday structures. Everyday political, economic, and social structures simultaneously encroach

upon and compose pilgrimage (Coleman 2002:356). The Turners identified three types of *communitas*. The first type of *communitas* is the pure type, or spontaneous, existential. This type of *communitas* represents the opposite of social structure, and pilgrims try to free themselves of everyday constraints by entering them. The pilgrims enter a liminoid state in which the individuals engage in celebrating common humanity by presenting the integral person from the convergence of multiple personae. The second type is normative *communitas*, which acknowledge the ways spontaneous *communitas* are constrained in their practice. Normative *communitas* attempt to capture and preserve the essence of spontaneous *communitas* by enforcing ethical precepts and rules. In normative *communitas* the process of the pilgrimage is normalized, routinized, and institutionalized (Eade and Sallnow 2000:xi). The third type of *communitas* is the ideological *communitas* in which there exists a revival of the *communitas* experienced during a pilgrimage back in the pilgrim's native society. These types of *communitas* often materialize as a sort of revolution or reformation of the society the pilgrims return to (Eade and Sallnow 2000:xi). I used this information to determine the type of *communitas* that exist in the thru-hiking community.

The Turners' claim pilgrimage can be understood as a universal or homogenous phenomenon. However, Eade and Sallnow, the two most notable anthropological researchers of pilgrimage aside from the Turners, argue that pilgrimage must be deconstructed into historically and culturally specific instances (Coleman 2002:357). Granted, Eade and Sallnow write their ethnographic research in the 1990s, a few decades after the Turners conducted their research, a time in which postmodern fragmentation seems more plausible than the quest for spontaneous experiences of unity (Coleman

2002:357). The Turners conducted their research during the “hippie era” of 1969 and Victor Turner’s book *The Ritual Process* became popular underground reading for the hippie counterculture because of its antistructural theme (Turner 1969:xiii). However by the time Eade and Sallnow publish their response and critique of the Turners research over twenty years later, postmodern thought is more academically prevalent and anthropology is more interested in the ways different cultures will interpret the same signs differently (Coleman 2002:357). I employed this critique of Eade and Sallnow’s to discover if there was a difference between *communitas* experience on the Appalachian Trail versus the Pacific Crest Trail.

Eade and Sallnow critique the Turner’s definition of *communitas* as failing to account for the mundane activities inherent in pilgrimage, instead depicting *communitas* as ideal social groups that are able to defy all of the restrictive boundaries necessary to maintain social groups (Coleman 2002:357). Sallnow’s research of pilgrimage in the High Andes of Peru provided no examples of *communitas* as structured social relations or as their dialectical antithesis, as the Turners’ definition of *communitas* requires (Eade and Sallnow 2000:xii). The Turner’s theories of *communitas* have been tested time and again by different anthropologists in Morocco (Eickelman 1976), Thailand (Pruess 1974), Nepal (Messerschmidt and Sharma 1981), north India (Van der Veer 1984), Peru (Sallnow 1981), Sri Lanka (Pfaffenberger 1979), and Bengal (Morinis 1984), to name a few. None of these studies confirmed the Turners’ hypothesis that *communitas* are, despite being anti-structural, bound by religious goals. On the contrary pilgrimage was found to be a highly individualistic act in which the solo traveler seeks to connect directly with the deity, or shrine of the pilgrimage (Morinis 1992:8). Essentially, the Turners

believe that pilgrimages are exempt from the mundane routines of everyday life, whereas Eade and Sallnow believe that pilgrimages simply provide a special accommodating context for everyday life to be expressed (2000).

Once *communitas* and shrines are viewed through the lens that Eade and Sallnow apply it becomes increasingly important to place the individual's pilgrimage within a larger context. Eade and Sallnow believe that shrines hold less intrinsic cultural meaning than the Turners would have you believe and that they are instead merely empty vessels in which any individual or group can project whatever beliefs they so desire (Coleman 2002:357). Since there are no shrines on the Appalachian Trail or Pacific Crest Trail, I applied Eade and Sallnow's concept of the shrine to the last few miles of the PCT or the AT, and to the end point itself. If there is one place on a long-distance trail that holds an idolized status similar to that of shrines on pilgrimages, it is the end point of the trail. I use Eade and Sallnow's theory to contextualize the women's experience at the end of the trails to see whether or not the theory applies or if they do, indeed, have a cohesive view of this "shrine."

I used both different conceptualizations of pilgrimage, that of the Turners and that of Eade and Sallnow, to dissect the journeys of woman thru-hikers. I examined how *communitas* form on the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian trail, while simultaneously noting the ways in which each individual experience is shaped by each woman's own approach to filling the void.

### *Types of Pilgrimage*

Something that all anthropologists who study pilgrimage can agree upon is that there are, in fact, a number of different types of pilgrimage. The different reasons pilgrimages occur can shed light on the similar qualities pilgrims possess, if there are any. This has the possibility to, in turn, illuminate a culturally bound pattern that creates the similar motivation for individuals to endure a pilgrimage in the first place. By researching the different types of pilgrimages that exist, I was able to get a sense for the numerous cultural reasons why one might embark on a pilgrimage. With this multiplicity in mind, I was able to then search for indications of a culturally driven desire for women to thru-hike the PCT or AT.

Some pilgrimages are formal and structured, while others are unregimented and follow no set path or guidelines. Predominately when the word pilgrimage is used one tends to think of a religious journey. However many secular pilgrimages do exist, like the New Age celebrations at Glastonbury, pilgrimages to war graves, Elvis Presley's shrine at Graceland, and Liverpool football fans pilgrimage to Anfield (Eade and Sallnow 2000:xvi). Anthropologist Alan Morinis divided all pilgrimages into six categories: devotional, instrumental, normative, obligatory, wandering, and initiatory.

Devotional pilgrimage has the goal of the journey to encounter a religious shrine, personage, or symbol. An example of devotional pilgrimage is the Buddhist pilgrimage that ventures to places where the Buddha himself was once present. A devotional pilgrimage may also be one in which an encounter with a divine presence is not the goal, yet devotion is the stressed aspect of the journey, as is the case in the Hindu pilgrimage of Vaisnavite sect (worshippers of Krishna). In both of these pilgrimages the goal is the accumulation of religious merit that can be applied to this life or the pilgrim's next born



life. Similarly many Christians seek a trip to Jerusalem to visit places that bore witness to the life of Christ (Morinis 1992:10).

Instrumental pilgrimages are supposed to accomplish finite, worldly goals. These pilgrims may be seeking a cure for illness, seeking fertility, or the solution to a number of concrete quandaries. In ancient Greece there was a shrine that housed a mystic healing divinity, Asklepios, who was reported to cure ailing pilgrims who paid the shrine a visit. Christians will endure a pilgrimage to Lourdes for similar healing purposes. Other popular healing sites include Velankanni in south India, Saut d'eau in Haiti and tombs of Muslims saints. Instrumental pilgrimages can be undertaken for innumerable reasons: in Bengal pilgrimages will be completed for the sake of stopping hair loss, finding a good marriage partner, or scoring well on exams (Morinis 1992:11).

Normative pilgrimages are part of a ritual cycle, relating to the life cycle or the annual cycle. Hindus will embark on a pilgrimage at any major life passage, including death. The Hindu belief in perfection of death at a pilgrimage site has resulted in ritual suicide at places like Puri and Allahabad. Cyclical traditions of pilgrimage are also found in Judaism, where weekly pilgrimages and pilgrimages on holy days like Passover have historically marked times when men of Hebrew tribes would converge at temples in Jerusalem. In Muslim, Buddhist, and Latin American Catholic traditions pilgrimages can facilitate individuals breaking free of previous routines in order to enter the next stage of life (Morinis 1992:12). Shrines tend to outlive other socio-cultural institutions, providing a stable ruler by which to measure the changes of life.

Obligatory pilgrimages enjoy a self-explanatory title: they are seen as required within a certain faith or religion. The most famous obligatory pilgrimage is the *haji*, the

fifth pillar of Islam that enjoins all Muslims to Mecca once in their life. Muhammed had the brilliant idea that bringing representatives of Muslims from every segment of the dispersed Islamic religious world would increase solidarity of the international Muslim community. Over a million Muslims a year complete this pilgrimage to Mecca (Chapter 9 Thayer). Obligatory Christian pilgrimages were typically instated as punish or penance. Still a common pilgrimage route, Santiago de Compostela was once where convicted criminals were sent on penitential journeys in the Middle Ages. Some pilgrims were condemned to wander from holy place to holy place until their chains wore down from the friction of being dragged (Morinis 1992:13).

Wandering pilgrimage has no predetermined goal. The pilgrim hopes her feet will guide her to a place that will satisfy an inner craving. The beggar pilgrims of Edo Japan wander from shrine to shrine seeking timeless eternity, mimicking the journey of the famous Zen-poet of the Seventeenth century, Basho. Early Christian theologians interpreted pilgrimage as a search for solitary exile, drawn from the biblical character Abraham who received word from God that he was commanded to leave his homeland. Wandering pilgrimage was regarded as a dying to the world in order to inherit heaven. One of the divergences between Martin Luther and the Catholic church surrounded the issue of pilgrimage, since shrine worship developed later and ruined the original intent of this type of wandering pilgrimage. There does still exist a contemporary Christian pilgrimage of wandering by Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad (Chapter 7 Glazier). Wandering reflects the fact that a pilgrim's goals do not need to be located in space and time but that a journey is still undertaken because the movement toward the Other, the unknown, is called for to realize the quest, the craving. Wandering pilgrims assert that what is known

in their normal lives is incomplete and unsatisfactory, so they set out hoping to find the Other through simply the act of leaving their normal lives behind (Morinis 1992:13).

The sixth type of pilgrimage is initiatory. These pilgrimages are undertaken to transform the status of participants. The indigenous people in Mexico who pilgrimage to Huichol seek a hallucinogenic cactus in order to reach a higher level of consciousness. The *haji* can also be considered initiatory because once pilgrims complete the pilgrimage they are *haji*, a new social rank (Morinis 1992:14).

Almost every example of pilgrimage given by Morinis was done in the name of one religion or another. Do women thru-hikers have similar religious or spiritual intentions behind their decision to hike? By classifying the women's adventures into a specific pilgrimage category, certain cultural patterns will either be confirmed or refuted, depending on whether or not all of the women's hikes fit into one or more categories.

Of all the pilgrimage research I came across, I was most intrigued with the notion that miracles are expected to happen on pilgrimage, and that these miracles, among other events that are only able to occur in the liminal space of a pilgrimage, transform the pilgrim into a different person from who they were before they began their journey. Ultimately I found that the structures of pilgrimage, the ideas of *communitas* and *liminality*, shapes the experience of the hikes for the women whose stories were reviewed for this paper. Just as a pilgrimage is a transformative experience with key components, so are the hikes these women endure. The fundamental phases I discovered to exist within pilgrimage and thru-hiking are as follows: the pilgrim's motivation for pilgrimage as a defining characteristic of the type of pilgrimage they embark upon; pilgrims enters a liminal space in which they shed their old identity and create a new one;

pilgrims become part of *communitas*, as defined by both the Turners and Eade and Sallnow; pilgrims separate themselves from tourists; spirituality as a mechanism for understanding the miracles of the pilgrimage; physical challenges as an essential attribute of the pilgrimage; and the challenge to incorporate the pilgrimage experience back into the monotony of everyday life.

### *A Brief Trail History (With Women)*



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The Appalachian Trail, established in August of 1937, runs from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Mt. Katahdin in Maine, and covers approximately 2,100 miles, running through 14 different states<sup>6</sup>. The Pacific Crest Trail, established in 1973,

<sup>4</sup> [http://columbian.media.clients.ellingtoncms.com/img/photos/2012/10/04/10-07\\_Pacific\\_Crest\\_trail\\_t180.jpg?370a03faaa4bde2115f371a02430eb3e6a451be5](http://columbian.media.clients.ellingtoncms.com/img/photos/2012/10/04/10-07_Pacific_Crest_trail_t180.jpg?370a03faaa4bde2115f371a02430eb3e6a451be5)

<sup>5</sup> [http://atc.civcore.com/images/AT\\_Overview\\_Poster\\_volunteer\\_areas\\_detail.jpg](http://atc.civcore.com/images/AT_Overview_Poster_volunteer_areas_detail.jpg)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/history>

stretches from Mexico to Canada, passing through California, Oregon and Washington and is over 2,700 miles<sup>7</sup>. Almost immediately upon the creation of the PCT and the AT, hikers, adventurers, wanderers and lost souls began completing the trails in groups and on solo adventures. In 1976 Teddi Boston was the first female to solo thru-hike the PCT (Mann 2011:16). The first male PCT thru-hiker, Eric Ryback, completed his journey in 1970, before the trail was officially opened, and returned to civilization a god amongst men, with a book deal in line that bound his story in a best-selling hard cover (Mann 2011: 18). Boston, however, was fired from her job because of her hike (Mann 2011:18). She was written about in two magazines, both of which misspelled her name (Mann 2011:18). Boston was a 49-year-old mother of four who decided to hike the PCT southbound, well known to be substantially more challenging than the northbound direction Ryback completed and yet she received substantially less attention and praise for her accomplishments than he (Mann 2011:18).

Emma Gatewood, affectionately known by the thru-hiking community as Grandma Gatewood, was the first woman to complete a solo thru-hike of the AT. Grandma was a 67-year-old when she first thru-hiked the AT in 1955. Standing at an unimposing 5'4", she weighed in at 155 pounds and had given birth to 11 children. Grandma carried a denim bag with 20 pounds of gear, cooked over an open fire, lost 30 pounds, and wore out five pairs of sneakers while hiking (Maine Rose 1999:62). Grandma didn't worry about keeping her family posted, she used a guidebook on only one occasion, and was quite content with eating cold food if necessary. She knew how to take care of herself. Grandma walked alone most of the time, only joining other hikers for

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/long-distance-hiking/thruhiker-faq/>

a mile or two. She ultimately hiked the AT three times, during which she never carried a tent, sleeping bag, or regular frame backpack, using a tarp and quilt to set up her shelter each night. Grandma was also the first person, man or woman, to thru-hike the entire trail a second time (Maine Rose 1999:xiii).

### *Trails, established*

At this point in time, both the AT and the PCT receive enough thru-hiker traffic each year to have their own established seasonal practices. Thru-hikers on both trails have the option of hiking northbound or southbound, though on both trails the former is far more popular than the latter, due to weather complications that come about from hiking north to south. A southbound hiker has a less flexible time period in which to hike in order to avoid snow in the southern mountains of either trail. This limits hikers' margin for error, leading most to decide to hike northbound. The season for hiking the AT is from the tail end of March through September, whereas the PCT hiking season is from late April through August. The most recent data of PCT thru-hiking statistics taken in 2008 recorded roughly four hundred hopefuls beginning a northbound thru-hike, with a 40% completion rate, with women composing 33% of the hikers at the finish line<sup>8</sup>. Over two thousand hikers started the AT in 2011, with a 25% female constituency, though only one in four hikers successfully completed the trail<sup>9</sup>. At the beginning of thru-hiker season, crowds of hikers will flood the trail as they all set off on their expedition. The PCT even has an official kick off party in the desert of southern California (Stopwatch 2011:116). Then, further up the PCT, Ray Day marks the official day that trail legend

<sup>8</sup> <http://hikethru.com/about-the-pct/thru-hike-success-rate>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/2000-milers>

Ray Jardine has calculated to be the ideal day for leaving Kennedy Meadows and beginning through the high Sierras (Piper 2008:121).

