

# Pilgrimage and the American Myth

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I set out to look for America in the spring of 1990. The decade had turned.... Love of country was back in fashion, replacing love of money, and so was patriotic travel. American families began to hit the road, going in search of the founding ideals they felt the country had lost during the '80s. I like the idea of pilgrimages, and I liked reading about the new pilgrims<sup>1</sup>.

Despite nearly constant references to their routine travel circuits as 'pilgrimages', Americans are relatively unaccustomed to announcing either short or long distance trips as quests for transformative, let alone sacred, experiences. We commonly borrow the term to acknowledge some repetitive treks densely embedded in personal or social custom. There is the weekly 'pilgrimage' to the shopping mall, soccer meet or swimming pool, the annual trek to the lake or family reunion. Sometimes the goal suggests a weightier purpose such as periodic visits to elderly relatives or cemeteries, treks that are solemnized by assignment to the vague category of pilgrimage. Much of what we dub pilgrimage would not earn that name according to traditional religious criteria, yet many other activities Americans commit themselves to clearly fall within critical assessments of pilgrim behaviour, customs, aspirations and processes.

Truer to the spirit of traditional religious pilgrimages are the non-routine and, for many individuals and families, defining journeys undertaken to admire and take in national landmarks, historic sites and natural wonders. By the twentieth century, tourism – especially in America – eclipsed the grand tour of Europe usually reserved for the moneyed elite, and became massively democratized and re-channelled in the celebration of one's own present nationalism rather than submissiveness to foreign cultures or the past. The American middle class came to form the vast majority of domestic tourists supported by whole agencies of the federal government, such as the National Park Service or the Bureau of Land Management, or state and local cultural authorities, entrusted with the preservation and interpretation of sites declared by popular assent national treasures. The homes of presidents, battlefields of the Civil War, trails of exploration, and memorials to key moments and movements in US history swelled the list of potential sites of solemn visitation as well as recreation. The 'mere' tourist is often the covert identity of the patriotic pilgrim who seeks to enlighten and educate himself while paying homage to a heritage landscape which anchors his identity as citizen and cultural heir.<sup>2</sup> Within a twenty-mile radius of my

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<sup>1</sup> W.K. Zinsser, *American Places: a Writer's Pilgrimage to 16 of this Country's Most Visited and Cherished Sites* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> The National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the US Forest Service, the Fish & Wildlife Service and other agencies administer a vast treasury of honored sites including 58 Natural Features and Wonders (Yellowstone was the first, in 1872), 2354 National Historic Landmarks (Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY; Medicine Mountain, Wyoming; Andrew Wyeth's various homes), 45 National Historic Parks (Appomattox, Jamestown, Yorktown, Lewis and Clark Trail, etc.), 89 National Historic Sites (Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, Topeka, Kansas), and 100 National Monuments (Statue of Liberty; Devil's Tower, Wyoming).

own home in Williamsburg, Virginia is the largest living museum of America's Colonial period, the pristine parks that enshrine the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown, and the battlefields of the final British defeat in the Revolutionary War at Yorktown. Even private entrepreneurial concoctions like the local Presidents Park with its cartoonishly oversized (and hollow) heads of United States presidents garner respectful visitors willing to overlook the questionable taste of the display out of deference to its patriotic aspirations.<sup>3</sup>

Deprived of a single unitary religious myth but galvanized by a 400-year history of endless lurching into a vast, nearly endless continental expanse, Americans derive their collective consciousness through perpetual displacement from early coastal settlements like Jamestown (1607) and Plymouth Rock (1620), to their first incursions into the thickly forested Midwest, to the celebrated explorations of Louis and Clark (1804-1806) that took these wayfarers all the way to the shores of the Pacific. To this we add the scarred battlefields where some 620,000 US citizens died in internecine bloodshed between North and South (1861-1864), a conflict which forever marked our landscape with solemn memory. Taylor notes the long history of this confluence of land and identity whose greatest mythic expression in the Western imaginary inaugurated itself in the Sinai desert with the birth of the Jewish nation in its Exodus Event in the course of which 'which G-d manifests Himself in awesomely direct forms. The myth establishes the sacred, chosen character of the Hebrew people, but also serves to inscribe them in a landscape in such a way as to make them, in a powerful if special sense of the term, indigenous.'<sup>4</sup> The merger of people and land through travel allows Americans too to feel truly indigenous despite their newcomer status and despite the variety of countries their ancestors once came from. Even those just arriving on these shores from Mexico, Pakistan, or Kenya can eventually acquire a sense of belonging by collecting American experiences, performing their new tribal and national identity on the road. Pilgrimage defines the highways to citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

English-speaking Europeans arrived in a New World that had – for them – no sacred places. All sites were equally secular, unlike Spanish explorers who encountered numerous durable monuments to locations visibly regarded as holy by indigenous cultures from central Mexico through the high Andes. But the blank North American landscape rapidly became inscribed by newcomers seeking to establish utopian villages, 'New Jerusalems' in the making, that would validate their founders' beliefs and reinforce their faith with a sense of physical place. Pilgrimage seems therefore the somewhat inevitable expression of religious sentiment in America. It helped forge the imaginative impulses that led to the founding of most of the Protestant utopian communities of the nineteenth century from Plymouth Rock

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<sup>3</sup> During its six years of operation in Williamsburg, Presidents Park drew some 350,000 visitors. It closed in September, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> L.J. Taylor, 'Centre and Edge: Pilgrimage and the Moral Geography of the US/Mexico Border', *Mobilities*, 2/3 (2007), p. 385.

<sup>5</sup> '...[D]issenting Puritans, Calvinist Boers or Mormons ... saw the movement to the edge (their own or that of their forebears) as itself the definitive pilgrimage, a journey once again to a place where a new destiny and identity, always with great difficulty and many trials, could be inscribed in the landscape. As with the ancient Hebrews, there was an ideology of self-transformation possible within these pilgrimages but also a collective rebirth in the form of a construction of indigenusness accomplished in the course of these movements through the landscape: a fundamental encounter with the land that was mutually transforming. The people and land become one another.' (Taylor, 'Centre and Edge', p. 386).

—whose pioneers most blatantly called themselves ‘Pilgrims’— to more subtle founders of the many semi-sacred settlements of the New World, untroubled by the fact they were the descendants of Anglicans, Puritans, Calvinists, Quakers, Lutherans, Mennonites, Baptists, members of the Dutch Reform Church, and others who all thought to reject old style Roman Catholic practices including pilgrimage.