Established support for the thru-hiker community on the AT and the PCT exists in a number of different formats, both before and during a hiker's trip. Sometime during his 16 thru-hikes of the Appalachian Trail, Warren Doyle decided to found and direct the Appalachian Trail Folk School, and the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association. Doyle is quoted in the introduction to Odysa's memoir encouraging prospective hikers,

The pilgrimage is an important part of many cultures. We need to get away from the familiar and explore not only what is around the next bend but also discover the strength and beauty that we have within us. A walkabout helps us to realize that we were just conditioned and trained in school, and with this realization we can take our first steps toward freedom and self-actualization. We develop our critical thinking abilities, rediscover being curious, and find ourselves asking questions again. We begin to more closely define what is real and what is trivial to us. We become more awake to beauty and truth, right and wrong. We rediscover a childlike sense of wonder at the essence of the natural environment. [Odysa 2011:x]

Here Doyle refers to thru-hiking as a pilgrimage. He expresses the necessity of pilgrimage in its ability to afford its travelers perspective on their society, how it promotes creative critical thinking in the pilgrim. Thru-hiking pilgrims undergo an individual transformation as they hike, and yet their experience is uniform enough to merit the existence of support groups and networks such as those provided by Doyle.

The AT and PCT have been around for 76 and 40 years, respectively. At this point in time, previous thru-hikers, supply town locals and park rangers have created an intricate and impressive system of physical, mental and emotional support on the trails. Although there exists such a wealth of knowledge about the AT and thru-hiking, when Odysa, a hiker to be introduced later, stops in the town of Roanoke and attends Sunday school to speak with the kids about the AT, none of the children know about the AT,

though their town is on the AT (Odyssa 2011:141). Although within the worlds of thru-hiking there appears to be a great support for current and future thru-hikers, encouragement for others to endure the journey is minimal, with locals remaining unaware of the existence of the trails (Piper 2008). Since thru-hiking is not endorsed or claimed by any religious faith as most pilgrim pathways are, thru-hiking pilgrims are self-selecting, those who deliberately seek out a solitary wilderness experience. As noted by Dubisch (1996), miraculous tales of the events of pilgrimage perpetuate its existence, and yet the reach of the tales of thru-hiking is limited. Just as a pilgrimage associated with a particular faith, thru-hikes tend to attract those who are predisposed to success on the pilgrimage: in the case of thru-hiking, those individuals are white, wealthy males. These white, wealthy males are predisposed to successful thru-hikes in large part because American society's gender roles and class roles create a prevalent social space for the recreational outdoorsman. When young men are taught in school and their homes the legacies of outdoorsmen such as Thoreau, Roosevelt, and Emerson, they are essentially taught that they have what it takes to be successful in the wild. Women, however, are not afforded such wide recognition of their capacity to enjoy the natural world on their own.

#### *A Common Misconception*

Before diving in to reading memoirs and trail journals, I decided to investigate the common societal perception of women in the wild as informed by the media, television and books. A common societal belief seems to be that women simply do not interact with the natural world in the same way men do. TV shows like *Man Vs. Wild*, *Dual Survival* and *Survivor Man* follow men who live in non-urban settings. Framed with a



certain amount of Hollywood suspense, these shows sell their viewers the idea that the wilderness is unpredictably dangerous, and that only an aggressively confident man might survive its unpredictable ways. Social media plays a strong role in informing our society of the expectations of its members. Television programs possess a haunting ability to infiltrate people's ideas of how they should conduct themselves within society by broadcasting explicit messages of what constitutes appropriate behavior. According to the previously mentioned shows, the woods are a man's world. There is one TV program, *Man, Woman, Wild* in which a husband and wife attempt to survive in the wild together. The man, Mykel Hawke, who has the deep, gruff yet smooth voice of a late night radio DJ, slowly and calmly leads his blonde, chatty, nervous, large-breasted British wife, Ruth England through their wilderness adventures. One of the most highly rated comments on Youtube clip of the show reads, "If he ever wants a divorce he could just leave her out there<sup>10</sup>". In the one show that actually follows a woman trying to survive in the natural world, she is depicted as dependent on her husband who is usually the one gathering the food they need for their survival.

Similarly, with literature that is highly circulated and promoted about human interaction with the non-human world, the domain remains male dominated. From the historic writing of Henry Thoreau and R.W. Emerson, men who sought to "live deliberately" (Thoreau 1978:17) in the natural world, to the environmental activist writing of the Beat generation Gary Snyder, Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey to the modern survivalist adventure writing of Jon Krakauer, Aron Ralston, Joe Simpson, nature writing is a male-centered sphere, colored with language of domination and bravery.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXdIacxmt80>

Women have, indeed, written of their relationship with nature but their journeys are not widely read, usually featured instead as articles in magazines (Mann 2011). There is a small number of relatively well-known literature written by women about philosophical musings on nature, like Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain*. However these books are not as widely circulated as those of their male counterparts. Like the popular survivalist TV shows of the contemporary moment, the books *Into the Wild*, *Into Thin Air*, *127 Hours*, and *Touching the Void* support the notion that the wilderness is dangerous, and only capable of being navigated by thick-skinned, strong-muscled men.

The most popular contemporary example of a woman who has written of her extended time spent in wilderness is that of Cheryl Strayed, whose memoir *Wild* was endorsed by media tycoon Oprah in June of 2012 and later became a #1 New York Times best seller. Strayed writes of her solo thru-hike on the Pacific Crest Trail in 1995, a journey she undertook shortly after her mother's unexpected death. In a book review by New York Times writer Dwight Garner, published for the same organization that helped support the selling of Strayed's memoir, Strayed's adventure is described as, "loose and sexy and dark as an early Lucinda Williams song" (2012:1). Strayed has poured her heart into the pages of a book about the strength of her spirit, and the New York Times has the audacity to publish a piece summing up her writings as sexy and loose. Then Garner has the gall to claim that Strayed's best writing in her novel is that about her own love life, "She is even better on her own lust. Parts of this frank and witty book belong in "Best American Sex Writing 2013" (2012:1). The fact that such a prestigious and widely read publication would sell Strayed's writing as a sex book undermines the serious nature of

her tales. The magnificent ways in which the trail changed Strayed's life have been completely diminished and forgotten about in this review published by one of the nation's most highly regarded news source.

Publications like the one of Strayed's are the way stories of the miracles of thru-hiking pilgrimage are perpetuated and advertised, they are what keep the pilgrimage alive. And yet inspiration seems targeted at a certain demographic. As noted in chapter 11, many women thru-hikers are working to change this pattern.

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### *Before the Hike*

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#### Chapter 2: Motivating Factors

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This chapter observes the women as they plan for their thru hike, detailing their reasons for hiking and the reactions they receive from friends and families about their intentions to hike.

The motivations that spur pilgrimage shed light on the culture that supports it, the culture the pilgrims come from. For instance, if all pilgrims of a certain pilgrimage undertake the journey in order to mark the beginning of their adult lives, it will provide insight to the importance placed on time and the distinction of childhood and adulthood within that society. With this in mind, the women's motivations may expose certain cultural phenomenon. Each woman had a different motivation for wanting to pursue a long distance solo hike. Some were explicitly searching for a resolution to a problem they felt in their lives, some were seeking greater clarity and perspective, and others still were simply interested in being in nature for such a long time. Piper notes that, "I was

[not] trying to find myself. I had hoped to become myself, which seemed different” (Piper 2008:221). Piper indicates that there is something about the process of hiking the PCT that she hopes will reveal her true character, which has not yet been uncovered in her 50-some years of life off of the trail. Stopwatch, the other PCT hiker, was inspired to thru-hike after hearing of a friend’s experience hiking the entirety of the Appalachian Trail. Stopwatch was drawn to the physical challenge of distance hiking.

Odyssa sets out to hike the AT, “to be in nature, to push my limits, to meet new people, to put off getting job, or to give my mother gray hair” (2011:11). Odyssa does not seem to have profound expectations of her experience, though she does describe the trail as “calling” to her (2011:10). She continues to proclaim, “we’ve spent our entire lives under the influence of family, school, and religion, and we need to test our doctrines. The trail provides a place to sort through the fact and fiction of our childhoods,” suggesting that to some extent she is aware that the trail will provide answers to questions she does not yet know how to ask (Odyssa 2011:72). Odyssa is the only author whose memoir addressed her religion directly. While others will hint at a spirituality or faith, Odyssa is a church attending Christian. However, she does not mention her religion playing a role in her decision to hike the AT.

Amazin’ Grace resolved to live life to its fullest after her father passed away when she was 19 years old. During the months preceding her father’s death, he took his family on numerous camping trips. On one of those trips Amazin’ Grace traveled a portion of the AT and knew that she would return to the trail someday. Immediately before she committed to the hike she broke up with a boyfriend for whom she had delayed her original hiking plans. Though Amazin’ Grace may have had a reason to leave her home,

she did not necessarily have a specific aim for her journey, “I’m on a pilgrimage to find out why I’m on a pilgrimage” (2001:82).

Willow was 39 years old when she decided to hike the AT, the mother of two teenage boys, who had recently gone through a nasty divorce with her children’s father. She sought to free herself from fear on the AT: “I was afraid of living without love, afraid of still loving. This fear sent me on a personal quest” (Willow 2012:1). Furthermore, Willow wanted to liberate herself from the expectations she believed others were placing upon her as a single mother, expectations that would dictate she abandon her own desires entirely (2012:2). Willow was tired of letting her fear of letting others down control her life. She embarked on a journey to reclaim control of her own life.

Each woman had her own reasons for wanting to thru-hike. The trails adopt the role of shrines as defined by Eade and Sallnow (2000), with the individual approaching the shrine for distinct reasons. No two women reported the exact same motivation for thru-hiking. Thousands of people begin thru-hikes on the PCT and the AT each year with the intention of walking, one foot in front of the other, for months on the exact same trail as every other thru-hiker, and yet none come to the trails for the same reasons. This only confirms the secular nature of thru-hiking, and that though there may be official kick off parties and schools abundant with trail information, there is no single prevailing line of thought as to why one might hike such a hike.

From the moment a woman first decides to thru-hike a long distance trail to the minute her journey begins, her story is unique, defined more by her personal past experiences than predicated on a preexisting set of standards that would lead one to begin a thru-hike, say the societal requisite rite-of-passage pilgrimage into a new period of life

or religious migration to a shrine to cleanse past sins, for example. Thru-hikers did not report committing to a thru-hike in order to prove their faith, heal a malady, honor a ritual cycle, or fulfill a religious obligation. This discrepancy in reasons why the thru-hikers began their pilgrimage revealed that they do not subscribe to a singular faith, religious dogma, or spiritual belief system. For this reason the act of thru-hiking fits into the wandering category of pilgrim classification, as defined by Morinis in Chapter 1. These women are, as is specified within the wandering type of pilgrimage, seeking to feed an internal craving, one that is not met in their normal, everyday lives. Some are looking for adventure, some seek a physical challenge, some hike as a way of delaying other societal obligations and some do not know why they are hiking. All of these motivations would suggest that everyday American culture, as these women experience it, is not rife with adventure, physically strenuous activities, or an allowance of time to put off achieving societal expectations. These women are seeking liberation from their banal everyday lives, and a jumpstart to help further them in their understanding of their own identity and their place in the world.

Thru-hiking allows women to escape the monotony of the everyday much in the same way leisurely travel does, but with a larger sense of purpose. This relates to the anthropological discussion of tourism and pilgrimage, the ways in which they differ or are similar. Though the tourist is viewed as superficially enjoying a luxurious pastime, the pilgrim is understood as undertaking a devotional struggle in the name of something greater, a religious goal, a tribute paid. This distinction is a prime reason why this thesis and its subject require due attention. Without the distinction between pilgrim and tourist, the former runs the risk of being viewed as similarly exploitative as is the tourist. When

a tourist flaunts their surreal experience on a yacht in Saint Tropez or the epiphanies they reached while scuba diving off the Great Barrier Reef and stay in a five-star hotel every night, their experiences are received with a skeptical appreciation, at best. These tourists did not work for their epiphanies, they paid for them. The pilgrim, on the other hand, struggled deeply to receive whatever wisdom they acquired along the way. In Mexico on December 12<sup>th</sup> each year, Dia de la Virgen, people of varying socioeconomic class join together on their knees as they approach the shrine (Peterson 1992:45). These people did not simply step on a cruise ship and tour the Mexican beaches en route to see the Virgen, bonding over their common humanity while enjoying shrimp cocktails and margaritas. These pilgrims struggled to earn their title as pilgrim, endured pain and discomfort to reap the benefits of the pilgrimage. These women thru-hikers are seeking refuge from the everyday in an honorable way. They want to explore a different life but they decide to do so with great difficulty laid out ahead of them.

### *Reservations & Support*

An overwhelming majority of women who decide to thru-hike the PCT or the AT have little to no backpacking experience (Maine Rose 1999:22). Naturally, this would seem to lead to a number of hesitations on the part of the hikers themselves, worrying whether or not they will truly be able to survive in the wilderness, let alone complete the goal they have set out for themselves. However, most women seemed remarkably confident about their ability to thru-hike before stepping foot on the trail. Piper prepared minimal safety precautions as she, “felt certain nothing would ever harm [her] out [on the

trail]” (2008:36). Although Piper has never camped for longer than a week, she has great determination, and thus confidence, to pursue her hike, alone.

Since, as previously mentioned, there are not many publications or public expressions of or about women thru-hikers, female thru-hikers expressed being confronted with unsupportive reactions. Odyssa expresses nothing but excitement for her own journey and claims, “I had adjusted to the idea of hiking on my own, and I was excited about it, though my mother was not.” (2011:9). Odyssa’s mother was not the only one discouraging of her trip. Her summer boss offered her a full time position, and when she turned it down to hike the AT he warned, “you need to think very seriously about what you are trying to run away from” (Odyssa 2011:47). Odyssa is not the only woman who was met by a fair amount of resistance from family members and friends. Amazin’ Grace received reactions of disbelief that “a girl” would decide to hike the AT alone (2001:55). Willow’s father was worried she would be abandoning her kids and asked, rather pessimistically, if she had written a will (2012:11). The skepticism that was presented to the women thru-hikers was never malicious and seemed to simply be a product of a society in which spending months alone in the wilderness is uncommon and unknown, especially for women, and therefore scary and unadvisable.

Though they did received their fair share of warnings from loved ones, the women I read about also enjoyed a great deal of encouragement from friends and family. Willow’s two sons insisted that she would not be abandoning them, but rather teaching them a valuable lesson of following their dreams (2012:3). Many women reported support from at least one family member, and none claimed to have only received only opposition to her thru-hiking plans (Maine Rose 1999:5). Odyssa’s father recognized



that, “people are a threat everywhere” (2011:33). Often the warnings of family members dissipated over time, once they were assured that their daughters, wives, or mothers were safe and pursuing an admirable feat.

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*During the Hike*

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**Chapter 3: Liminal Establishment and Identity**

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This chapter follows the thru-hikers as they enter the liminal space of the trail.

Subsequently, thru-hikers begin to reconceptualize their identities and individuality.

*Trail names*

A unique feature of long-distance hiking is that hikers get a new name, a trail name. “It’s like a rebirth when starting a thru-hike. In a life experience that changes a person both inside and out, trail names are aptly fitting. A person goes through so many physical and mental transformations along the trail that she is in a sense a different person from the time her feet greet the trail to the time she again reaches pavement for good,” says Stopwatch (2011:5). Trail tradition holds that a trail name is something bestowed upon a thru-hiker by another hiker. Stopwatch was given her nickname by a group of thru-hikers she had been traveling with when they noticed her obsession with the timing of miles and estimation of arrival times. The same day she was given her trail name, her new comrades took her watch away from her, a sort of mark of her shedding her old habits from life off the trail that were no longer necessary on the trail (Stopwatch 2011:135). However, some women decided to choose their own trail names. Piper, Amazin’ Grace, Odyssa and Willow all named themselves. Odyssa was concerned that

she would get stuck with a name that commented on her height, like Sasquatch or Amazonia. She wanted a name that would have a deeper meaning, one that connected more with who she aspired to emulate while on the trail. She decided upon the name Odysa as she was a classics major in college and compared the trail to Homer's Odyssey. Her trail name aided her on a process of introspection:

I thought about what the name meant. Maybe I was a wanderer on a long journey back to my home. But then what was I walking away from? And did I really even have a home? After all, I no longer lived with my parents, and I was out of school but without a job. I didn't even know what the word "home" mean anymore. Maybe that was why I was out here. Maybe I was searching for a home [Odysa 2011:28]

Trail names become a second identity for thru-hikers, and while they are on the trail it becomes their only identity. When thru-hikers introduce themselves to one another they only use their trail names. Indeed, some women would befriend other hikers throughout the five months they were on the trail and never know their real names. Trail names morph from a simple nickname into a representation of who the hiker has become over the process of their hike. Thru-hikers distance themselves from their previous lives off the trail by adopting this new identity. They are not legally changing their given name, which they will be addressed by once again after their hike is completed. Thus, thru-hikers enter the liminal state of pilgrimage as defined by Edith and Victor Turner.

### *Walk Different, Talk Different*

Once thru-hikers activate this alternative identity within themselves, their behaviors take a different form than they would off the trail. Thru-hikers challenge the definition of refined behavior when they find themselves acting in ways that they acknowledge would not be socially acceptable off of the trail. At the top of an unnamed

mountain in Virginia, Amazin' Grace yells at the top of her lungs for thoughts of her ex-boyfriend to, "GET OFF MY MOUNTAIN" (2011:60). She recognizes that this behavior, which was cathartic for her process of healing from her breakup and moving on to focus on other parts of her journey, would not be acceptable off of the trail. For Odysa, her behavioral changes resulted in expressions of happiness even when no one else was around. She notes, "at home, I usually reserved smiles and laughs for other people but on the trail I was learning to smile and laugh just for me, even if no one else was around" (Odysa 2011:193). Amazin' Grace also enjoys moments of acting out in ways that she acknowledges as remarkable in normative American society. When she and a group of fellow thru-hikers are dancing in the rain she realizes, "if only our friends could see us now, they'd know how crazy we are" (Amazin' Grace 2001:66). In the liminal existence of the trail, women are able to let loose in ways that are not socially acceptable, and they engage in the loss of their old identities as an imperative rite of passage of their journey as noted by Coleman (2002).

### *Home Is Where the Heart Is*

At a certain point on the trail, the women have become so comfortable with trail life and their new identities that the days they spend resupplying in towns feel more alien to them than the thru-hiking culture. Around mile 220 of 2700 on the PCT, Piper realizes that, "ordinary life was starting to feel less real to me and trail life was starting to feel like home" (2008:58). She arrives in the town of Soledad, CA and feels unsafe since she is *not* in wilderness. Now she worries about rapists or a person with a gun, "bears and snakes did not bother me at all. It was non-hiker humans that I was worried about" (Piper

2008:86). Odysa notices that her struggles have revitalized her in a way she never knew from normal society:

I started to realize how what was important in my life had changed. Out here I wasn't worried about the government or the economy, fashion or pop culture. Instead I was concerned about whether or not I had enough food to make it to the next resupply point, where my next water source would be, and whether my clothes would keep me warm and dry...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 [Odysa 2011:126].

Odysa has shed the lifestyle she knew off the trail and revels in the rawness of the new life she experiences while hiking.

For Amazin' Grace, her transition to fully accepting a new way of being focuses on her sexual identity. She dated both men and women before the trail but was never public about her female partners since she was concerned about the judgment she would receive. On the trail she finally begins to sort through the fact that she has been denying her sexuality for years because of societal pressure "I'm still under society's thumb, or only a recent escapee, still ignorant of what I want and need in life. I might not wear makeup, I might not care about diets or fashion, but I've spent more than enough time in relationships with men, because that was the socially easy thing to do, even though I've known for a long time that it's not what's going to make me happy" (Amazin' Grace 2001:125). As female thru-hikers become more comfortable with their trail identity and their liminal existence, they are able to be candid about the parts of society that did not suit them.

Coinciding with the women's complete acceptance of trail life is their rejection of normative lifestyles. Suddenly behaviors that once seemed normal to them now seem foreign. "[I was] grateful I would soon be back out in the woods and away from the strange things people felt compelled to do for money," says Willow (2012:214). The

women become strangers in their own society but are not yet faced with the daunting task of working through those feelings, as they have the safe space of the trail to return to.

As each woman begins to identify more with trail living they begin to enjoy a feeling of home wherever they are:

I've found something that was missing all my life. A deep sense of peace, of at-homeness, at-oneness, everywhere I go. Anywhere I lay my head, anyplace I even sit down, is home. I've slept in a feed shed, in a bathroom, on this porch, on cliffs, in the woods, in shelters, and in every one of them have felt more at home than any place I've ever lived. Somehow, in the midst of wandering, I've discovered how rooted I am; I'm no longer alienated. I'm home anywhere, everywhere, and will never feel rootless or homeless again. [Amazin' Grace 2001:215]

This sense of inner peace did not exist for Amazin' Grace before the trail when she felt she was constantly searching for peace and for a home outside of herself. The constant change of the trail has allowed her to find those things within herself. Willow finds a similar sense of calm when she adjusts to the idea that walking is the destination (2012:27). Off the trail society constantly focuses on moving forward, progressing, obtaining the next best thing. These women began to find a joy in the journey, a joy they may not have realized if they had not decided to thru-hike.

For most of these women becoming more at home on the trail and finding peace within their hike has to do with a release of some type of mental, emotional, or physical baggage they were carrying that was weighing them down. For Amazin' Grace, she was held back by memories and mixed emotions surrounding her ex-boyfriend. For Willow, it was accepting that she was a human with needs beyond being a responsible mother. Odysa reflects upon her trail name and realizes that, "like the legendary Odysseus, I was on a journey home. But maybe home wasn't a physical place at all, but rather a state of truly knowing myself and feeling at peace with who I was" (2011:223). Off the trail

society constantly focuses on moving forward, progressing, obtaining the next best thing. These women begin to find a joy in the journey, a joy they may not have realized if they had not decided to thru-hike. The transition thru-hikers make from their off trail to on trail identity, coupled with their increased feelings of comfort with thru-hiker lifestyle reveals the positive shifts that can occur in a liminal pilgrim state. Existing in a transitional realm, in which no social constructs of any consequence are commanding these women behave certain ways, love certain people, achieve certain goals, has allowed them to create their own identities that appear as more of a “true” self than what society has previously forced them to be. These women are fueled by the belief many pilgrims subscribe to, as defined by Morinis (1992), that beyond the known of everyday life lies a force with the capacity to solve the seemingly unsolvable difficulties one encounters in everyday life. By inhabiting these new names, behaviors, and conceptions of home, women thru-hikers begin to tap into the transformative force of pilgrimage.

### *Hiking alone*

Some pilgrimages are executed en masse, with groups numbering up to hundreds of thousands of people migrating in a herd-like fashion. Other pilgrimages are taken on individually. Thru-hiking is unique when the hiker decides to go at it alone, since there are at least hundreds of other people on the same trail within the same time frame. Odysa makes a distinction between loneliness and being alone when she states that, “I think I actually experience loneliness and boredom more at home than on the trail.” (2011:237). The fact that these women have made the conscious decision to endure hardship, trials and tribulations primarily on their own sets up a particular definition of aloneness. To be alone and to be lonely are two different states of being, though they are

often assumed to mean the same thing when used in everyday vernacular. Consider the commonly referenced hypothetical “crazy cat lady,” a mythical older woman who cannot find a male companion and must therefore resort to seeking company in her feline pets. This woman is regarded as lonely in her aloneness, as solitary people are often assumed to be. This cat lady stereotype is so pervasive that scholarly articles are being written in attempts to determine if it holds any truth (Lee Zasloff and Aline Kidd’s research for their published article, *Loneliness and Pet Ownership Among Single Women* was inconclusive<sup>11</sup>). As noted by Odyssa, to be alone does not necessarily imply loneliness<sup>12</sup>, just as to be lonely does not require being alone. One can experience feelings of loneliness when in solitude or when in a city full of people. Loneliness seems to be more descriptive of an emotional state of vulnerability, whereas to be alone is a description rooted in the physical aspect of a person who is not surrounded by other people.

Although to be lonely and to be alone are two distinguishable experiences, they do often occur together. A person can most certainly feel lonely when in the presence of others, but is more likely to experience feelings of loneliness when they are by themselves. Though this was confirmed in a cross-cultural study conducted by Leonard Cargan in New Zealand, The United States, and Australia, studying feelings of loneliness among couples and singles, the study also found that singles reported less discomfort with loneliness and were more likely to be proactive about remedying their loneliness when it occurred by joining organizations, etc (Cargan 1986). Women thru-hikers who decide to hike alone are not necessarily signing up for months of loneliness, nor for a future of the crazy cat lady. These women benefit deeply from the solitary moments they

<sup>11</sup> (Kidd and Zasloff 1994)

<sup>12</sup> “Loneliness is a subjective phenomenon (it is not necessarily synonymous with objective isolation, so that people can be alone without being lonely)” (Perlman and Peplau 1981:31).

are able to spend reflecting upon their own identities and experiences. Since women are expected to be the caretakers within the home, these solitary moments allow women to revel in the positive aspects of aloneness without the stigma of what it means to be a woman alone.

Hiking alone can make women feel more vulnerable when faced with possibly dangerous scenarios, like hiking across the Sierra snowfields on the PCT, or falling sick in a remote shelter in the White Mountains on the AT. Thru-hiking alone also means missing out on sharing the positive experiences with loved ones, family and friends. According to Piper, “hiking alone amplified the scariness and muted any joy there could have been” (2008:135).

As more and more individuals and groups decide to thru-hike the PCT and AT each year, hiking alone becomes less of a given and more of an assertive action. With the AT commonly referred to as the “party trail” within the thru-hiker community, one has to purposefully put a distance between themselves and other hikers at times. However there are large stretches of both trails, especially towards the end when most other thru-hikers have dropped out, when it becomes rare to come across another thru-hiker. Hiking solo can then feel like a cruel mind trick, when thru-hikers know that they may be only 20 minutes ahead or behind another group of hikers and never meet up with them (Piper 2008:143).

Amazin’ Grace was grateful for the opportunity to hike solo, since she felt she had a lot to process with regards to her most recent, nasty breakup, that she needed to go through alone, “away from the distraction of other people” (2001:59). It is all too easy for a solo thru-hiker to get distracted and caught up with the allure of hiking with others.



However, each woman's story held a part in which she met up with a group, decided that she was losing track of her own journey, and put in the effort to distance herself from the group again. Willow notes that off of the trail she will be hurried and overwhelmed, so she makes the decision to spend her last nine days alone, soaking in the last of what the trail has to offer (2012:268).

### *On Being A Woman*

All women thru-hikers considered their femininity while on the trail. They called into question what definitions and expectations society places on being a woman. Piper recalls her friend Cerena from home who impressed her by often backpacking alone, "it impressed me that a woman could do this without requiring someone else to make it safe and acceptable" (2008:168). Before thru-hiking, Piper felt society tell her that women were not capable of being in the wilderness alone. Women thru-hikers have to navigate their hike alone in more than just the physical sense. Since society does not broadcast news of women in the wilderness, these thru-hikers are also metaphorical trailblazers, paving the way for a different type of feminine identity.

Though in the liminal space of the trail these women are redefining this feminine identity, they begin the trails carrying the baggage of how society defines the female identity: "'women have been socialized to be 'nice,' 'polite,' 'to follow the rules.'" When thru-hiking the AT, a woman's first concern should be for her own personal safety" (Maine Rose 1999:46). Maine Rose is warning that the way women have been socialized to behave could actually put them in harm's way when it comes to their own safety on the trail. Women will need to be assertive at times in which society would call upon them to

maintain a ladylike, polite, peaceful disposition, especially when it comes to turning away unwanted male attention. When women thru-hikers begin to place their own safety concerns as their utmost priority, they are able to develop their intuition and learn to trust themselves. Maine Rose continues, “in general, I think women are taught that they can’t be alone, can’t take care of themselves, can’t deal with nature, can’t be strong. For this reason, I encourage every woman to hike alone for at least part of the trip. You might learn some surprising things about yourself. And you won’t learn them any other way” (Maine Rose 1999:57). Without this distance from society, Maine Rose believes this transition from socially dictated submissive behavior to confidence might not be possible. Maine Rose sees the pilgrimage of the thru-hike as a necessary catalyst for independence and self-reliance. Past thru-hiker, Selky, wrote to Maine Rose for her book that,

We’re all part of one big family out [on the trail]. We all help where we can to make this life more bearable. And what a life it is! Especially for women. We are an important link in the cycle of life. Too often we are dehumanized and made to be sex objects of desire, unworthy of respect. Well, that’s not how the real world works. We are strong, capable human beings deserving of respect. I have found that [on the trail] people recognize the difficulty of the tasks we are able to perform. They dig deeper than looks. This helps you forget what you look like and find out who you are. You find strength and power in being female. You are a creator with the ability to give life. That makes you amazing. Walking alone over Mother Earth has helped me to realize that it’s given me a sense of strength I never knew, an unparalleled empowered feeling of capability. [Maine Rose 1999:37]

Selky implies that normative culture does not consist of many leveling activities, noting that the strenuous task of walking the AT placed her on the same playing field as men who have also hiked the trail.

As women thru-hikers live for months away from the gendered expectations forced upon them off the trail they begin to question the standards that are places upon women. In a resupply town Willow took her time during a rare hot shower, “musing on

matters of being a woman hiking the trail while [she] pampered [herself] with scented shampoos, lotions, razors, and combs” (2012:47). Women mention feeling strong and connected with their bodies in ways they never have before, without all of the products society sells as necessary for obtaining beauty and strength. Towards the end of the trail Odysa ran into a group of south-bound AT hikers just beginning their hike who were so clean they looked “like models” relative to her dirt and sweat stained appearance. Odysa cannot help but laugh as these women look at her “in horror” since she feels more beautiful than ever now that she knows her strength and her connection with nature so intimately: “I might not have been considered pretty by society’s standards, but what society thought mattered less and less to me” (2011:271). This may be where Maine Rose’s conviction that women will only obtain such profound confidence by thru-hiking comes from: women are able to dig past their own desires to fit in with the superficial expectations of society and feel their physical strength. Although all women report having lost weight on the trails, and many of them enjoy this process, a desire to be thin is not enough to get a person through 2100 plus miles of excruciating pain, and emotional and mental strain. Women create a new relationship with their bodies as sources of strength and providers of life, as Selky referenced. Without the trail providing a liminal space in which gendered norms are questioned, these women may not have known a similar opportunity to know their own power.