Their first foundations, almost unwittingly, themselves became sites of pilgrimage, new spiritual homelands to which later settlements looked back with longing and deference. American Protestants trying to opt out of the secular world lived pilgrimage as their guiding concept when they left Europe for the New World and plunged into the heartland of the continent to build idealized Christian collectives like the Shaker foundations, also called the Millennial Church, brought to America in 1774 and among the most successful in maintaining an internal culture that spread to take its place in the American mythology of new beginnings and self-reliance. Other foundations include the likes of New Harmony, a socialist community in southwest Indiana founded by Robert Owen in 1825, and the Amana Church Society, founded in Germany in 1843 and transplanted to Iowa in 1855 where its villages have flourished as cooperative corporations since 1932. Ephrata Cloister near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a foundation of Conrad Beissel for his German Baptist brethren (1732-1814) stands in this heritage line as well. Steeped in Old World trappings, emigration morphing into pilgrimage is a gesture common to almost all the religious traditions currently in vogue in the United States, from conservative Catholicism, to all varieties of Protestantism, to Buddhism, and on to New Age wandering and the call of the open road.

I would argue that the enactment of travel for transcendence has been a major factor in American history since the earliest colonial settlements, marking our national landscape and collective mental maps and as such it forms part of a nationalist narrative, akin to that of the Camino de Santiago supposedly marching in step with the Spanish Reconquest of Christian lands held under the military control of Muslim invaders.<sup>6</sup> There are vast stretches of American history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that we must elide in this treatment, but essential elements will likely persist in most analyses.<sup>7</sup> What Americans rarely do is either adopt a self-conscious identity as ‘pilgrims’ or recognize that status in others. Even more decidedly there is a near total disregard of historical displacements within our continent as instances of pilgrimage travel. But the omission of the word does not belie that enduring practice. The American myth, as a shared experience sought by means of travel along certain routes and to specific places, intersects with traditional pilgrimage in immersing the individual self in the collective enterprise of an imagined community that spans generations. What was a blank expanse

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<sup>6</sup> The myth of the glorious Reconquista, so much a part of the nationalist narrative of Iberia, is by now fairly disassembled. The nearly 800 years that Muslims lived, and yes, fought in Spain was marked by long periods of negotiated co-existence and an undulating frontier that swung north and south as military strength and political fortunes grew and faltered. The interpenetration of Moorish and Christian culture saw more influences flowing north to the roughshod and poorly-educated Christians than Christian influences colouring the elegant court culture of Andalusian Spain.

<sup>7</sup> For an example from early in the twentieth century, see D. Shiffman, ‘Ethnographic Pilgrimage in Depression-Era America’, *Pilgrimage. A Special issue of Mosaic. A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 36/4 (2003), pp. 155-69.

when we arrived is now richly populated with sites and trajectories that confer membership in a vital community and allure travellers with the promise of transcendence.

Because pilgrimage journeys have to be voluntarily embraced for higher purposes, this discussion excludes immigrant groups using remembered pilgrimages as a part of their legitimate attempts to sustain traditions in a new and perhaps unwelcoming environment, or forced migrations except as transformed by solemn re-enactments or ‘ritual historicizing’<sup>8</sup> as in the case of the native Americans who reanimate the Trail of Tears, African Americans who venerate the Underground Railroad, or the Future Generations Ride of the Lakota Sioux to Wounded Knee, South Dakota, all of which are important and very deliberate manifestations of collective will to make travel reverent, restorative and even sacred. Pilgrimage may be obedient, to a tradition, community or belief system, but there is a required element of agency even in one’s abandonment to the odd fortunes of the road. Even believing in providentialism is a choice. And while acknowledging that tourism has frequently overshadowed, eclipsed or been the socially acceptable pretext for more direct expressions of the desire for transformative travel, I will not address the specific tensions between tourism and pilgrimage well studied by anthropologists of tourism as Graburn<sup>9</sup>, Coleman and Elsner<sup>10</sup>, Coleman and Eade<sup>11</sup>, Swatos<sup>12</sup> Swatos and Tomasi<sup>13</sup>, York<sup>14</sup> or Badone and Roseman<sup>15</sup> and which go back to the earliest days of Christianity and its popularization of religious sightseeing in Syria and Palestine, as Adler<sup>16</sup>, Cohen<sup>17</sup>, or Olsen.<sup>18</sup>

We need not obscure the fact that this nascent field is resistant to neat packaging. Pilgrimage studies, by their very nature, examine a troop on the move. Getting pilgrims to stand still to analyze their moving parts is the job of researchers who are also sometimes participants, if only to keep up with the surging tide of ‘true believers’.<sup>19</sup> Art historians freeze-frame gestures, mostly high ideals, while

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<sup>8</sup> C.V. Prorok, ‘Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions in the Americas’, *The Geographical Review*, 93/3 (2003), p. 283, at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30033919> (accessed 5 March 2013).

<sup>9</sup> N.H.N. Graburn, ‘Tourism: the sacred journey’, in V.L. Smith (ed.), *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), pp. 17-31.

<sup>10</sup> S. Coleman and J. Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> S. Coleman and J. Eade, ‘Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage’, in S. Coleman and J. Eade (eds), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-25.

<sup>12</sup> W.H. Swatos, ‘*Homo Viator*: From Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism via the Journey’, in W.H. Swatos and L. Tomasi (eds), *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism. The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety* (Westport CT & London: Praeger, 2002), pp. 1-24.

<sup>13</sup> Swatos and Tomasi, *From Medieval Pilgrimage*, pp. 1-24.

<sup>14</sup> M. York, ‘Contemporary Pagan Pilgrimages’, in Swatos and Tomasi, *From Medieval Pilgrimage*, pp. 137-58.

<sup>15</sup> E. Badone and S. Roseman, ‘Approaches to the Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism’, in E. Badone and S. Roseman (eds), *Intersecting Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage and Tourism* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 1-23.

<sup>16</sup> J. Adler, ‘The Holy Man as Traveler and Travel Attraction: Early Christian Asceticism and the Moral Problematic of Modernity’, in Swatos and Tomasi, *From Medieval Pilgrimage*, pp. 25-50.

<sup>17</sup> E. Cohen, ‘Pilgrimage and Tourism: Convergence and Divergence’, in A. Morinis (ed.), *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 47-61.

<sup>18</sup> D.H. Olsen and D.J. Timothy, ‘Tourism and religious journeys’, in D.H. Olsen and D.J. Timothy (eds), *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys* (Abingdon UK: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-21.

<sup>19</sup> M. Tate, ‘Tourism and Holy Week in León, Spain’, in Badone and Roseman, *Intersecting Journeys*, pp. 110-24; C. Turnbull, ‘Postscript: Anthropology as Pilgrimage, Anthropologist as Pilgrim’, in Morinis, *Sacred Journeys*, pp. 257-74.

anthropologists provide snapshots of behaviours both singular and borrowed from other moments in life. Scholars in religious studies take spiritual sketches of travellers' yearning for the transcendent, while sociologists capture glimpses of mixed motives and intrusions of the definitely non-sacred. Even tourism studies help us see past the picture postcard images of the exotic and wondrous and show us vacationers, trekkers, skeptics, seekers and spenders flowing in and out of the channels of belief.

## Taxonomies of pilgrimage

Diverse forms of travel are undertaken for goals greater than sightseeing or commerce. Many sojourners alternate among their interior identities as pilgrim, tourist or merchant, or use one to disguise or justify another. Even those who set out on consecrated and well-defined religious journeys admit that in the end it is easier to be a gawker who is never a pilgrim than a pilgrim who is never a gawker. Although they tend to overlook important differences between travelling pilgrimages and mere site visits, several researchers have proposed configurations of ritualized or solemn travel among Americans and other contemporary groups.

Juan Eduardo Campo<sup>20</sup> employs a simple tripartite division for modern pilgrimage expressions in this country: pilgrimages of organized religion, treks expressing 'civil religion', and others encoding 'cultural religion'. The first embraces mostly avatars of Catholic practices transposed into the New World by immigrant populations. By his own acknowledgment, the examples Campo offers of domestic Hindu pilgrimage are limited and confined to constructed shrine sites and never sacralized landscape features, while Muslim pilgrimage is non-existent within the United States.

Campo's two other categories are given the tag of 'religion' but are probably better understood as convergent values systems and national sentiment. His pilgrimages of civil religion promote patriotic values and enjoy the backing of large government agencies as custodians and interpreters of these prestige sites such as Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts; Civil War battle sites like Gettysburg; Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota; Pearl Harbour and the sunk battleship Arizona in Hawaii; Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, etc. Each of these receives countless millions of visitors every year. We might add several sites which rapidly became focal points of national identity, even a profound sense of national mourning, such as Ground Zero in New York after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and before then the sites of the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sellars and Walter (1993) anticipate Campo in their exploration of civil religion but emphasize that, for the memorials of heroes and historical personages, the contingent nature of a tomb acquiring the

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<sup>20</sup> J.E. Campo, 'American Pilgrimage Landscapes', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 558/1 (1998), pp. 40-56.

status of sites of sober visitation: a ‘shrine’s development is by no means a certainty’<sup>21</sup>; ‘in some instances ... a memorial to the deceased is built or the place of death preserved, and then come the pilgrims.... In others, the pilgrims come regardless, the place becomes sacred, and a memorial has to be erected in response’.<sup>22</sup>

Pilgrimage of cultural or ‘implicit’ religion forms a ‘third group [which] comprises pilgrimages that in a significant way incorporate elements deriving from the sphere of cultural values and practices but that are distinct from those identified with organized religions and civil religion’.<sup>23</sup> Americans who wish to feel themselves full participants of their cultural world seek distinctly American venues to take the pulse of popular landmarks in time and space. Graceland, Elvis Presley’s home near Memphis, Tennessee, Las Vegas, Disneyland in California and Walt Disney World in Florida all qualify. Such sites are uniquely American and experienced by so many that their blatant commercial aspects do not prevent visitors from feeling that they are acquiring a repertoire of essential touchstones. Those who never leave home to be drenched in the mists of Niagara Falls or to take in the view from the top of the Washington Monument are in some sense diminished citizens of the nation.

Finally, Campo recognizes that with the increased fluidity of communication and travel pilgrimage has become a global phenomenon. Americans readily leave the US to participate or at least become observers at fully religious places like Rome, Jerusalem, Seville during Semana Santa, and Mecca, or in terms of patriotic pilgrimage they travel to the cemeteries of Normandy in France or to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan. Cultural pilgrimages would include any return to the ancestral homeland of a more or less well defined minority group of immigrants to the US whether they be Poles, Italians, Indians or any other group in diaspora. A special case can be made for a ‘reverse pilgrimage’ not named by Campo, the growing traffic of black citizens of the US who seek to visit the slave forts of Ghana and other locales on the West African coast to pay homage at the sites of embarkation of their ancestors condemned to foreign servitude.

Like Campo, Carolyn V. Prorok<sup>24</sup> emphasizes the role immigration has played in overlaying ‘old country’ practices onto a new landscape by replicating traditional pilgrimages in new sites or with fondly remembered ones recreated here, sometimes in miniature.<sup>25</sup> She identifies the principal

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<sup>21</sup> R.W. Sellars and T. Walter, ‘From Custer to Kent State: heroes, martyrs and the evolution of popular shrines in the USA’, in I. Reader and T. Walter (eds), *Pilgrimage in popular culture* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1993), p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> Sellars and Walter, ‘From Custer to Kent State’, pp. 179-80.

<sup>23</sup> Campo, ‘American Pilgrimage Landscapes’, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Prorok, ‘Transplanting Pilgrimage’, pp. 283-307.

<sup>25</sup> The nostalgic memorial in miniature is first immortalized in Western literature in Aeneas’s discovery of a colony of fellow Trojans in exile who have built a scale model replica of their now lost city and its outlying rivers and hills (*Vergil’s Aeneid Books I-IV*, ed. C. Pharr (Boston: D.C. Heath & Company, 1964), pp. 294-351). The threat of slipping into kitsch is real, and Charles Witke, the great classicist of the University of Michigan, used to joke with his students that this episode was one of Virgil’s few true lapses in taste, envisioning a layout that we would now attribute to a putt-putt golf course. Miniature Lourdes (twelve US locations) and Fatima shrines (eight US locations) are among the most numerous manifestations of pious miniaturization among American Catholics (see L.K. Davidson and D. Gitlitz, ‘Replica Pilgrimages’, in *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland: an encyclopedia* (2 vols, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002), vol. 2, pp.

mechanisms for immigrants as ‘co-opting sacred sites of host communities, maintaining links to their homeland, or re-creating sacred sites ... through replication, (re)cognition, creating movable rituals, celebrating sites of sacred embodiment, and ritual historicizing’.<sup>26</sup> She underscores the precarious nature of trying to reassemble pilgrimage traditions in new, sometimes hostile environments but finds that the energy to pull it off arises from a need to anchor our temporal, individual selves in a ‘collective selfhood’. She points out that most cultures are rooted in an essentially nomadic past which generated identity through the spaces people traversed, spaces which became sacred through repetition and ritualization. The result was the consecration of unique but constantly evolving pilgrimage circulation systems as a standing feature of a given culture, and such systems are evident in many modern religions whether viewed as a unitary system (all Muslims direct their steps and worship wherever they find themselves toward Mecca) or as a highly diversified system in which territories are mentally mapped as a complex of holy points and paths (Hindu and Christian landscapes). Prorok recognizes that the glance backward toward an ancestral homeland can transform any return there into a pilgrimage to one’s origins, a mother country ‘made sacred by its role in the diasporic imagination’.<sup>27</sup>

Linda Kay Davidson and David Gitlitz are among the pioneering researchers and adventurers on the Camino de Santiago and have published the best guide to that Catholic sacred journey, *The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook*<sup>28</sup>, and the invaluable *Pilgrimage and the Jews*<sup>29</sup>. In their two-volume *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland: an encyclopedia*<sup>30</sup>, they provide extensive coverage of world pilgrimage including thirty-eight sites in the United States. There are excellent general essays on ‘Activities During Pilgrimage’, ‘Criticism of Pilgrimage’, ‘Life as Pilgrimage’, ‘Literature and Pilgrimage’, ‘Motives for Pilgrimage’, ‘Sacred Space’, ‘Secular Pilgrimage’, ‘Tourism as Pilgrimage’, and so on. Their more capacious taxonomy recognizes and discusses overlapping pilgrimages – sites, journeys and periodic events – that they recognize as religious, secular popular (Grateful Dead concerts; visits to the grave of Jim Morrison in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris), secular political (the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas; the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Japan; the D-Day landings sites on the beaches of Normandy), and those of secular identity (the Ghana Slave Forts in western Africa; the Stonewall Inn where the American gay rights movement started; and Wounded Knee).