Women thru-hikers report witnessing, in addition to a change in the way they conceive of their own feminine identity, a change in the way they perceive the strength in other women. Willow felt strong energy coming from the few women she met on the trail, and felt instantly connected with them. She explains, “[the women I encountered on

the trail] were individually and collectively redefining what I thought a woman could or should be” (2012:222). Being surrounded by women with the courage, spirit and willpower to complete such an arduous journey has positively inflated Willow’s image of women. Odysa experiences similar sentiments, but with regards to the women who she encounters off the trail during her hike. Odysa stayed with three women, all friends of friends, for anywhere from one to three nights while she was on the trail. She learns a valuable lesson from each of these women as she visits them: from one she learns that stay-at-home-moms are more than what she previously thought, from a female Pastor she stays with she learns that a woman is capable of teaching about God, and from another woman she learns that a more equal union of income earners can exist within a nuclear family (Odysa 2011:234). As thru-hikers step outside of the judgment boundaries of society not only are they able to question their own position within society, they also reconceptualize the roles other women play.

A part of this new identity the women assume is one of inspiring other women to do the same. In the White Mountains, Amazin’ Grace runs into a Girl Scout group and almost all initially admit that they did not think a woman could do what she is doing. Amazin’ Grace spends the afternoon telling the troop about her adventures and by the end of their conversation a few proclaim, “I’m gonna be just like you and hike the whole Trail someday” (Winters 56). A trail angel in Vermont gave Willow a ride into town and exclaimed that she was inspired by Willow’s adventures. Willow beams, “it felt good to be a part of the revolution of women who are expanding our culture’s vision of the female and pushing their own limits, creating change across generations” (Allen 208). Women thru-hikers critically examine the role that women typically play in society.

They gain a better appreciation for themselves and other women in the process, a process that many claim would not occur if not for the trail.

Willow questioned her femininity regarding her role as nurturer, caretaker and especially mother, while hiking the trail. Willow felt the conflicting draw as a mother that suggested she was being a selfish, and therefore poor, mother (2012:91). She goes home due to a bad knee for a week, during which time her oldest son, Joseph, is suspended from school. Since her ex-husband works all day and they cannot afford a babysitter, they decide that Joseph will join her on the trail, “Damn, now I was stuck hiking with my delinquent son, whose delinquency was probably related to my absence in the first place, while I chased this stupid dream, and his father struggled to keep up with two kids he had never parented alone” (Willow 2012:91). Willow blames herself for her son’s behavioral issues and yet still wants to bring him on the hike with her. She questions if she is able to mother effectively while hiking with her son: “hitching into town with my teenage son was a trail experience that causes a mom to think twice while the mind dredges up all the fears we are supposed to let govern our lives...how do you teach your teenager about hitchhiking without feeling guilty?” (Willow 2012:94). She is concerned about how to talk about the partying 20-somethings at a hostel with Joseph, who is supposed to be on punishment, “we were able to discuss the event from the perspective of outsiders, a luxury many mothers of wayward teens don’t get. I continue to be ever grateful” (Willow 2012:95). Ultimately she finds that her ability to overcome the tricky parenting situations on the trail provides a beneficial learning experience for her and her son alike, one that would not be afforded to them if they were off the trail.

When Willow's younger son and ex husband joins her for a few weeks so the four of them are hiking together she feels her identity shifting from Willow to mom: "their pending arrival has created a huge shift in my focus...I have moved into mother-mode...my usual first thought of [a maildrop package], 'wonder what goodies might be in there for me?' was replaced with, 'I could use this for packing up meals for the boys'" ... "watching this shift has offered new discoveries about my thinking as a woman and as a mother; it was interesting to see how quickly my priorities changed when my responsibilities included someone else's well-being" (2012:137). "Stress has returned. I was appalled as I watched myself obsess and worry over my sons on the trail" (Willow 2012:138). " Despite this difficulty she is looking forward to instilling a love for the forest in her older son. She makes a separation between being a mom and being a thru-hiker: "my unfounded worries fed my growing anger over the change of my status from thru-hiker to trail mom" (Willow 2012:142). But then she realizes that her identity as thru-hiker can help her to be a better mother: "I feel a bit guilty, as a parent, that I am not worrying about my kids...there should be no reasons to worry just for the sake of worrying, like I think my parents did and so many other parents do" (Willow 2012:253). Other women report "while it is not frowned upon by the men of the Trail to see a dad thru-hiking, a woman may incur severe criticism and has a whole different set of issues before she is ready to leave a child or children behind" (Maine Rose 1999:12). Willow's feelings of guilt, her concerns about not being a good mother shed light on what is expected from mothers off the trail: never-ending attentiveness and care. Maine Rose's observation that fathers are not chastised for their decisions to hike highlights unequal expectations of mothers and fathers in society regarding child rearing. It is these social

obligations that make women hesitant to hike in the first place. Women are supposed to nurture others, not themselves or their crazy dreams of hiking 2000 miles. Though all women reconsider their feminine identity, only Willow is faced with dealing with the realities of being a mother on the trail. Her past defines this part of the hike for her as distinct from other, non-mother solo female hikers. In this instance Eade and Sallnow's idea of the unique pilgrimage experience existing as a void that is worshiped and witnessed differently by each pilgrim appears to apply to Willow's particular experience (2000).

### *Hike your own hike*

A concept that thru-hikers constantly are confronted with that seems to encourage the plurality of hiking experiences is that of "hiking your own hike" (HYOH).

Theoretically, this principle suggests that each thru-hiker should concern themselves only with their own hiking style, whether that refers to a personal style or that of a group they are hiking with, refrain from judging the ways in which others chose to hike, and bear in mind that there is no single "right" way to hike. On the Appalachian Trail, there are even names given to hikers who chose different styles for progressing forward on the trail.

The AT is marked by white blazes on trees, fences, and trail markers. Blue blazes show up sporadically on the trail to mark paths that are either shortcuts to more scenic routes, sometimes indicating where there used to be white blazes but the trail had to be diverted due to land policy or land erosion. Those who hike only following the white blazes are considered "purists," those who include blue blazed trail portions are referred to as "blue blazers," those who hitchhike beyond the necessary rides to resupply towns are known as

“yellow blazers” and hikers who incorporate all methods of hiking are called “rainbow blazers” (Amazin’ Grace 2001:95).

Predominantly women noted the small number of people who actually seemed to live by the HYOH principle. Stopwatch received continuous grief for the high mileage she maintained through her whole hike. She never took a single “zero day,” a day without clocking any miles, which many hikers reacted negatively to (Stopwatch 2011:99). Hikers informed Stopwatch that she was not getting the “true trail experience” and that she was not enjoying herself because she was going so fast (2011:115). “[other hikers] would look at me with cold eyes that accuse me of lying, of hiding some other motive for not taking days off,” says Stopwatch, “‘hike your own hike’ often added on the caveat ‘as long as it’s not too different from my own hike’” (2011:125). When a hiker is struggling to grasp the HYOH principle, it seems no hiking style will please them. Though stopwatch received grief for not taking a zero day, Willow felt judged for taking too many, noting that zero days can be viewed as “mental health days” are off the trail (2012:61). The stigmas that are attached to taking time off to recoup in American society are also present on the trails.

The women whose stories have been followed for this thesis each reached a tipping point in their hike after which they felt they could accurately claim they had embodied the HYOH philosophy. For all of them it came at a time when they were able to forgive themselves for hiking outside of the norm, for truly constructing their own hike and for not letting the judgments of others affect their decisions. For Piper, she reached a turning point when she realized, “as we all talked of our experiences and struggles, injuries and illnesses, it became clear that a pure thru-hike experience was not all that common and



there was nothing to be ashamed of that I could not ‘make it’ or that I needed to take time away from the trail” (2008:147). These moments marked a critical time, after which their self-acceptance lead to a greater, more genuine confidence in their own purpose for thru-hiking, understanding that they can be proud of their accomplishments without comparing them to others. For many, they considered how their Own Hike would be interpreted by non-hikers. Would their family and friends back home judge them for not completing the trail, or for hitchhiking into town instead of walking? These women still contextualized their hikes within a larger framework of their lives in larger American society. Willow remarks that the varied ways in which one can hike a trail, and the principle of HYOH can be applied to the “various approaches we all have to tackling life” (2012:5). This concept of HYOH would suggest that thru-hiking communitas is in the pure, spontaneous, existential category as defined by Edith and Victor Turner (1978). This type of communitas celebrates the integral human by converging personalities outside of normative social structure. In the case of thru-hiking communities, ultimately this celebrated integral person is all encompassing, it is not just one human, one identity, one way of hiking or one way of living, but it is the embraced spectrum of multiplicities. Since societal definitions of gendered or normative roles are temporarily lifted in the liminal space of the trail, each hiker is able to express their true self.

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#### Chapter 4: Communitas

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This chapter searches for the existence of communitas as defined by both the Turners and Eade and Sallnow.

#### *Turnerian Confirmation*

According to the Turners (1978), *communitas* are, “a spontaneously generated relationship between leveled and equal total and individuated human beings stripped of structural attributes” (216). After reading only one memoir or trail journal, the presence of *communitas* on the PCT and AT is apparent. Comparing memoirs and trail journals only reinforces the presence and importance of *communitas*. Women reported being treated as equals regardless of gender or age (Maine Rose 1999:79). There is a bond formed between thru-hikers that surpasses normative social constructions that constitute how, when, and with whom we interact. Off of the trail with literal walls separating us from one another, be it in a house, a school, a cubicle, individuals have the option of interacting with one another. When Odysa hears a woman hiker crying in her tent at night she notes that, “on this barren mountainside, it seemed cruel to allow someone to cry alone when I was so physically close to her” (2011:22). The physical arrangement of proximity of humans on the trail enables and in some cases imposes open, vulnerable interaction. Stopwatch reflects on the difference between interactions with strangers on the trail versus off the trail:

How often do you stop a stranger to find out what’s on their day’s agenda, let alone simply look them in the eye and say, “hello?” Try waving to complete strangers on the sidewalk or in the car, driving down the street. What kind of reaction do you get? You are likely to get no response at all, or that look we all know that says we’re toeing the line of socially acceptable behavior. Opening up so quickly to strangers just doesn’t happen I everyday life. Nor is it widely welcomed. On the trail, it’s commonplace and downright awkward when someone *doesn’t* say hello or acknowledge your presence with at least a nod or a wave. [2011:59]

The trail is at times nostalgic of a well-dreamt and yet never realized past in which individuals cared for the well being of others, even when it is inconvenient for them to do so. Women reported having other thru-hikers walk up to an extra five miles to deliver a rain jacket, a walking stick, even a bag of toilet paper, that they recognized as belonging

to Willow, Amazin' Grace, and Odysa, respectively. Communitas are reinforced on the AT and the PCT through the practice of behaviors that are not expected or acceptable within the confines of American society. These actions suggest a strong sense of community in which no one person's wishes or wants are put above those of another's.

Communitas bonds between thru-hikers are fortified by the common emotions and thoughts that thru-hikers understand, thoughts and emotions that are regarded as emanating from experiences one would only incur on a thru-hike. Piper felt connected to other hikers who shared, "stories of lives in transition, of feeling that there had to be more to life than whatever they had been doing, and that life was too short to put off big dreams," and concludes, "I was out here all alone surrounded by people just like myself. (2008:70). As noted in Chapter 2, no two hikers have the same goals for hiking the trails. From this uncertainty stems an opportunity at connection over confusion, separate from the comfort and certainty that people cling to off of the trail (Odysa 2011:17). Here communitas are confirmed as resulting form the voluntary removal of the everyday world, as Turner (1969) declared the case to be.

Though there is no one positive reason why people decide to thru-hike, almost all report a negative motivation in the belief that there is "more to life" than what is experienced in the routine of everyday life, or a curiosity to see what exists beyond the usual monotony. This distinction is necessary since it would be false to say the thru-hikers shared no common goals, and yet to suggest that they had common goals without making the distinction would risk placing a greater sense of unity and similarity among pilgrims within thru-hiking communitas than is actually present. Here I am making a distinction between a positive goal or motivation and a negative goal or motivation.

Thus, I define a positive goal as one that is easily measured, one that can be ticked off a list once achieved, a lower body weight, completion of a religious obligation, or the cure for a disease, for example. A negative goal, on the other hand, exists as a sort of void, defined by a lack of specificity, a desire to explore the Other as opposed to the Known. Thru-hikers express their negative goals when they claim to be hiking to put off getting a job, as is the case for Odysa, or to become themselves, as is the case for Piper. These negative goals are not easily quantifiable, they are more ambiguous, and they are rooted in an escape of one way of living. Though many thru-hikers do not have a known, or positive, goal, they bond over their shared negative goals. This shared negative goal reinforces the thru-hiking communitas as existing as a pure, spontaneous, existential one. One in which the integral person is celebrated. Thru-hikers do not need to share the same, specific positive goal. This type of communitas recognizes the plurality that exists within a negative goal.

It is impossible to escape intimacy and vulnerable interactions with other thru-hikers, since the shared unique experience of thru-hiking immediately solidifies a bond between thru-hikers. Thru-hikers report a different kind of relationship forming between one another than any they have experienced before. Amazin' Grace attributes this to the fact that, since no one knows one another off of the trail, revealing confessions will not have an impact in their "real" lives (2001:74). This suggests that off the trail, Amazin' Graze experienced limited open relationships because she feared the repercussions of being completely open regarding her sexuality.

Even though all the woman whose journeys were reviewed for the purpose of this thesis hiked solo, they all expressed being keenly aware of the tightly knit trail

community that somehow manages to remain so strong despite the fact that social interactions were irregular and unpredictable. The fact that interactions with other hikers most often occurred randomly, without planning, made many women feel the community even when they were hiking along; they knew that at any moment in time they might bump into an old friend from the beginning of the trail, or a stranger with whom they could immediately bond over so many details of their lives that might seem trivial to those off the trail, like packweight, resupply towns, and the luxury of warm showers (Odysa 2011:226). The ways in which close knit friendships seem to develop so quickly and strongly suggests the existence of *communitas* in the Turnerian definition (1978).

A critique that Eade and Sallnow (2000) had of the Turners (1978) approach to *communitas*, however, is that they felt the Turners did not address the ways in which *communitas* utilized normalized mechanisms to maintain a coherency. As Eade and Sallnow would suggest, thru-hiking *communitas* have a set of unwritten social rules that define appropriate and inappropriate behavior. When a thru-hiker on the Appalachian Trail, Fullabeans, makes inappropriate comments towards Amazin' Grace and other female hikers he is ostracized by other members of the thru-hiking community. That night in the shelter without formally discussing it, the male hikers create a boundary around the women keeping Fullabeans at a distance. Amazin' Grace relates, "he's broken the hiker community's shelter rules: There may be no physical privacy [on the trail], but you keep your hands and eyes to yourself" (2001:105). The unwritten rule about physical boundaries is unclear but strong.

Piper mentions that a thru-hiker who posted a photo of herself online outside of a trail angel's<sup>13</sup> home with a lewd hand gesture purposefully is not informed of further trail magic<sup>14</sup> by other hikers who felt her behavior "crossed a line" (2008:45). There appears to be an unwritten rule about respecting trail angels' hospitality. Similarly, when a thru-hiking couple is consistently rude to other thru-hikers, they are denied access to a map by thru-hikers when they ask for one: "I [felt] like a member of some tribe or strict religious sect. They've broken the hospitality rules, so now they're ostracized" (Amazin' Grace 2001:285). There exists an unwritten rule about polite, acceptable behavior within the thru-hiking *communitas*, and social behavioral expectations that are kept in check by an unnamed system of accountability in which hikers will disown other hikers who break the rules. These unwritten rules refute the Turners' definition of *communitas* as a counter-culture without any sort of structure (1978). Thru-hikers release certain societal expectations about guarded closeness and make fast friends on the trail. There is, however, a set of unwritten rules that dictates the appropriate code of conduct within these new relationships.

Thru-hiking *communitas* rejects certain societal ideas about intimacy but respects others. As mentioned in Chapter 1, *communitas* provide pilgrims with the distinct opportunity to critique their society, and to then rebuild a new one taking and leaving whatever aspects of the society they care to bring or leave behind. There are parts of American society that thru-hikers are happy to shed, like the lack of intimacy with which strangers usually interact. Thru-hikers enjoy perpetuating the *communitas* standard of

<sup>13</sup> A trail angel is a person who helps thru-hikers with their journey, expecting nothing in return. For more on trail angels see Chapter 6.

<sup>14</sup> Trail magic is a gift, usually in the form of snacks or water, placed on the trail by a non-thru-hiker, usually a trail angel. For more on trail magic see Chapter 6.

familiar interaction that they are not used to experiencing off the trail. However this openness has its limits, reflecting similar American boundaries of personal space and respecting hosts.

### *Eade and Sallnow's Rebuttal*

As is the case within any culture, the thru-hiking *communitas* has its drawbacks. The Turnerian approach would have one believe that the countercultures that develops when one is in the liminal space of pilgrimage are so spontaneous and self-directed as to be nearly flawless. Yet countercultures, try as they might, still contain many attributes that mainstream culture does. As previously mentioned, the thru-hiking *communitas* have a set of unwritten rules. Though this feeling can lead those within the *communitas* to feel included, they can also be subject to feelings of isolation when they find themselves not living up to the standards subliminally or implicitly set. Piper expressed feeling “left out” when she decided to lower her daily mileage and the other thru-hikers she had been walking with moved forward and left her alone without hesitation (2008:125). Piper even went so far as to describe her life on the trail as a, “life of loneliness” (2008:121). This exclusionary behavior based on speed and physical fitness begins at the beginning of the trail for many, when thru-hikers begin sizing one another up, judging who among them will be the one-in-four who make it to the finish line (Stopwatch 2011:61).

Just as there is a norm, a standard, that dictates respectful treatment of thru-hikers, it is not uncommon that thru-hikers will wonder if their behavior, opinions, or personality will be accepted. Odyssa compares “left-wing anti-fundamentalists” to squirrels, and

conservatives to moose, meaning that the former group is ever-present and dominating, whereas the latter are few and far between (2011:107). This leaves Odyssa feeling less open about her religious beliefs with other thru-hikers, inhibiting the spontaneous connections the Turners discuss (1978). Willow feels similarly underrepresented on the trail at times and exclaims, “what is all this hype about the camaraderie of the trail community anyway? What trail is there for a middle aged female,” after a rushed impersonal interaction with a southbound hiker (Willow 2012:121). Though there is no blatant hierarchy on the trail, there is a “typical” thru-hiker.

White males dominate the trail and without intention, even with direct effort against it, their sheer numbers are enough to make some who do not fall into those “normal” categories feel uncomfortable. In this way it seems Turnerian ideals of *communitas* may never be fully obtainable. Unless a pilgrimage is undertaken by a completely diverse array of people from the most assorted backgrounds, there will be one pilgrim whose character or past is more common than others. Even though *communitas* may work to eliminate judgment and power dynamics, individuals who approach a pilgrimage still bring with them the lives they lived as defined by their social context off the trail, and these definitions do not disappear overnight, or even over the course of four to six months.

Another repercussion of the trails being male dominated is that women often find themselves unwelcomingly sexualized. Piper met two women hikers whose trail names are “Beautiful and Gorgeous” (2008:132). Knowing the weight that trail names hold, the fact that these women’s trail names focus on physical attributes suggests that women have not completely escaped societal sexualizing and objectifying of women. Some times



the female body is objectified as a tool for more efficient thru-hiking. Odysa noted that, “guys always love hitching with girls, because it considerably increases their odds of getting a ride” (2011:121). Some women are seen capitalizing on this sometimes-aggressive attention given to females. Amazin’ Grace came across a woman hiker named Vampire who dressed provocatively and had equally sultry behavior around men. Amazin’ Grace watched as a few men fell under her spell and followed her up the trail (2001:124). Willow reported running into a woman who acted similarly and was frustrated that this woman was playing into the ditzy girl stereotype that Willow felt she had tried so hard to combat her whole life, especially on the trail (2012:87).

This sexualizing is problematic for a number of reasons. Although not the predominant stereotype of female thru-hikers among the thru-hiking community, there is a notion that a certain number of women are on the trail only to find a boyfriend. Odysa was asked on a date by a male thru-hiker towards the end of her journey, and she wanted to accept but she was, “worried about the perception of being like most female thru-hikers, who couldn’t stay out of relationships along the trail...I had come out here to be independent, not to find a boyfriend” (2012:250). Even though Odysa never had the intention of having her trip focus on a romance, she is hesitant to act upon her wishes because for fear that others will then perceive her as hiking for a date. A male friend of mine who has thru-hiked the AT twice and the PCT once warned me when I told him of my future aspirations to hike the AT that all men will want to sleep with me and so I will need to take control and hold firm ground against their persistent proposals. Maine Rose also notes in her book for future women thru-hikers that female thru-hikers will need to stand a firm line when men try to sleep with them (Maine Rose 1999:72-73).

Although these solo women hikers are able to reap the benefits of focusing on their own concerns, of not having to respond to normative society's call for women to be caretakers, they are still subject to crass, unwanted, objectification and sexualization. This is a prime example that refutes the Turners claim that *communitas* exist as the dialectical antithesis to structured social relations (Eade and Sallnow 2000:xii). Dominance over women is a culturally, not biologically bound, concept. The existence of these assertions of dominance on the trails serves as evidence that *communitas* are not the idealist countercultures the Turners assume them to be, and that they are, in fact, heavily informed by normative society.

The assumption that all women thru-hikers are straight is extremely alienating to any woman who may not associate as heterosexual. Amazin' Grace admits to hiking in part to sort through her thoughts about her own sexual identity. She feels uncomfortable, however, at the prospect of discussing these thoughts with other thru-hikers, "I haven't yet heard anyone go on about lesbians, though they seem a more visible target... Since I'm a woman hiking alone, I've already forfeited a certain margin of personal safety. Coming out to him would forfeit a lot more" (Amazin' Grace 2001:56-57). Amazin' Grace noticed a loud anti-gay sentiment on the trail among men, and chalked it up to the fact that the men may have felt a need to assert their heterosexual identity as they spent day in and day out surrounded by a male majority (2001:57). Other female hikers reported feeling less support from the community after coming out, and hate crimes on or near the trail have resulted in the murders of three lesbian short-term hikers in two different incidents (Maine Rose 1999:53). Here is yet another example of trail *communitas* not differentiating too terribly from frontcountry culture. The hospitality of

trail *communitas* is finite and seems to wear thin when hikers feel their own identity being threatened by accepting the identity of another hiker.

Overall *communitas* exist in the thru-hiking community, to a certain extent. Thru-hiking women reported feeling more intimate, leveled relationships with other hikers. They acknowledged these relationships as unique to the trail, as not something they would encounter in normative life. In these ways *communitas* exist within the Turnerian definition. However, per the critiques of Eade and Sallnow, thru-hiking *communitas* do still maintain a semblance of social order. It was not evident that one of these two definitions of *communitas* was more or less prevalent than the other, if anything, the thru-hiking *communitas* seemed to exhibit characteristics of both the Turnerian and Eade and Sallnow descriptions of *communitas*.

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## Chapter 5: Tourism

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This chapter applies the differentiating concepts of tourism and pilgrimage to thru-hikers and non-thru-hiker-hikers.

### *Non-Thru-Hiker-Hikers*

Most hikers one encounters on the PCT or AT are not thru-hikers, but day hikers, weekenders, or section hikers. Section hikers are hikers who hike the full length of the PCT or the AT, but require multiple seasons to do so. A section hiker might hike consecutive sections of the trail in succession each year, or they may space out their journey over two decades, hiking random 100 mile sections, flip flopping all over the trail. Day hikers and weekenders are hikers who have no intention to thru-hike and are

merely out hiking a portion of the trail for either a day, or a weekend, respectively. Weekenders, it should be noted, is a term that can be applied to describe hikers who are out for longer than a weekend, the word simply making a distinction that they are hiking for longer than just one day or an overnight. Though the Turners claim that, “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist,” thru-hikers are quick to make assertive distinctions between themselves and other, non-thru-hikers on the trail (Victor and Edith Turner 1978:20). There appears to be a hierarchy among non-thru-hikers, as designed by thru-hikers, with more respect and camaraderie being extended to other hikers the longer they have been or plan to be on the trail. Thus, a tourist on a tour bus that only drops its passengers off at the trail head parking lot for an hour garners the least amount of respect from thru-hikers, whereas an individual hiking either the John Muir Trail, a 240 mile section of the PCT, or the Long Trail a 273 mile stretch of the AT in Vermont, will be viewed as being able to understand some of the struggles of thru-hiking. Thru-hikers are able to make judgments about the status of another hiker just by looking at them: the cleaner they are, the fatter they are, the newer their gear looks, the louder they are, the less time they have been on the trail and the less they will be welcomed to join the thru-hiking *communitas* (Piper 2008:131, Willow 2012:260).

The idea that the rounder a hiker looks is an indication that they have not been on the trail for a long time has further implications. It suggests that, since they are not thru-hikers and are able to carry more food, they might have food to spare for thru-hikers. All thru-hikers had experienced at least one interaction with day hikers, weekenders, or section hikers who enthusiastically handed over whatever food they could spare. Thru-hikers will sometimes strategically place their campsites close to other, non-thru-hikers,

with the hopes of scoring some free food. They are almost always successful. This ironically means thru-hikers enjoy profiting from the overconsumption they so abhor, which is another instance of *communitas* existing within the larger structure of society, contrary to the Turnerian belief of the autonomy of *communitas* (1978). When they are unable to obtain food from others, it can instantly escalate thru-hikers into a state of name-calling. Odyssa arrived at a shelter on the AT one night to find that there was no room for her since it was full of weekenders. Not only did they not try to make room for her, they proceeded to overeat and not offer to share any food. Odyssa remarked, “they felt like overindulgent, inconsiderate houseguests...there might not have been a hierarchy among thru-hikers, but I definitely felt like we should be able to pull ranch over weekenders” (2011:75). When thru-hikers create a hierarchy of hikers and place themselves at the top, they ironically feed into cultural plays of power that they claim to be so happy to escape on the trail.

Often times when thru-hikers place themselves on metaphorical pedestals above other types of hikers they do so based on a measure of physical hardship. Odyssa was angry with these weekenders since she noted that they had not endured as difficult of a hike as she had. At another point in time Odyssa compares her appreciation of a view to those passing by in cars who pull over to enjoy the same vista. She claims that she worked harder for that view and knows it more intimately (Odyssa 2011:139). This speaks to American culture which uses such expressions as “the early bird gets the worm,” promoting competition and the idea that if one works harder for something, puts in the extra hours, they will be rewarded for their efforts. This idea of work being put in

equating better results, and of there being disappointment if things do not play out in this manner seems distinctly American to me.

Women noted many times that the trail's liminal space differed from the surrounding American culture that lacks sympathy in the form of time allowance for sifting through mental and emotional difficulties. Piper momentarily fears the loss of her title as thru-hiker when she experiences a major moment of self-doubt in which she is utterly convinced she will need to quit the trail early. Among her first worries about not completing her thru-hike is how she might be able to put a positive spin on "being a quitter" in a job interview (Piper 2008:209). Piper is expressing a two-pronged fear: of losing her title as a thru-hiker, being demoted to merely a "hiker," and of returning to normative society that does not accept "quitters." This thru-hiking *communitas*, which at times boasts a judgment-free supportiveness, is once again seen as existing neither within nor outside of the confines of the society from which it is produced, as neither the social structure itself nor its antithesis (Eade and Sallnow 2000:xii).

Any time I have travelled or studied abroad there seems to be a competition among foreigners that attempts to define what marks the difference between a tourist and someone who is in the area with a more permanent, and therefore more noble, intent. Since time spent in a country seemed to highly correlated with dropping the negative label of tourist, when meeting other travelers who have spent equal amounts of time in a foreign country other qualities need to come into question in order for the hierarchy to continue to exist and make important distinctions. For example if two Americans are living in a foreign country for a year, but one lives with a host family and has only local friends while the other works at a backpackers hostel and never learns the local language,

the former will judge the latter as being subordinate. This matter of intent marking a quantifiable difference in the legitimacy of a persons journey is present on the AT and the PCT, where thru-hiker “groupies” are those who get a bad rep for wanting to thru-hike for all of the “wrong reasons.” Usually these groupies do not complete the hike, or are severely aided by hitchhiking to gain ground (Piper 2008:161). Amazin’ Grace ran across two female groupies at different junctures on the trail, women who appeared clean and plump, indicators that they were not hiking, at shelters and absorb all of the laughter and chatter around the campfire (2001). Groupies, section hikers, day hikers, and weekenders all receive so much grief from thru-hikers because thru-hikers have gotten to a point where they recognize the pain of their journey as integral to the overall experience. They bemoan the unfair idea that others could reap the benefits of the trail without having endured any suffering to do so, yet they simultaneously claim that others are actually missing out on the full trail experience, a true appreciation, by not knowing any suffering to put the trails’ beauty into perspective.

Even after the pivotal moments in which women seem to transition to Hiking Their Own Hike, feeling more secure about their own hiking style and coincidentally not projecting as harsh a criticism on other thru-hikers, they seem to maintain an unforgiving judgment of non-thru-hikers. This reinforces the idea that pilgrimage exists within a liminal state. Moreover it asserts that in this liminal state the pilgrims view themselves as removed from those who exist outside of it. Section hikers, weekenders, and day hikers will return to the comforts of their homes at the end of the month, weekend, or day, and be enveloped by normative society. Thru-hikers seem to believe that these non-thru-hikers have not put in sufficient blood, sweat, tears, or time to exist in the liminal field of

pilgrimage. To earn the title of thru-hiker, to be a true pilgrim and not just a tourist, one must walk the entirety of the trail within one season.

*Pilgrim, Queen, Homeless?*

Though a woman may wear her title as thru-hiker with pride on the trail, and off the trail as well, a judgment thru-hikers reported receiving more frequently than they would have liked was that of a comparison to a homeless person. Stopwatch and Piper both struggle with wanting to be treated with the same respect they were granted as the wage-earning citizens they were when they began the trail when they found their way back into civilization to resupply or visit acquaintances. However they find this treatment difficult to obtain as their stench, dirt-laden clothes and skin, and generally rough demeanor suggest they may be homeless, at the very least completely unaware of the societal norms of cleanliness. Stopwatch defends herself from this status, claiming, “despite looking homeless, I certainly never felt that I fit the mold. I never asked anyone for money or food, though I gladly accepted free food, and I could pay for anything I wanted” (2011:39). Thru-hikers are subject to the negative stigmas attached to being a homeless person, as they receive wary side-glances and suggestions to wash their hands when they enter bakeries and cafes in towns further from the trail that are not used to hosting thru-hikers.