## American Indian Religions and Pilgrimage

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519-22, which includes examples from Jewish, Hindu and other faith communities but whose replica shrines are all outside the United States).

<sup>26</sup> Prorok, ‘Transplanting Pilgrimage’, p. 283.

<sup>27</sup> Prorok, ‘Transplanting Pilgrimage’, p. 289.

<sup>28</sup> L.K. Davidson, and D. Gitlitz, *The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> L.K. Davidson, and D. Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage and the Jews* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland*.

Of special importance for understanding contemporary American myth and its pilgrimage sites are the head article of Davidson and Gitlitz and the thirteen place entries on Native American Religions (Bear Butte, South Dakota; Mount Shasta, California<sup>31</sup>; Sedona, Arizona, etc.), in essence pagan sites in that they hold in common ‘certain overarching principles’ which repeatedly centre on the unity of the spirit and physical worlds and humankind’s role in maintaining their balance and living in harmony with elemental components like the weather, the cardinal directions, and companion species such as horses, birds and buffalo. In calling these religious traditions and their pilgrimages ‘pagan’, I certainly do not mean to slight them, but only to identify some of their key features implicit but relatively unexplored in Davidson and Gitlitz. Pagan belief systems, in classical antiquity, within traditional indigenous populations, or among modern Euro-American or Euro-Oceanic youth routinely all manifest an ‘intense locality in [their] ... perception of and encounter with deity’ and their ‘this-worldly orientations’ without a ‘fundamental interest in soteriology or afterlife affairs’. Pagans feel that ‘the godhead is immanent within the world rather than ... radically and transcendently other ... both personal and impersonal as well as male and female’, and that ‘supernatural reality is considered neither good nor evil but potentially a mixture of the positive and negative’. In examining a pagan’s reasons for undertaking a pilgrimage journey ‘the magical act of contact with a sacred site or object ... is crucial and leads to the acquisition of fortune, power, or healing usually ... in tangible terms’.<sup>32</sup> There are some 500 tribal groupings scattered within the fifty American states, many of whom were forcibly relocated when colonizing European settlers seized their lands and slaughtered their defenders. Their creation myths, healing rituals, rites of ethnic identity and vision quest<sup>33</sup> are not just woven into the mythology of the modern American consciousness – and a rebuke to the nation’s historical misdeeds – but are part of the fabric of the more ecologically sensitive leading edge of American aspirations.

Taylor, exploring the vast migration of Mexicans and other Hispanics through the Sonoran Desert to seek employment or political asylum, notes the continuity of ancient native traditions in this annual surge of vulnerable travellers.

Native Americans, the Tohono and Hia C-ed O’odham, moved transhumantly or nomadically among seasonal camps and villages through a territory that encompassed thousands of square miles on both sides of what became the border between the US and Mexico. But they also moved on pilgrimage, first to acquire salt and rain from the sea, and, beginning in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, on their own version of a Catholic pilgrimage to the shrine of San Francisco Xavier in Magdalena de Kino, Sonora. ... Also on a ‘spiritual mission’ are many devotees of ‘Wilderness’ who come alone or in groups to walk through such official and ‘authentic wilderness’ as can be found in the national lands along the border, including Organ Pipe National Monument and the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge [both in Arizona]. While ostensibly

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<sup>31</sup> L. Huntsinger and M. Fernández-Giménez, ‘Spiritual Pilgrims at Mount Shasta, California’, *Geographical Review*, 90 (2000), pp. 536-58.

<sup>32</sup> York, ‘Contemporary Pagan Pilgrimages’, pp. 141-2.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland*, vol. 2, pp. 431-34.



concerned with other goals, these movements, like those of the anti and pro-immigrant groups, can also be understood as pilgrimages that narrate, perform and geographically inscribe versions of America.<sup>34</sup>

Eade and Sallnow<sup>35</sup> proposed a tripartite analysis of pilgrimage through its *persons*, *places* and *texts*. S. Coleman and J. Elsner<sup>36</sup> expanded this list by adding *movement* as a key feature that operates as a configuring force in a given pilgrimage. Native American pilgrimages – those of the Lakota Sioux, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, and elsewhere – show their unique character on the American landscape for being habitually ‘closed’ rather than ‘open’ expeditions: members of these tribes are the sole *persons* who may enact their rituals and non-native Americans may not join in no matter how sympathetic or supportive they may feel. The *place* is the original landscape of their traditional rites, even though interstate highways, public and private lands now overlay its sacred circuits, spanning streams, prairies and hillsides. The *movement* may also be highly choreographed, such as for the Lakota who execute their commemorative Bigfoot Memorial Ride, more recently evocatively renamed the Future Generations Ride, on horseback. And in terms of *text*, the Lakota are also exemplary, having bequeathed to American lore a work of deep mystical insight, *Black Elk Speaks*,<sup>37</sup> revered by scholars of many traditions worldwide and now embraced by nearly every native tribe in America, many of whose oral traditions have been lost over time along with the extinction of their languages. Taylor brings these features together in an insightful contribution to what he calls ‘moral geography’:

... the cultural practice of ascribing symbolic significance and moral valence to particular landscapes. In the case of nationalism [i.e., for native American nations] there are of course countless examples, including ‘ancient homelands’, or ‘where our dead are buried’. Such places are never simply given or remembered; rather they are created and sustained through the cultural work of specific actions and narratives. In the category of actions comes movement through the landscape, a particularly potent form of which we often call pilgrimage.<sup>38</sup>

One factor elided by all four of the preceding scholars,<sup>39</sup> is a distinction between pilgrimages which are more precisely identified as site visits and those which include – and may be essentially qualified as – travelling pilgrimage for which the journey is an indelible component. The completion of the trek is always presumed, even in cases like the modern Camiño Camino de Santiago which Spanish pilgrims in particular may assemble over the course of several years by doing short stretches as vacation time and means allow. Following the routes to Santiago is the primordial experience, and many who perform this multipurpose rite for personal or cultural reasons – or who feel disaffected from the Catholic Church or religion in general – never enter the cathedral at all or collect the certificate of

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<sup>34</sup> Taylor, ‘Centre and Edge’, p. 384.