Stopwatch notes that thru-hikers have the strange capacity of being treated like a homeless person and a celebrity all within a short 24-hour period. When people are not reacting with fear to their appearance and they ask questions about their hike, they are almost always amazed. Stopwatch begins to look forward to running into people on the



trail and having them ask where she is coming from, just so she can tell them, “Mexico” and watch as their faces fill with shock and awe: “I even had a little girl of twelve years tell me she wanted to be just like me when she grew up, a woman thru-hiking the PCT” (2011:103). There is a stark contrast between the two most common ways thru-hikers are regarded by the non-hiking community: either their travels seem to be worthy of praise or they are immediately dismissed due to their looks before being able to explain their trip.

Although most of the quick bias thru-hikers receive about their homeless appearance occurred when they were in towns that were not accustomed to seeing thru-hikers regularly, hostility towards thru-hikers in towns that are frequently used as resupply towns is not uncommon. The Appalachian Trail has more towns along its course than does the more remote Pacific Crest Trail, so may be simply by a matter of frequency that the AT has more conflict in towns between locals and thru-hikers. The town of Port Clinton, Pennsylvania has only one restaurant, and hikers are not allowed to dine in the main room (Odyssa 2011:186). Odyssa eats in this restaurant with another thru-hiker, at the bar, and notes feeling discriminated against by locals who give her long, disapproving stares and seem to intentionally try to make her feel unwelcomed (2011:187). In Vermont, locals have gone so far as to remove white blazes from the AT with the intention of disorienting hikers (Willow 2012:213).

Even though thru-hikers may enjoy certain benefits of support that come from thru-hiking communitas, they are not devoid from receiving the judgments of normative society. Though the status of pilgrim undeniably has a more appreciated role within most societies than does a tourist, the qualification depends on which society is making these judgments. Though thru-hikers generally reported receiving support from strangers, the

moments when they felt discriminated against, or even simply ignored, made a lasting impression. This impression lasted in a way that eventually led all thru-hikers to acknowledge the conflict of the liminal space existing within normative society, and accept the impossibility of living within the liminal space indefinitely if they ever cared to enjoy the benefits of that society again. Although the hikers reported gaining so much from their hikes, and many continued to thru-hike other trails or repeat the same path, they also recognized with heavy hearts that thru-hiking was not a sustainable way of living if they hoped to receive any credibility in the eyes of those living within the confines of normative culture. Although to pilgrimage may be viewed as more respectable than to travel, neither are acceptable lifestyles within normative American culture.

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#### Chapter 6: Spirituality

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This chapter focuses on the metaphysical incidents that occur on the trails, and how hikers make sense of these happenings.

As noted in Chapter 2, no hiker expressed a religious goal or motivation as a part of their decision to thru-hike. Yet pilgrimage has a history rooted in religious or spiritual occurrence, with devotional and obligatory pilgrimages constituting a large number of the massive migrations of the world religions of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (Morinis 1992:10-13). Though it is true that thru-hikers did not express sentiments about the trails in the same ways a pilgrim to Lourdes or Mecca might articulate the sacred existence of those sites, the journey thru-hikers have is nevertheless experienced by many as a pilgrimage. Anthropologist Lee Gilmore studied the secular pilgrimage of thousands of people to Black Rock City in Nevada for the art festival, Burning Man (Dubisch and

Winkleman 2005:155). Gilmore created a set of pillars by which she measures a pilgrimage, given the sometimes secular nature of the act:

[Pilgrimage is] a (1) ritualized journey to a (2) specific, culturally imbued geographic location intended to (3) connect individuals to a collective experience of (4) something beyond their ordinary existence, something perhaps sacred, transcendent, healing, or transformative, however the individuals and communities involved choose to conceive those ideas, and that (5) can emerge in either religious or secular contexts.” [Dubisch and Winkleman 2005:156]

Thru-hikers described encountering mystical, magical forces on the trail. Sometimes these forces were completely explicable but entirely uncommon, if not unheard of, in normative society. This mysticism plays a crucial role in their transformative pilgrimage experience.

### *Trail angels*

Trail angels are non-thru-hiking people who aid thru-hikers in their journey without any expectation of receiving anything in return. There are many different types of trail angels, and many ways in which a person can offer to help a thru-hiker. Some trail angels are past thru-hikers who have relocated their homes in order to live closer to the trail to help thru-hikers by hosting them overnight at their houses, allowing them to use their internet to update trail journals, do laundry, shower, and be fed. These trail angels are known as “established trail angels” (Stopwatch 2011:76). Some of these trail angels are so established that their names and phone numbers appear in official thru-hiking trail guidebooks as a resource for hikers. Trail angels will also drop trail magic (see next section) on the trails. A person who impulsively helps a thru-hiker, usually after hearing of their travels, is known as a “spontaneous” trail angel (Odyssey 2011:173).

Trail angel encounters inspire thru-hikers, and they often feel that there is some

untouchable quality about thru-hiking that moves others to be selfless and to give so greatly. After meeting a couple at a lake in Oregon and explaining that she had hiked from Mexico, Stopwatch was offered a place to stay the couple's private cabin on the lake (2011:86). Not a week later, she arrives at a hotel to discover a cycling group she had come across earlier in the day paid for her to have a room for the night (Odyssa 2011: 96). Odyssa states that, "we [thru-hikers] can hardly believe our own stories because they are acts of kindness that just don't happen often on the trail, and definitely never happen in real life" (Odyssa 2011:83).

Indeed many women find that, either during a break from the trail or when they complete it, the type of giving that trail angels stand for disappears. Only a few miles off the ending terminus on the PCT, a woman refuses to give Stopwatch a ride into town, which leaves her feeling, "miffed and even hurt by the lack of trail magic the moment we stepped off the trail. Why hadn't she helped [me]? Trail magic did not go beyond the boundaries of the trail" (2011:112). Trail angels are special characters whose grace does not appear to thru-hikers to live in places off the trail. The naming of these helpful characters as angels is in itself a nod towards a trail mysticism. By naming these people trail angels their helpful actions are in a sense restricted to the trail: kind people enact kindness off the trail, not trail angels. This type of saintly individual is limited to existing within the liminal space of thru-hiking.

Not all trail angels are angels. Piper checked her email in town at a trail angel's home and saw that the trail angel had posted negative comments on her blog, calling her an "unprepared neophyte and foolish for not having expected there to be snow in Wrightwood" (2008:89). Immediately Piper feels unwelcomed and does not reveal her

identity to anyone at the trail-angel run hiker hostel. Piper has another unfortunate run-in with a trail angel who seems to have spent all his generosity in the years he has been an established trail angel, “he had ill will for everyone we talked about, including other hikers who had been there before me...now I was thinking that the trail angel had out-lived his trail angeling days, but he had so much invested in his identity as a trail angel that he had not noticed he no longer ought to be one” (2008:182). Trail angels are held to standards of the unconventional, unreciprocated giving they participate in. Unlike most deities along pilgrimages, trail angels are acknowledged as mortals with the capacity to fall from their saintly title should they experience a change of heart or intention.

### *Trail Magic*

Just as there are different kinds of trail angels, there are different kinds of trail magic as well. One thing that is common about all trail magic is that it is regarded as specific to the thru-hiking experience, “trail magic isn’t commonplace outside of the trail...people simply aren’t that nice to strangers or even to people they know closely” (Stopwatch 2011:87). Trail magic most commonly appears as stashes of food and beverages on the side of the trail. On the PCT in Southern California trail magic most commonly appears as water caches in the desert parts of the trail. Thru-hikers almost immediately depend on this potentially inconsistent generosity of strangers they will never meet who drive all the way out to the middle of the desert and hike a few miles just to ensure that thru-hikers will not go thirsty (Stopwatch 2011:16). Thru-hikers will ration their consumption of trail magic to ensure that hikers behind them will have access to it as well.

An important quality of trail magic is that it is never known to a thru-hiker when or if they will receive it. However all women experienced multiple times in which they seemed to ask for something and shortly after receive what they were searching for. Piper was having difficulty receiving a ride into town and immediately upon changing her perspective to a more positive one, she gets a ride and attributes that to her newfound faith in trail magic (2008:191). Trail magic becomes intertwined with the idea of the trail taking care of its hikers, the sense of a greater spirit or design looking out for thrus. In this regard trail magic can sometimes appear as an affirmation, instead of a physical item. In Roanoke, Odysa attends a church service in which God spoke to a few of the church members and told them directly to communicate with Odysa, ““God has a purpose for your hike. He is with you, and he will never leave you or forsake you” (2011:143). Amazin’ Grace also notes, “this trip does feel like a pilgrimage, one so necessary that even angles are on my side, helping me through. I sense convergences, arrivals, meetings, forces coming together, the slow current of happy fate. Grace, like my name; spiritual gifts. Good things are coming. I can feel them” (2001:79). The women all reach a moment in time when they discover that, much to their surprise, their needs are always meet when they simply vocalize or pray for them. As Willow put it, “ask and ye shall receive” (2012:109).

Amazin’ Grace has perhaps the most surreal trail magic experience of all. After feeling lonely on the trail for some time, Amazin’ Grace asks they mystical powers-that-be to help her, specifically by presenting her with a female hiking companion. Not more than two miles after her request, she runs into Nomad, a solo woman thru-hiker who is looking for company. The two hike together and make a sort of game out of asking for

rides, good campsites, a free box full of clothing and then rejoicing when their trail magic prayers are answered. They decide to name the force of nature that seems to be watching out for them Gladys and will shout, “Thanks Gladys” when she sends them trail magic. Amazin’ Grace and Nomad eventually part ways and while Amazin’ Grace is hiking alone she laughs to herself thinking how crazy it would be if she met a woman named Gladys, and if that woman turned out to be the woman with whom she would begin her new life as a homosexual. Fifteen minutes later Amazin’ Grace bumps into a man and woman out for an overnight hike all the way from Manhattan. The woman’s name? Gladys. Amazin’ Grace feels ecstatic and electrically charged and takes Gladys’s contact information. She still has over a month left on the trail, but when she gets home she calls Gladys and the two have been partners ever since (Amazin’ Grace 2001).

Trail angels and trail magic occur on the PCT and AT in a proportionate manner: the PCT is not as old, popular, or close to civilization as the AT is and so there are fewer trail angels on the PCT and fewer incidences of trail magic, particularly of the metaphysical variety. The most prominent difference I found between communitas on the PCT and the AT was that of trail magic. Fewer PCT thru-hikers reported experiencing trail magic as a holy entity, a type of spirit than did AT thru-hikers. On the PCT trail magic was mostly cut and dry, boxes of fruit or bottles of water, whereas on the AT thru-hikers acknowledged trail magic referring more to a spirit with the capacity to answer prayers (Odyssey 2011, Amazin’ Grace 2001, Piper 2008). Here the thru-hiking communitas are experienced differently on the two trails based on their differing geographical and historical realities, as Eade and Sallnow would suggest (Coleman 2002:357). Even though thru-hikers on the AT and the PCT share so much in common

their experiences are shaped by the specific trails they hike, which are two distinct pathways. AT thru-hikers Odysa, Amazin' Grace, and Willow all reported feeling a greater sense of being provided for in life when they left the trail. Their experience with AT trail magic gave them faith in the abundance of this world and the sense that everything will be taken care of by some higher, unknown power. PCT thru-hikers Piper and Stopwatch, on the other hand, were more keenly aware of the generosity of individuals off the trail. The thru-hiker's relationship with the spirit of trail magic differs depending on which trail they hike, reflecting their experiences from their hikes. This concept is contrary to the Turnerian idea that pilgrimage can be regarded as a universal and homogenous phenomenon.

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## Chapter 7: No Rain No Rainbow

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### *Luxuries vs. Basic Needs*

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, a defining characteristic of a pilgrimage is the physical struggle that the pilgrims endure. Not only does this struggle serve to differentiate pilgrims from tourists, it also seems to be a grounding way for pilgrims to comprehend their experience. Thru-hikers endure immense physical difficulties: malnutrition, hypothermia and exhaustion, to name a few. The physical struggles they endure become a defining part of their hike and a catalyst for trail transformation. A key component of thru-hiking is that for four to six months, thru-hikers carry everything they need to survive on their backs. If they decide to bring along any items beyond the bare necessities they will have to feel the extra weight on their shoulders, and notice the way it slows their progress. This unavoidably brings into question what constitutes a



“necessity” versus a “luxury,” not only on the trail but off of it as well. Each woman spends a significant portion of her time contemplating her relationship with consumption, be it of commodities or natural resources. Suddenly having to rely on streams, rivers, and lakes for water, thru-hikers garner a newfound appreciation for the facility with which water is obtained in the front country, “water is one of our most basic needs, yet it’s something that most of us never give a second thought to. How many times do you ask yourself during the day, ‘where am I going to get my next bottle of water from?’ If anything, I ask myself this question because I have to choose between two kitchens at the office, not because I question whether the next creek I cross will be flowing or not” (Stopwatch 2011:13). Initially having to think so thoroughly about sustenance and question over and over how they might be able to shed pack weight is a stressful process for thru-hikers. Within the first month, many women found themselves panicking about resource scarcity and uncertainty. However, once they become more comfortable with a lifestyle that does not include corner stores or 24-hour Walmarts, they begin to critically examine the ways in which society blindly promotes constant, unending consumption of basic and luxurious goods (Urbanski 28).

Stopwatch began to question the vessels of extra space in a backpack, comparing them with extra space utilized in society only as a means for acquiring more stuff, junk, things:

Pockets, crevices and zippers are not good for a hiker. It is like the newlywed couple that moves from one bedroom apartment to a four-bedroom, three-bath home. Do they really need all that space just for them? They are likely to spend money filling it up with stuff that they may never use. A large, empty pack is just as dangerous to a thru-hiker. It’s just begging to be filled with useless weight. [Stopwatch 2011:48]

Thru-hikers have taken step back from a society that mindlessly endorses the progressive movement towards accruing more and more accoutrements. Furthermore, as hikers are directly aware of the effect extra equipment has on their ability to hike successfully, they also call into question the ways in which extra commodities in society can cloud their ability to live successfully. As they rethink the place commodities have in their lives they ultimately question success. American society measures success by the quantity or quality of luxury goods and services one owns or utilizes. By getting down to the bare bone essentials of what they need to survive, thru-hikers critique the definition of success that shapes most of our daily lives, working for money to purchase goods without end, Piper asks, “I philosophized in the hammock that most people had their priorities all wrong. What more was needed in life besides a trailer with solar-powered Internet and some hammocks? What were we all working so hard for if this was not it” (2008:121)? A natural part of the progression of questioning definitions of success and commodity accumulation is for the thru-hikers to begin to postulate how they will live their lives differently off of the trail, beginning with altering their thought processes and daily habits on the trail. Many note a greater sense of peace upon realizing that they have all they need, and that it is not very much (Piper 2008:173). Living the humble life of a penniless pilgrim has morphed these women to be comfortable with lives of simplicity. When pilgrims empty their loads physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually they are able to refuel with the necessary items only. Pilgrims go through a physical unburdening that parallels their metaphysical cleansing of past identity.