<sup>35</sup> J. Eade and M.J. Sallnow (eds), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (Urbana and Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Coleman and Elsner, *Pilgrimage Past and Present*, pp. 196-220.

<sup>37</sup> J. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, ‘Centre and Edge’, p. 384.

<sup>39</sup> Campo, ‘American Pilgrimage Landscapes’; Prorok, ‘Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions’; Davidson and Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage: from the Ganges to Graceland*.

completion which is offered either as a formal Latin proclamation issued by the Church or as a simple Spanish diploma with no implied religious significance.

## Religious pilgrimages in the US

There are abundant sites of religious pilgrimage in the United States. For American Catholics there is the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC and St Patrick's Cathedral in New York, both of which stand in as 'head churches'. Other sites may draw visitors from around the nation but are still basically local devotions managed by a given parish church or religious order, places which may have little more to boast than a congregation or an unusual building (St John's Abbey Church, Colledgeville, Minnesota), statue or cross (The Cross in the Woods, Cheboygan, Michigan).<sup>40</sup>

There are only a few cases of Catholic shrines where a walking pilgrimage is an essential component and greater than a procession conducted in the course of a specific liturgical service, or access to a more or less elaborate outdoor Way of the Cross, itself a medieval devotional invention meant to reproduce in miniature a trek to the Holy Land. The Spanish colonial era Mission of Chimayó north of Santa Fe, New Mexico is a distinctive walking pilgrimage: its Good Friday crowds carry crosses to the humble chapel from miles away. The California Mission Trail embraces an extensive string of venerable Franciscan churches like San Juan Capistrano and Santa Bárbara, but plans for relinking them for walking pilgrims are complicated by the California highway system which lies atop the old mission roads and now blocks many land routes from one to the next. Across the border to the north, the Canadian pilgrimage shrines of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré and St Joseph's Oratory, both in Québec, are informally linked by an 18-day walking path being developed in imitation of the Camino de Santiago.<sup>41</sup>

Among American Protestants, only the pilgrimage practices of the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) are fully 'nativized': the original foundational trek happened in America in the 1830s and 1840s and from the beginning was interpreted from within that community as a divinely choreographed re-enactment of biblical journeys with Brigham Young styled a new Joshua for his people. The Mormons undertook a mass exodus from their Sacred Grove in upstate New York, suffered a massacre of their leaders by mobs in Nauvoo, Illinois, and finally took up residence next to the remote Salt Lake in Utah to escape persecution for their unorthodox beliefs and practice of polygamy. This trajectory spanned the settled continent of their historical moment and only stopped when they reached the furthest

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<sup>40</sup> On American Catholicism, see studies by V. Baker, 'Breaking Bread with Prisca: Catholic Women, Pilgrimage, and Identity Politics and Theology', *Theatre Annual. A Journal of Performance Studies*, 63 (2010), pp. 1-26 and L. Russell, 'The Pilgrim Paths', *ibid.*, 58 (2005), pp. 1-65 and D.A. Menchaca, 'Performing Identities', *ibid.*, 58 (2005), pp. 67-121. M.J. Chiat's, *The Spiritual Traveler. Chicago and Illinois. A Guide to Sacred Sites and Peaceful Places* (Mahwah NJ: Hidden Spring [Paulist Press], 2004) announced as the first volume of a fifty-state project, mostly covers significant Christian churches and shrines but also Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist holy places, and sites of historical and cultural interest.

<sup>41</sup> Personal communication from Austin Cooke, president of the Canadian Company of Pilgrims.

edge of their known world, a rather unplanned pilgrimage that achieved biblical proportions, real martyrdoms, and an epic sweep. It is important to add that this church has in recent decades staged re-creations of their historic pilgrimage in period costumes and wagons. Deployed as a trans-generational rite of passage and catechetical tool, the popular and theatrical nature of the costuming finds echoes in the evocative wardrobes seen in the Passion Play of Oberammergau (Bavaria, Germany) or even among those who choose to walk the Camino de Santiago in playful re-creations of medieval garb. The Mormon practice is halfway between the German staging, with its fully biblical narrative and dramatic arc but (in common with the Lakota) a similarly closed rite to which outsiders cannot volunteer themselves as participants, and the Camino stylings which are un-scripted historical approximations that recall a primordial community's experience. Pilgrims in Spain are not acting out a transgenerational educational practice among living believers so their outfits are entirely personalized. The Mormon re-enactments are especially notable for making the travel component the essential element whether it takes place along some of the still rutted wagon trails that marked their first passage out West in the 1840s or on any random stretch of woods and fields within reach of their local Stake (comparable to a diocese).<sup>42</sup> The Mormon treks, especially those accompanying Pioneers Day, 24 July, which is an official holiday in the state of Utah, are deeply imbued with religious overtones. The youth taking part pause for organized prayers, and perform traditional songs and dances.

## Secular Pilgrimages in America

The journeys that explicitly entail trekking a distance within the United States are all instances of cultural pilgrimage intimately tied to esteemed natural settings. A 'Triple Crown' of distance hiking trails in the continental US include the Continental Divide Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail and the celebrated Appalachian Trail. The 'AT' is a route of over 2,000 miles of frequently strenuous and nearly always isolated terrain stretching from northern Georgia to northern Maine, a trek which lingers in the background imagination of many Americans who view it as an epic achievement even when done in stages let alone accomplished in a single season from early spring to early fall. There are no significant cultural monuments to visit along the way and no history other than its founding and growth in support infrastructure and popularity.<sup>43</sup>

There are a growing number of historic trails that retrace the paths of major events in American history. Although often maintained by national or local government authorities, they are not patriotic in any normative sense and some constitute 'dark pilgrimages' in that they are journeys of remembrance and even reparation. The Lewis and Clark Trail exists as a well-documented route by the explorers

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<sup>42</sup> L. McCoy, 'A Pioneer's Journey', *The Daily Press* [Hampton Roads, Virginia], Good Life section (1 August 2010), pp. 1, 9.