### *Water Stewardship*

No matter how simple their lifestyle, thru-hikers are still dependent on the basics of food and water. This can facilitate a deeper connection with the land, since navigating the land without extra resources requires a deeper knowledge of the land: they are now depending upon their navigational skills, ability to read the weather and find water sources for survival. Thru-hikers have the unique opportunity to live for an extended period of time in the natural world without barriers or buffers that might mute human impact on and human relationship with the environment. In the desert of Southern California plastic water bottles scatter the trail after being used and discarded from the water caches placed by trail angels. This frustrates Piper who finds it obnoxious that hikers would brag about a low packweight but rely on water caches, since she sees the bottles as degrading the natural beauty of the land (2008:91). In Northern California Piper visits her mother's friend's home and is pained to see his lawn of green grass in the middle of summer, "water was precious and scarce and not one person [at the party] except me could see with such clarity that the chemicals that made that lawn so green were in the lake immediately below, the lake that was the source of water for everyone at the table. I did not say anything aloud about this. I did not want to offend anyone. But secretly I was horrified" (2008:195). Piper has, at this point in time, hiked for hundreds of miles alongside rivers and streams, following them to their glacial source, and she recognizes the ways nothing in the natural world can be compartmentalized, that everything is connected. Odysa feels a similar attachment to the precious resource when she realizes, "at home, I never appreciated water because it is always available, but lying beside the brook and listening to the water splash over the earth, I realized how precious and important clean water is...at home, I was god. Water depended on me: I could turn it

on and off with the twist of a knob. Out here, I was dependent on nature. The rain shower reminded me that I was not in control: I was part of something much bigger than myself” (2011:131).

Beyond simply feeling a deeper appreciation for natural resources, Willow and Piper both express their concerns about climate change and how it might affect those sources. Piper talks with other hikers about the forest fires occurring on the trail the year she hikes it, which they believe to be caused by global warming “we were glad we were hiking the PCT now before it would all be gone” (2008:110). Willow comes across many dry creeks and streams “it’s a rather alarming snapshot of what is happening to our planet” (2012:118). With the separation of urban and non-urban spaces that exists in metropolitan areas in the US, many are able to ignore the effects their consumption has on the environment. As Odyssa mentioned, water comes from a tap without effort, electricity comes with the flip of a switch just as easily. Once these women spend multiple months living by the graces of the natural world they see the negative impact human consumption has had on nature and they fear it. Though not all pilgrimages utilize the same mechanisms for supporting their journeys, few, if any, are entirely self-sufficient. Whether the pilgrim begs for sustenance, forages, or is supported by a religious network of charity, the pilgrim has the unique opportunity to witness their connection to their lifeforce. Or, as is the case with thru-hikers, they have the opportunity to recognize how they are alienated from their lifeforce in their normative lifestyles.

### *Food*

A significant way that everyday life changes on the trail is that thru-hikers must eat a bafflingly large number of calories in order to maintain their weight. All women thru-hikers reported losing weight on the trail. Since one's pack weight is directly correlated to the speed at which they are able to hike, packing more food for sustenance will ultimately mean the hiker will take longer to get from one resupply town to the next. Hikers are unable to carry enough calories on their back for what they are burning. Therefore, when arriving in town hikers will develop what is referred to as the "hiker appetite," meaning essentially that they can and will eat anything and everything in sight in order to refuel for their low-calorie days on the trail. Instead of selecting foods with low calories, as they might in the front country, thru-hikers begin to look at food in a price-per-calorie equation (Piper 2008:119). Stopwatch claims that "it really was every woman's dream" to eat whatever you want and still lose weight" (2011:35). With so much pressure placed on women to be thin in society, all of these women expressed joy at being "able" to eat so much without negative consequence of weight gain. For Piper, she, "thought of the trail as my pregnant time, the time when I could eat whatever I wanted, in whatever quantity I wanted" (2008:34). Here Piper is insinuating that it is only socially acceptable for women to eat whatever they want, and however much of it, when they are pregnant, and that at all other times they are expected to exercise some sort of regimen of control. Odyssa divulges, "it was a glorious moment. I was free from calorie counting for a brief period in my life and that is one of my best memories of the PCT. Part of me wonders if only a woman could really appreciate that freedom, but I know that many men would give up some piece of their life to have that slice of life without the guilt" (2011:72). Willow expresses that it is simply "fun – eating all the pure

crap you can get your hands on” (2012:206). These women revel in the fact that they are able to break the rules of society, the rules that they usually must obey since they have a real effect on their bodies. The ways in which women hike through feelings of malnourishment, dehydration, and general discomfort provides them two main benefits: their travels are legitimized, and they reconsider their relationships with commodities and natural resources.

### *Worrying about returning home*

These women relate to the transformations they have gone through on the trail as profound. They have spent months and miles pondering their individuality, their femininity, the relationships they have with others, the relationship they have with the earth, their life philosophies and lifestyles in general. Due to the space and time these women have placed between themselves and the lives they had previously lived off the trail, as the time nears for them to leave the trail many of them begin to worry about their ability to reintegrate their newfound sense of self into their lives back home. As mentioned in Chapter 5, there reached a point for each woman when she realized she would not be able to thru-hike indefinitely, and that the liminal *communitas* of thru-hiking was finite. This is particularly disturbing, considering that many of them feel removed enough from their previous existence to justify using their trail name to describe who they feel they have become on the trail and their given name to describe who they were before the trail. Piper expresses concern about losing her trail identity when she says, “I did not want Piper or the trail to fade into memory. What could I do to keep both alive? I had no answers” (2008:189). Thru-hikers express concern that normative

society is not a nurturing environment for their newfound sense of self: “People everywhere were generally so good and so helpful. Modern life tended to skew perception and make people think everyone was a possible threat. The profoundly amazing wonderfulness of the real world on and around the trail astounded me. What could I do to keep the trail alive inside me? How might I bring the trail home” (Piper 2008:218)? Willow also worries that her trail mindset will not survive the “real world,” as she has come to refer to normative society, “I do not worry about anything [on the trail]; I’ve adopted such a carefree existence, I almost dread the harsh return to reality. How do I preserve this state of mind in the real world?” (2012:253). The pilgrims have undergone a transformation of sorts, and yet they doubt the permanence of these transformations beyond the liminal space in which they were brought to light.

After being out of a job for months, without having the stress that would normally be associated with unemployment off of the trail, thru-hikers express their extreme aversion to reentering the workforce. Amazin’ Grace wants to be able to enjoy benefits of civilization, “without getting trapped and stagnated by it, without getting caught up in jobs and materialisms and all the other isms. I don’t ever want to be in a room where there’s not an open door, or a window, to let the night breeze in” (2001:193). Amazin’ Grace’s temporary hiking companion, Nomad, also a solo female thru-hiker proclaims, says ““All I know is, [returning home] won’t be easy. We have the most perfect life, we’re all happy and free, and I for one don’t miss that bullshit at all. Malls, 9 to 5. Yuck. Any job would seem like such a trap after this”” (2001:281). Willow feels similarly and expresses, “when I think of working again, I feel as if I am being dragged back to shackles and chains. I cannot imagine how to find a job that jives with my life, for every

job I've ever had has been no more than a means of making a living. I fear the bills will come too fast for me to put much time into starting again. Don't wake me from this dream – not just yet" (2012:26). These women feel not only that their thoughts and ideas have changed but that they would like to incorporate the lifestyle into their everyday off the trail, whether that means being more active, having more interactions with nature, or utilizing fewer resources. Yet many of them see the jobs they left behind as incompatible with their new life dreams. This highlights the importance placed upon work in American society. Thru-hikers struggle to conceive of a life in which they are able to separate their career from their identity, fulfilling themselves with extracurricular activities and relationships. In casual conversation in normative society one of the first five questions asked will always be "what do you do," meaning what is your job? A person's job becomes a defining part of their identity. Jobs as thru-hikers knew them before they hit the trail conflict with their trail lifestyles, even when it comes to basic day structure and daily purpose. On the trail a thru-hiker spends their days walking from one resource to another to maintain healthy ratios of food, water, and shelter. Thru-hikers remember their days working in offices as comparable to being bound by shackles and chains. However illusory thru-hikers picturesque imaginings of *communitas* and liminal existence may be, they are certain they experienced a simpler, more joyous life on the trail, if only for a moment in time.

Unfortunately, not many women proclaim an alternative option for ways to pursue their life after the trail, which concerns many of them. When people would ask Odysa why she was hiking the AT, she told them she was doing it to "figure it all out," but as she nears the end of her hike she worries, "I had planned to have it all figured out by the



time I got to Katahdin, and instead everything seemed more complicated than when I had started” (2011:271). Willow expresses similar sentiments of not having any concrete plans: “I still have made no amazing discoveries, and have no earth-shattering plans for life after the AT. In fact, I’m still just as concerned, if not more so now, about what I will do to make ends meet after I get home” (2012:267). Piper is more concerned with how society will receive her upon her return from the trail, “I wondered who would understand a 43 year old, childless, long-distance hiking woman” (2008:227)? It seems this concern goes both ways: the women are worried that they are not ready to receive society, and that society will not understand them.

### *The end*

As the women come upon the final miles of the trail and reach the end of their journey, they experience a range of reactions. Due to the emotional, mental, and physical transitions these women undergo while hiking the trails, it is no wonder that many have a profound ending to their trip. Amazin’ Grace cries, feeling relieved that she, “released the final burden. I’ve reached the ‘place,’ the place I vowed to go, the goal of the pilgrimage. Wherever that is, I’m there. It’s a shock to realize this so suddenly, but I feel the completeness deep down, in my bones” (2001:311). Even though Amazin’ Grace does not feel she has everything figured out, she does feel accomplished, that she reached the end of her pilgrimage. Odyssa felt similarly accomplished when she reflects, “I [felt] huge, as if every mountain I’ve walked over is inside me, and no one can ever take it away or make me feel small again. We hadn’t conquered the mountain or the trail. We had conquered our doubts, fears, and weaknesses” (2011:290). Odyssa felt the trail was a

vehicle for her to grow as a person and conquer the physical manifestation of existential obstacles that come up in life, such as uncertainty, fear, and struggle. The pilgrimage provides a condensed metaphorical platform for these women to figure out larger life quandaries.

At the end of the trail Willow and other hikers reveal their given names to one another, “names that sounded hollow and meaningless after answering to trail names for the past six months. It was as if we were revealing secret identities as espionage agents or something, clues to our unknown lives far from this hallowed circle, far from this warped microcosmic reality. These were the names of strangers, vapid reminders of the inane world we had left behind” (2012:279). Unto that inane world they must move forth.

As the women thru-hikers approached the end of their journeys, the last few miles and the final steps on the trails, they expressed remarkably similar experiences. Each woman felt overwhelmed emotionally, triumphant in her ability to overcome adversity, yet lost with no sense of direction for a next move. This would imply a consistent ideology about the shrine, as I have decided to view the end of the trail, agreeing with the Turners’ ideology about the cohesive nature of pilgrimage (1978). However, each woman’s thought process approaching the end of her journey was so individually oriented, none expressed an awareness that other thru-hikers had experienced similar feelings before, or any sense of camaraderie in those final moments. This would lead me to believe that each woman approached the shrine with her past experiences on the trail shaping her conception of the shrine, and that these approaches were so similar due to the simple fact that these women had undergone such a parallel existence over the past four to six months.

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 Chapter 8: After
 

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*Reintegration*

All of the women thru-hikers reported difficulty fitting back in to the lives they had vacated to hike the trails. Many expressed symptoms of culture shock and experiences of disorientation. Piper mourned the fact that when interacting with people, they addressed her by her given name, Diane, “I wondered who I was anymore. My home felt like a foreign country” (Piper 2008:192). Odysa, Jennifer, experienced a different take on similar emotions of alienation, “the world was the same, but I was different” (Odysa 2011:295). Willow, Amy, struggled with the seeming simplicity of the life she returned to, “gone is the feeling of voracious satisfaction that comes from knowing this hot meal is one of only two you may have in a week’s time; there is no feeling of novelty to the hot shower since most likely there will be more showers more often now, and there is no desperation to get into clean clothes as clean clothes are once again an everyday expectation” (Willow 2012:286). With societal luxuries came societal expectations and Amy found herself increasingly aware and self-conscious of her age off the trail (Willow 2012:286). The liminal communitas of the trail, however flawed they may have been, disintegrate in a painful way for these women. Time speeds up and hikers find themselves in a world of hurrying cars and rushed words (Maine Rose 1999:136):

I had a fairly rough adjustment period when I came off the Trail. When the day finally arrived when I was supposed to actually walk back through the doors of the company where I had gotten a leave of absence, I spent the day on the couch at home in tears. It was supposed to be different now. I wasn’t supposed to end up in the same place that I was before I started the trail. My world was supposed to be a different place; I NEEDED it to be a different place. And yet, there I was reporting back to the same company, living in the same city, filling my life up

with the same meaningless things that drove me to hike the train in the first place. I struggled with that for several weeks. Around January or February things started to brighten for me. I realized that my physical surroundings might be the same as they were a year ago, but I had changed. It was a great revelation. I didn't need a new city or a different job to make me happy. I finally began to understand that it was me, my thoughts, my outlooks, and my plans that would make my life a happy one” [An anonymous '97 hiker; Maine Rose 1999:139]

Thru-hikers struggle to reintegrate themselves into a world they feel so distant from.

They have spent up to six months struggling and challenging themselves physically, mentally and emotionally and have endured many transformations of self. Due to these transformations, thru-hikers are faced with a decision: suppress what they have learned and try to pick up their old lifestyles as they left them or attempt to create a new life for themselves.

Some say the hardest part of the trail is being off of it, trying to explain it to others, weight gain, working a 9-5, not feeling as “in control” of their daily routine, depression can happen to thru-hikers regardless of what they are returning to (Maine Rose 1999:136). Stopwatch, Julie, warns, however, that everything seems sweeter in retrospect, “after that [hardship], all I wanted was to be back on the trail. The trail that I hated for so long, that I cursed under my breath so many times, that broke me mentally and physically each day. I yearned for the life I lived on the trail. I wanted the simplicity back” (Stopwatch 2011:160). Indeed many hikers will discuss the strange addictive quality of the trail. While hiking they struggled immensely, and some vowed to never hike again. Yet when they begin to participate in everyday life again, they will often start a cycle of revisiting the trail or other long distance hikes claiming that they will only do one more before kicking the habit for good.

Most pilgrimages that are not of the wandering variety, pilgrimages in which there exists positive goals, are either strictly one-time only events, or regimented

occurring to a program predetermined outside of the pilgrim's personal desires. Thru-hiking, as a secular wandering pilgrimage, has the potential to draw its pilgrims back to its dusty path at any time they feel their inner craving revitalized, needing to be fed by the trail again. Eventually, most thru-hikers decide they need to begin to sort out their life, buckle down and move past their thru-hiking idealism. Kelly, Amazin' Grace, states, "I want to move on. I'm no longer on the trail, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life wishing I were" (Amazin' Grace 2001:326). Diane expressed similar feelings of needing to come to terms with the fact that she was no longer a thru-hiker (Piper 2008).

### *Lessons Learned*

Throughout the process of hiking the Appalachian Trail or the Pacific Crest Trail women go through bouts of personal growth, as they are faced with intense tribulations that require either adaption or abandonment. As detailed in the preceding chapters, as women trod through their journeys they consider what they are learning, how they are changing, and as they near the end of their travels they ponder how they can incorporate these lessons into their lives off the trail. Having completed the trail and spent time back in the society they had grown away from, the women reflect on the lessons they learned, the lessons the trail "taught" them. Many women gained insight as to what is important and what is not- food, water, love and shelter (Maine Rose 1999:139).