<sup>43</sup> For a personalized and popular – and rather witty – account of walking the Appalachian Trail, see B. Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

commissioned by Thomas Jefferson to locate a passage to the Pacific coast. Only some sections, such as those near Columbia, Missouri, are marked and readily accessible.<sup>44</sup>

Sites of secular pilgrimage, rather than travelling adventures, embrace innumerable gatherings throughout the US which draw enthusiasts who, in part, may be celebrating their whimsy rather than any transcendent value or aspiration. High Pointers take as their sites of cultural pilgrimage the highest points in each of the fifty States. Some of the ascents are extremely easy while others require advanced mountaineering skills. In addition to an on-line community and annual convention of enthusiasts, the national organization sponsors a newsletter, publishes guides for the more challenging summits, and cultivates friendly relations with owners of high points on private property. The annual Harley Davidson motorcycle rallies are festive events that indulge in loud concerts, outrageous leather costumes, and casual tourism. They occur in Daytona Beach, Florida, Laconia, New Hampshire, and Sturgis, South Dakota, where for two weeks each August participants and vendors double the population of that state.<sup>45</sup> Among the event sites of secular pilgrimage, one could point to those who travel to rendezvous with other fans for concerts by bands such as the Grateful Dead, whose devotees are known as Deadheads, and by Jimmy Buffett, whose followers are called Parrotheads, after the Hawaiian shirts and parrot headgear worn by many of them. The Burning Man event in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada is a free-spirited, deliberately counter-cultural celebration of self-reliance (mostly surviving the fierce desert heat for a week), art and free expression (temporary displays of outlandish and ingenious concepts), a rigorously inclusive sense of community, and environmentalism.<sup>46</sup> The sprawling Star Trek conventions held around the world deserve mention as well for their mass appeal at home and abroad.

Many of these events are quirky extensions of American culture and camp pilgrimages, but in their own way respectful encounters with displays of hospitality, good will and, in the Turners' classic formulation, *communitas*.<sup>47</sup>

## Pilgrimage and Narratives of America

From Antiquity pilgrimage has bequeathed a legacy of writing about natural history and cultures in conflict and encounter. It is, arguably, the root source of all subsequent travel writing as a genre, and more importantly seems to have been the medieval forge where modern autobiography and other kinds

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<sup>44</sup> T. Schmidt, *National Geographic Guide to the Lewis & Clark Trail* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Jill Dubisch examines 'motorcycle pilgrimage' as a uniquely American expression (J. Dubisch, 'Heartland of America': memory, motion and the (re)construction of history on a motorcycle pilgrimage', in Coleman and Eade, *Reframing Pilgrimage*, pp. 105-32).

<sup>46</sup> See Taylor on 'wilderness cults' which seek to venture into endangered natural landscapes. He gives special consideration to groups which feel somehow threatened and which 'are worried about the profanation of sacred ground and seek to preserve, protect and experience (in a religious/spiritual transformative way) the wild authentic landscapes crucial to both individual and national redemption' (Taylor, 'Centre and Edge', p. 391).

<sup>47</sup> V. Turner and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture. Anthropological Perspectives* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell & Columbia UP, 1978).

of life writing draw their nascent forms. Among writers in English, fifteenth-century Margery Kempe – a difficult travelling companion even by her own admission – chronicles her life through a series of pilgrimage trips, while fourteenth-century Geoffrey Chaucer created an international literary monument by using an expedition to a martyr's shrine as the setting for his *Canterbury Tales*. Other non first-person English travel writing emerged and flourished over the centuries, like the historical novel invented by Walter Scott (*Ivanhoe* 1819 and the *Waverley Novels*) and the maritime novel launched by James Fenimore Cooper (*The Pilot* 1823). The nineteenth century was an age of intensified exploration and exploitation of colonial lands and resources and a Romantic personalization of nationalist sentiments as individuals sought to refine their identity in contrast with their country's history and perceive character. Many European writers still returned to 'colonize' their more remote, preferably medieval, past where they felt the authentic roots of their ethnic or national experience lay preserved. Others like Benito Pérez Galdós celebrated more recent formative events like the French invasion and Spanish war of independence from the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) to the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy (1875) in the forty-six novels in his wildly successful series of *Episodios nacionales* (1873-1912).

America's literary legacy has been enriched by foreign travellers who described the America they encountered and their own pilgrimages through this country, figures like the Argentine educator Facundo Sarmiento, the Cuban poet José Martí and most indelibly of all the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville whose *Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840) was prescient in its understanding of the American psychological profile. De Tocqueville came to New York City in 1831 and spent nine months ostensibly touring prisons but also taking shrewd notes on social *mores* and the dynamics of political life, an obsession with material goods, the vitality of private enterprise, the negotiation of labour and the contested ownership of its fruits, Russo-American rivalries, and the impending crisis over slavery which would lead to the United States' near dissolution during its bloody Civil War.

The twentieth century saw an efflorescence of travel writing world-wide including pilgrimage narratives. Authors of scant literary merit, like Paulo Coelho<sup>48</sup> and Paul Cousineau,<sup>49</sup> still seize the imagination of their countrymen and inspire countless seekers to set out on travels that have already been scripted for them in comforting visions. Part of motivation for travel is a longing to reconnect with a simpler, more authentic time. Many contemporary pilgrimage narratives put on display both a belief in the journey's power faithfully to recreate the experience of those who went before on the same trails and a concomitant 'distrust of modernity': yarns of solemn adventuring are the armature 'whereby travel is

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<sup>48</sup> A New Yorker magazine biography of Paulo Coelho observes that 'Coelho writes in Portuguese; some literary critics in Brazil joke among themselves that translation must improve his prose. 'He writes in a non-literary style, with a message that confirms common sense', Manuel da Costa Pinto, a columnist for *Folha de S. Paulo*, said. 'He gives readers a recipe for happiness'. ... Most 'Brazilian critics ... reflexively dismiss Coelho' (D. Goodyear, 'The Magus. The astonishing appeal of Paulo Coelho', *The New Yorker* (7 May 2007), p. 39). The essay portrays Coelho, for all his wealth and popular acclaim, as an amused charlatan and a flake.

<sup>49</sup> P. Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: the Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Berkeley CA: Conari Press, 1998).

narrated as a nostalgic encounter with a past made desirable by the crippling effects of modernity'.<sup>50</sup> Americans who write of their expeditions for other Americans – and Americans never write with foreign readers in mind – are in search of authenticity, their historic and heroic past, an American myth they can believe in, and as part of a flight from the uniformity of strip mall marketing and mass media toward a Golden Age of lost innocence.<sup>51</sup> Part of the allure of sometimes arduous travel is the opportunity to become part of the experience of others, like those who trek to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington to tell their war stories for the benefit of willing listeners. Hearing from a veteran who lost friends and fellow soldiers, and his youth, in the jungles of southeast Asia is for many 'mere tourists' a transformative encounter with authentic witness and holy man in one.

Travel freighted with special meanings has become so thoroughly laced throughout American culture that it has spawned literary classics like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*,<sup>52</sup> the obvious model for the Jack Hitt<sup>53</sup> first-person pilgrimage narrative, *Off the Road*, which did so much to popularize the Spanish trek to Santiago de Compostela among English language readers. Other noted American writers include John Steinbeck<sup>54</sup> whose *Travels with Charlie* inspired Charles Kuralt's 'On the Road',<sup>55</sup> broadcast segments starting in 1967, over twenty years' of sentimental and often quirky mini travel documentaries for CBS television, and William Zinsser's beloved *American Places*.<sup>56</sup>

While Kerouac, Steinbeck and Keralt dedicate themselves to the telling vignette in miniature, Zinsser opts for iconic and monumental sites like Mount Vernon, Niagara Falls and Pearl Harbour: 'I had looked for America long enough in its microcosmic places. This time I was going after the big ones'.<sup>57</sup> Although he was clearly engaged in serial site pilgrimage rather a journey from place to place, Zinsser felt that he partook in the motivation held in common by fellow arrivals at each place: 'What I

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<sup>50</sup> P. Genoni, 'The Pilgrim's Progress Across Time: Medievalism and Modernity on the Road to Santiago', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 15/2 (2011), p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> Travel and the search for authenticity are themes explored by D. MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Badone and Roseman, 'Approaches', p. 14; E. Badone, 'Crossing Boundaries: Exploring the Borderlands of Ethnography, Tourism, and Pilgrimage', in Badone and Roseman, *Intersecting Journeys*, p. 182; and Genoni, 'The Pilgrim's Progress', pp. 167-9, 174, n. 34. Conrad notes that 'A pilgrim is not a tourist. You have a deeper experience precisely because you are not an observer in the traditional sense. ... The locals look to you as a special experience, as authentic. Despite the distance, you are a participator, an authenticator, even more than the locals themselves' (R. Conrad, *Pilgrimage to the End of the World* (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2004), p. 34; also cited by Genoni, 'The Pilgrim's Progress', p. 167). In examining the American myth Taylor concurs that 'The frontiersman was at the same time both the enemy of wild nature and its embodiment. ... This was a ... transformation ... that stripped off 'the veneer' of civilisation and left 'essential man'; Taylor, 'Centre and Edge', p. 388. The quest for 'genuine' experiences may not need ironic comeuppance, but see A. Potter, *The Authenticity Hoax. Why the 'Real' Things We Seek Don't Make Us Happy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> For the durable appeal of this travel narrative see Jennifer Schuessler's and David L. Ulin's report on how it became the 'top-grossing book' app for the iPad; D.L. Ulin, 'Jack Kerouac on the app road', *Los Angeles Times* (22 June 2011), at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/jacketcopy/2011/06/jack-kerouac-on-the-app-road.html> (accessed 5 March 2013).

<sup>53</sup> J. Hitt, *Off the Road. A Modern-Day Walk Down the Pilgrim Route into Spain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994) [Rpt. 2005].

<sup>54</sup> J. Steinbeck, *Travels with Charlie: In Search of America* (New York: Viking, 1962).

<sup>55</sup> C. Kuralt, 'On the Road'. *CBS Evening News* (1967).

<sup>56</sup> W.K. Zinsser, *American Places*.

<sup>57</sup> Zinsser, *American Places*, p. 2.

also saw was why we all go. I don't mean that I know the story behind every family trip; people bring different needs to sacred places and take different things away. It is also true that these places are not static; they keep being reshaped by new events and social currents. ... on a deeper level all of us are on the same quest. We are looking for continuity'.<sup>58</sup> Repeat visitors to Yellowstone or Rockefeller Plaza felt that they were reconnecting with 'a family possession', that they 'had been brought there as children and were now back with children of their own, pilgrims to the memory of what they once did with their parents. Old Faithful and the Skating Rink were twins in their ability to link the past and the present and the future across the generations and to reaffirm the pleasure of bringing up a family in America'.<sup>59</sup>

Zinsser's patriotic credulity leads him and his reader to a willing trust in the power of place, especially locales long revered by American visitors. His very occasional ironic detachment is reported with a certain humility, something he has to acknowledge and keep under control, like his mistrust of sanitized and 'Disneyfied' American history, an accusation levelled (unfairly) at Colonial Williamsburg, the largest and most carefully planned living museum of colonial America and at Virginia's role in the Revolutionary Era. Other writers with even greater mass appeal than Zinsser do indulge to the full their private notions, such as the reincarnation imaginings of Shirley MacLaine<sup>60</sup> and the sardonic humour of German comic Hape Kerkling<sup>61</sup>.

## **Movies about Travel are not Pilgrimages**

Fictionalizations of travel claim their own popular movie genre, but one disqualified as a form of virtual pilgrimage because it focuses on individual experiences, characters and a unique narrative, and not on the enduring power of places in themselves. Film inevitably privileges the visual and aural. The viewer's passivity and the loss of a sense of space and place detach movies from lived pilgrimage. The dislocation and estrangement of pilgrimage are interiorized and privatized, never participating in a communal experience that spans generations and builds communal membership. Films are obviously durable cultural treasures with the power to entrance and unite decades of viewers. Endless holiday replays of 'Wizard of Oz' (1939, heartland Kansas and a fantasy land), 'It's a Wonderful Life' (1946, small town America), or 'Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street' (1946, quintessential New York City) attest to the power of iconic art forms, but do not constitute leaving one's home turf. The overwhelmingly popular British trilogy on the printed page and silver screen, 'The Lord of the Rings' (2001, 2002, 2003), is essentially a peripatetic quest narrative of conflict between the fictionalized tribes representing good and evil, but still not a pilgrimage.

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<sup>58</sup> Zinsser, *American Places*, p. 187.

<sup>59</sup> Zinsser, *American Places*, p. 188.

<sup>60</sup> S. MacLaine, *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit* (New York: Pocket Books, 2000).

<sup>61</sup> H. Kerkling [Hans Peter], *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

Sharing beloved movies is all about feeling centred, not volunteering oneself to be uncentred by a voyage to foreign territories or to seek a high plane, a touch of the transcendent. The spell of movies is strong and may express profound truths shared by a nation or culture, but it is technologically sophisticated, collaborative to the point of artistic anonymity (*pace* our reverence to the director's controlling vision), a form consumed but never produced by the recipient, and endlessly repeatable in an identical way – just the opposite of what actual pilgrims experience as they make a path through their own weather and emotional warren.

There are countless classic American road trip movies, well represented by 'It Happened One Night' (1934), 'Easy Rider' (1969), 'Rain Man' (1988), 'Thelma and Louise' (1991), 'Sideways' (2004), and 'Into the Wild' (2007), and movies that both celebrate and parody the form like 'The Muppet Movie' (1979), National Lampoon's 'Vacation' (1983), 'Planes, Trains and Automobiles' (1987) and 'Little Miss Sunshine' (2006). David Denby has observed that 'Things happen on trips; that's why the road-movie genre, with its radical concentration of means, never seems to tire. An opening to landscape, movement, adventure, and the eternal American desire to drop everything and light out for the territories, the form is both inherently dramatic and supremely flexible'.<sup>62</sup> We even interpret the lives of non-Americans through the lens of formative, often youthful, treks, such as 'The Motorcycle Diaries' (2004) about the Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara.<sup>63</sup> But in almost every case the actual routes chosen are circumstantial, random, barely reported in the script and merely shown on the screen as a series of landscape backdrops, essential to the mood but fairly irrelevant to the interaction of the characters.