After spending months on end consuming massive amounts of food for fuel, Julie proclaims, "my views on food changed - it changed the way I looked at food, both on and off the trail. It also changed how I ate food when in the presence of seemingly endless quantities of it, such as in town or grocery stores. It even made me a bit of crazy"

(Stopwatch 2011:36). Julie gained a true perspective on the abundance and variety of food that appears “like magic” in our society, in our grocery stores and homes

(Stopwatch 2011:42). She feels that others within her circle of peers do not realize how lucky they have it. She also recognizes that, although she experienced true pains of hunger, she knew her malnourishment had an end date, and that it was self-imposed, contrary to those who live in hunger without a choice of living otherwise (Stopwatch 2011:42). The trail taught her gratitude.

The experience of thru-hiking, of carrying all one needs to survive in a backpack, makes thru-hikers learn the ways in which we accumulate such a large amount of unnecessary stuff, commodities, clothing, furniture, decorations, in our lives. Additionally, it is easy to get bogged down in emotional and mental clutter. The trail gives women the ability to sort through all of that amassed “junk” realizing that we have too much “stuff” in our lives upon returning from the trail (Maine Rose 1999:142). Julie reflects upon an insight that occurred to her while she was hiking. She considered a newly married couple that moves into a house that is larger than necessary. The couple will fill their house with their possessions and purchase more than they have to fill the empty space in their bigger habitat. They will become attached to the house and the items it holds and purchase insurance out of fear of losing what they own. They will need to work longer hours or a longer tenure to ensure they have enough cash or pay off a credit for all they have purchased. The couple becomes tied down by all of the items they own, unable to easily get up and move again, let alone take months off to hike a trail or pursue a dream. That is, considering the couple can even afford to take time off of work and paying off all of the bills they have accrued. Julie warns, “after all these

considerations, at the end of the day, all we are talking about is *stuff*. Inanimate objects that cannot love us back” (Stopwatch 2011:57). The trail has taught these women how to critically examine what they choose to fill their lives with, since those things will ultimately dictate how they are able to live out their daily lives.

Thru-hikers learn valuable lessons about relationships and how they interact with other people based on their time spent living for months in the trail communitas. Dot “D-Train” MacDonald learned, “to accept others for who they are, not what they do or how they dress, or even what others think of them. To throw yourself onto the kindness of others, to trust. To forget that there are any differences between us if only for a few minutes through some magical shared time. And to do it for a long time” (Maine Rose 1999:130). Living in the thru-hiking communitas without hierarchy and within the trust network of trail angels and trail magic, thru-hikers express a reinvigorated faith in humanity. These women are ready to expect the best from others, and have seen the way they rely on the support from other people to get them through a day, thus becoming more openly appreciative of our interconnected nature. However, Julie recognizes that it is difficult to acknowledge the goodness in other people in normal civilization. Julie laments that, “either way, self-imposed or not, in today’s world, it’s downright hard to be good. Being civil is one thing. To go beyond the imposed laws that dictate how we act is where the magic happens. Those are the acts that take more energy, more effort, and more caring beyond not breaking the man-made laws...we are taught to rely only on ourselves, to trust no one, and to show no vulnerability” (Stopwatch 2011:88). Although the thru-hikers learned to trust other people in ways they had not previously done, they

are also keenly aware that this type of trust and magic is exclusive to the trail, or at the very least that not exist within normative society.

The women gained a profound appreciation for the natural world, which manifested in a number of different perspectives for each woman. Julie reconsidered what it means to own land. She concluded it is “silly” to think we can actually own land and control everything that occurs on it, that nature remains as wild as ever despite our best attempts to tame it (Stopwatch 2011:83). Diane learned that, despite what society tells us, this “untamed” wild is nothing to be afraid of. She learned to trust herself in nature, and to, “trust nature itself” (Piper 2008:222). By sleeping on the ground every night, drinking from springs and even digging her daily toilet, Diane felt a kinship with the animals she encountered and, “gained a sense of myself as belonging to the Earth” (Piper 2008:229). These women learned to have a different relationship with the land, one in which they were not fearful, but rather one in which they learned how to coexist peacefully with the natural world.

Perhaps the most influential lesson the women learned was how to unlock their own potential to Hike Their Own Hike. Julie noted that, “‘Hike your own Hike’ could just as well be titled, ‘Live your own Life’” (Stopwatch 2011:131). Julie learned that she needed to stop falling into the trap of letting outside influences determine her happiness, namely the opinions others had of her hiking style. She has applied that lesson to her life off of the trail and is working to not let others stop her from living her life the way she sees fit: “the ultimate lesson I learned on the entire Pacific Crest Trail is that I have a choice when it comes to my happiness. No one else can choose it for me, and no one is making me choose either way. The decision is mine to make, the reaction is my own, and



my attitude is in my control” (Stopwatch 2011:155). Julie feels empowered to pursue her own path to happiness. Kelly gained confidence in her ability to tackle the obstacles that come up in life, having overcome hurdles that once seemed insurmountable on the trail,

On the trail, your old difficulties, obsessions, and problems follow you, riding in your pack, making you tired, until you eventually outwalk them. You’re not the same person, and you have a different view of your limitations. The horizon, a place that looks so far away, isn’t that far. You look at it and know you’ve outwalked it many times. All your old limitations seem to fall away. If you put your mind to something, you can do it- if you really want to. Set a goal. You can reach it” (Winters 326).

Kelly was inspired to discover that she has the ability to hike her own hike, to live her

own life, whatever that might entail. A thru-hiker, Gail “Gusty” Johnson, wrote to

Beverly Hugo for her book, “Women and Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail” that her

newfound determination has benefitted her whole family, even though she believes that,

“hiking the Appalachian Trail is a very selfish thing to do” (Maine Rose 1999:8).

Despite this acknowledgement, Gail remarks, “I’m glad I did it and the gains from my

thru-hike were great for me. The good was passed on to my family in the way of a more

relaxed me. I learned on the Trail how to separate what is really important from what

really doesn’t matter and my entire family benefits from that” (Maine Rose 1999:8).

Hiking your own hike does not imply forgetting about other people in your life,

neglecting the needs and wants of others. To the contrary, women thru-hikers found the

applied lessons they learned from hiking the trails enhanced their ability to relate to and

interact with others. These women had discovered a more clear sense of self, a revelation

that benefits all. Julie concludes, “...The PCT has made me who I am, for the better”

(Stopwatch 2011:7). Beverly agreed with Julie’s assertion and found that women can

gain confidence, greater trust of their own insight and intuition, a sense of belonging to

something larger than oneself (Maine Rose 1999:132). Once these women are able to

know themselves better and to know their surroundings from a different perspective, the whole world benefits.

### *Implemented change*

After having walked for months on end, women thru-hikers inevitably bring pieces of trail life back to the frontcountry with them. Most women drastically simplified their lives after the trail, deciding to homeschool their kids, and relocate to a more rural setting (Maine Rose 1999:146). Julie convinced her boyfriend to whittle down their belongings so they could fit everything they owned into a compact car. Comparing this downsizing with pack sweeps on the trail she notes that they were, “eliminating unnecessary life weight” (Stopwatch 2011:56). Julie acknowledged that she had created a need for all of the stuff they were getting rid of, that the need was not inherent. She claimed it took half way through her hike hiking for her to realize how stuff had been preventing her from enjoying herself (Stopwatch 2011:56). Once she lightened her pack weight half way through the trail she began to enjoy herself much more. Need another sentence here.

Some women thru-hikers admit that their lives may not actually look drastically different from the lives of their peers, or from the way their lives were before they started the trail. However, Julie confides, “I know [my boyfriend and I] are different from our peers. There is a fire below our surfaces that gives us strength, and that gives us an edge on those around us. We know this isn’t the only life possible. Other lives exist beyond the nine to five, beyond the meetings and deadlines, beyond the grind and commercial push to consume” (Stopwatch 2011:160). Rachel agrees that though she, too, may not

lead a life terribly alternative from an outside perspective, “I am vastly different on the inside. I have great plans for my life, and I think they are very achievable. The future is a wonderful horizon. I now watch myself pretty closely to make sure I don’t get consumed by certain dangers that are fairly common traps in our society: materialism, greed, hunger for the American definition of “success,” the quest for more, more, more. All these things are looming pitfalls that could spoil my dreams if I let them. I want to keep my eyes on the “big picture,” the things that are truly important to my inner happiness. That will always guide me in the right direction.” (Maine Rose 1999:143). The lessons learned were metaphysical ones, ones that when implemented may not always result in the most dramatic outcome. Yet these women cherish their experience and the lessons they learned all the same. Even though the change is not that dramatic, their lives are still dramatically affected.

Jennifer claims that the trail teaches hikers to “pay it forward” (Odyssa 2011:297). Jennifer decides to pay it forward by writing a book about her adventure and giving lectures at different schools within her county to inspire other women and young girls to set forth on similarly ambitious adventures of their own. Beverly reported an overwhelming 30% of female respondents claiming to participate in some sort of community outreach in which they publicized their experience with the hope of inspiring movement in others (Maine Rose 1999:146).

Like pilgrims, these women thru-hikers return from their hike different people than those who left, bringing with them transformational tales of miracles witnessed and participated in (Dubisch 1996:3). Though they struggle to reintegrate their new selves into their old lives, this does not deter them from spreading the gospel of thru-hiking.

Whether writing a book, guest lecturing at colleges and elementary schools, or visiting Girl Scout troupes, solo female thru-hikers are eager to inspire other women to thru-hike, or simply to day hike, and to do so on their own. The importance of these outreach projects cannot be overemphasized. As noted in Chapters 2 and 4, white males dominate the thru-hiking world. Each bit of energy, each minute of time thru-hiking women dedicate to encouraging other girls and women to spend time hiking, utilizing knowledge gained from their own experiences, is a step towards more equal representation of gender in the thru-hiking communitas.

*Why the trail was necessary*

Each woman described the trail as a necessary experience in her life. She was on a wandering pilgrimage to fulfill an inner craving that simply needed to be filled, and there was no better way to resolve this than to hike. Julie was extremely grateful for the opportunity to push herself beyond her comfort zone and passionately believes that “going through life on the commonly unexamined life path simply doesn’t teach the same lessons as those that we learned while walking” (Stopwatch 2011:161). She claims that the life lessons that one has to seek out in normative society are unavoidable on the trail: “these lessons may have taken my whole life to bring forth. I feel privileged that I was able to learn them while still in my twenties, and it only took a little over three months and 2600 miles to learn them” (Stopwatch 2011:163). Julie sees the trail as expediting a process of self-discover that may have taken years to achieve otherwise, if it even happened at all.

Kelly felt that once she began to embody the HYOH principle she was able to unlock the trail's full potential. Initially Kelly had reservations and feelings of guilt about straying from the purist hike of following the AT's white blazes. She later comes to realize that by blue-blazing and yellow-blazing, hitchhiking more frequently, she was able to interact with normative society from a liminal place in a way that allowed her a unique perspective: "I don't know if I would have found this feeling as quickly or as easily if I had stayed on the official trail [instead of blue blazing]. It's the contact with civilization that does it- that hobo feeling of being here now, then leaving, just passing through, sleeping where you can, talking to everyone, then moving on. It's the freedom I love: no rules, no set path to follow" (Amazin' Grace 2001:215). The trail provided Kelly with the opportunity to experience that "hobo feeling" of freedom that allowed her to see Gladys, her name for the AT trail deity, in other people and places off of the trail.

Gladys gifted Kelly with her pilgrimage, which she understood as necessary even if she did not fully comprehend why it felt so compulsory: "This is how I felt on the trip, [that] it was a gift, something I had not earned, a journey given to me for reasons I didn't understand but trusted. I believed in the absolute necessity of what I was doing; if I quit before reaching the place I needed to get to, wherever and whatever it might be, I would have to keep coming back until I completed the task I had been given. I felt, simply, blessed to be there, doing the work, doing the walk" (Amazin' Grace 2001:333). Even though Kelly did not know why she was hiking she knew she had to keep walking until she figured it out, whatever "it" turned out to be. Kelly stopped 100 miles short of the Northern terminus of the trail, Mt. Katahdin in Maine, when she felt a physical release of tension. She was struck with the realization that she needed to stop living her life to

please others, whether that had been dating men instead of women or believing she had to complete the entire trail in order for her trip to be viewed as legitimate. She decided she wanted to complete those last miles when it felt right to her, not when she felt such immense pressure. Three years after her almost-thru-hike Kelly returned to the last 100 miles with her life partner, Gladys, and they completed her pilgrimage together, on their own terms (Amazin' Grace 2001).

Hiking the PCT gave Diane a sense of freedom she had not known before. She referred to herself as feeling like a bird in a cage as she passively received whatever life seemed to be throwing at her. While on the PCT Diane felt the door to the cage open, and yet she still had a sense of being unable to leave her cage. A year after her hike Diane revisited the southern portion of the PCT and lay in her sleeping bag staring up at a crow as it took off from its perch on a tree. Diane reflected, "I had said one night last July that I felt like a bird in a cage with the door open, that I had stepped outside but had not left the cage. Seeing the crow I realized that, if only for a little while, I had flown free" (Piper 2008:229). Diane's pilgrimage allowed her to know a freedom she had spent 50-some years searching for without success.

Although Julie regards the trail as a necessary part of her life she is adamant that others can receive the benefits of thru-hiking without committing to becoming a 2000-miler. Julie believes that others can find a greater truth by way of a liminality that exists just beyond what is known: "just because most people can't hike the PCT doesn't mean they can't find those experiences that would make them step outside of their comfort zones. Each one of us has our own bubble that we live in, that would be scary to leave.

Stepping outside of ourselves allows us to focus inward and clearly see what we're made of" (Stopwatch 2008:164).

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## Conclusion

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This research project utilized terms and concepts of pilgrimage to understand the transformative experience solo women thru-hikers have walking the length of the Pacific Crest Trail or the Appalachian Trail. Women shed their old identities and participate in *communitas* once they enter the liminal stage of pilgrimage. In this liminal existence they question the lives they had grown accustomed to off of the trail, reconceptualizing their normative behaviors and the mundane culture they left behind. Through hard work and dedication thru-hikers reach emotional and philosophical breakthroughs, which they subsequently struggle to nourish in their lives when they complete their hikes.

Ultimately, the women thru-hikers whose stories were researched for this thesis regard their hikes, their pilgrimages, as a pivotal moment in their life that has afforded them a greater sense of peace and conviction.

As Julie "Stopwatch" Urbanski mentioned one does not need to partake in a thru-hike in order to push their comfort zone and reap the benefits of creating an identity separate to the one that can often feel imposed by society. The study of pilgrimage reflects the facets of society that individuals either enjoy, detest, or seem to be unable to escape. By studying female thru-hikers in America the field of anthropology gains insight into the experience of females in normative American society, and how they would redesign their roles to be different or similar if given the chance.

This paper leaves many questions unanswered, a plethora of opportunity for further research. Each chapter could be expanded upon with the addition of more testimonies of women thru-hikers, giving an even more precise account of the ways in which communities reflect or reject American society. Adding men into the study would reveal an additional subset of gender identity. However if I were to continue research or an academic project along this same theme I would want to look into the cultural nuances within American society that have made it so financially well-off Caucasians are the individuals found most frequently recreating in the wild. Why is this the case? What can be done to ensure greater diversity in wilderness settings? I will keep these questions, and these women's stories, in mind as I begin my thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail in March of 2014.



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