The latest addition to this genre is a telling example. 'The Way' (2010) starring Martin Sheen and written, directed by and co-starring his son, Emilio Estévez, displays all the *bona fides* one could hope for in inducing, if not reproducing a pilgrimage experience. The movie is set on the Spanish Camino de Santiago heading toward Galicia, home of the shrine and relics of the Apostle St James the Elder in Compostela. Both Sheen and Estévez are of Galician descent, and decided to make the film as a tribute to their fondly recalled touristic trip along portions of the Santiago route from the Pyrenees through northern Spain. They even subjected themselves to filming the movie in dramatic sequence as they travelled the modern trail westward, relying on real pilgrims as extras. The son, played movingly by Estévez, sternly rejects his father's conservative values and his own barely started doctorate in anthropology at the University of California-Berkeley, and resolves to live the world, not just read about it. He makes for St. Jean Pied-de-Port in southwest France and the trail head of the Camino only to die on his first day in the mountains, caught in a freak snowstorm. The father flies to France to identify the body and decides in his grief and regret to carry his son's backpack and ashes to complete the

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<sup>62</sup> Denby goes on to note that the genre 'has served as the basis for crime thrillers ('They Live by Night', 'Bonnie and Clyde'), for violent explorations of the limits of freedom ('Easy Rider', 'Thelma and Louise'), for bruising tests of love and friendship ('Two for the Road', 'Scarecrow'); D. Denby, 'Drinking and Driving', *The New Yorker* (25 October 2004), p. 96.

<sup>63</sup> The film 'Diarios de motocicleta'/'Motorcycle Diaries' was filmed in Spanish by Brazilian director Walter Salles and was a co-production of companies in Argentina, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Chile, Peru and France with executive producers Robert Redford, Paul Webster and others.



pilgrimage in his place. The fictional father and son who suffered a generational divide are healed through a pilgrimage they make together, with the son appearing to his father as a silent companion invisible to others.

This may be an enticing inducement to undertake pilgrimage and the highly accessible modern Spanish version of it. But 'The Way,' while a dramatic and artistic success and a faithful depiction of the motives and camaraderie of modern Jacobean pilgrims journeying to Santiago, is a story of people using a malleable emotional landscape, not characters made pliant by the grandeur and authority they have granted to the mythic journey they undertake. The tensions are inherently eternal: impassive nature is the screen onto which humans project their aspirations, while at the same time the lens and physical reality which guides travellers' interpretation of the meaning of their trek. In movies about journeys, land and air and water are most often mere backdrop, stage props for actors who tell the story. For live pilgrims, land and air and water *are* the story and the only path toward their journey's resolution.

Movies about travel may not be surrogates for actual pilgrimages but they may well help consecrate sites accepted in the national mythology as focal points of the national experience. 'North by Northwest' (1959) helped enshrine the monumental countenances on Mount Rushmore as symbols of a nation's heroes, and countless films rely on Rockefeller Plaza, the Lincoln Memorial, the Grand Canyon, the Great Plains and the giant redwoods of California as backdrops which function as concrete extensions of a people, as do manmade structures like the Twin Towers of New York City and the Pentagon. To attack them, as happened on 11 September 2001, defaces the nation itself and leaves a vacuum in real space but more importantly in the national imaginary. To touch them, as pilgrims inevitably do at the memorials for the Vietnam War (in Washington, DC) or the Civil Rights Movement (in Montgomery, Alabama), both designed by architect Maya Lin, is to touch one's own body politic and confirm its solidity and permanence.

## **American Motives for Pilgrimage**

Medieval motives for making a pilgrimage could be holy or unholy, but the latter always included at least a veneer of righteousness and an inevitable susceptibility to realignment of one's life while undertaking commerce, tourism or war. Medieval pilgrims set out hoping to approach something greater than themselves and they travelled under the presumption that they would come closer to the divine or transcendent. Putting oneself in contact or proximity with a saint or figure of renown and to some extent participating in that person's world, ideology or community of believers helps justify an individual's existence. There was also pilgrimage to fulfill a promise or pledge either out of gratitude for a favour already granted or in token of spiritual fealty when asking for some benefit, like a cure, a miracle, or help for a loved one. On the far side of the scale, so to speak, one can also undertake a pilgrimage to do penance for a crime or sin, or to set right a transgression against the belief system which the sacred place or person represents. Traditional religious pilgrimage often entails a degree of abandonment to the will

of God expressed through the uncontrollable circumstances of one's trip. The inscrutable divine will expose the person to danger, perhaps to death, and the pilgrim submits himself to that judgement out of humility or for the sake of the revelations it may bring.

American citizens feel little need to use patriotic or cultural pilgrimage to negotiate with higher powers, to travel for reparation, gratitude, personal reform, seeking benefits or favours. It is not commonly a quest for conversion, a self-imposed change of life that can alter a personal direction and spirituality by means of meditative stretches of solitude and exertion, or through service to others. Submitting to a higher will and risking deprivation or death are likewise perfectly unexpected. Melding with their ideological community is, however, part of the ethos that puts Americans on the road to visit battlefields, the homes of presidents and national historic monuments. They already feel themselves full members of the national community and they lay claim by right to everything within the borders of their nation— a somewhat presumptive stance that can put them at odds with those who feel that traditional sites are being exploited for mere tourism or recreation. Mount Shasta in California, Devil's Tower in Wyoming and Bear Butte in South Dakota are all sites where vacationing hikers and rock climbers – and devotees of New Age practices – demand access to places held sacred by indigenous communities.

The trans-generational is enacted in a unique way by each traveller even if thousands or millions have preceded him or her on this path or in coming to this site, and repeat pilgrims are fully aware of the differences among each of their treks and arrivals, and savour that qualified glimpse of spiritual solidarity. American exceptionalism regularly exempts itself from traditional 'Old World' modes of self expression and rarely undertakes the travelling pilgrimages so heavily inscribed on the local, historical landscapes of medieval Europe. Yet Americans took what they perceived as a blank canvass to sketch a history of their mythic travel across new territories and eagerly established what they only dimly intended as future sites of pilgrimage, utopian foundations for religious goals. Later generations of Americans recognized that their shared landscapes provided them with wondrous portals to Nature as a non-sectarian stand-in for God. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, arguably the most famous speech in American history, is in essence the inauguration and consecration of a site ready made for pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage both sacred and secular is deeply ingrained in the American myth, on the contemporary landscape, and in cultural practices as varied as visits to cemeteries and amusement parks. In Washington DC our shrines of democracy crowd each other for space on the National Mall and many of those sites announce their sacred character in the most obvious of ways: arguably, the most blatantly temple-like structure in Washington is not the National Cathedral but the National Archives where the Constitution and Declaration of Independence are honoured as relics of living power which justify the city-reliquary which shelters them. Despite being something of newcomers to examining its history as one of interwoven pilgrimages, both religious and secular, travel for transformation – and for affirmation of a self-renewing national identity – contributes one of the most frequent cultural practices that allow American citizens to immerse themselves in their national myth.