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# Walden Pond and the performative touristic gaze

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WALDEN POND AND THE PERFORMATIVE TOURISTIC GAZE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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in

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

This is an ethnographic study of tourism at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. I argue that Walden Pond operates as a site that creates tensions among visitors due to the ways that time has transformed the once serene landscape into an overcrowded swimming pool. These tensions, however, fall under the expectation that the State Reservation of Massachusetts (re)creates Thoreau's Walden as suggested in his discourse, but the performance of history is enacted through the creation of meaning among visitors engaging in a dialogue that references the past, talking about a space that has cultural significance.

Exploring the touristic experience and the rhetorical performance of Walden Pond as a sublime body of nature, I wanted to see how the performance of tourism was manifesting itself in the gaze of tourists and what they could teach us about tourism. My technique involved a process of close observation, learning about people's lives, and constructively listening to their perspectives. I first offer an introduction to my study in the first chapter, and then owing the history of Walden Pond to the second chapter in order to provide a context for the social evolution of the site into the twenty-first century. In chapter three I then discuss the tour itself and markers of the pond, including the Thoreau house replica, fence, signs, the embodiment of walking, and the actual house site. Chapter 4 examines the visitors' perspectives on: Walden Pond as a sacred location, the house site, a place of nature, and authenticity. By understanding Walden Pond as a representation of itself and as a space to talk about the past, we begin to see less problems, dissatisfaction, and ambivalence that are connected to all the reasons that I list throughout the study, and more performances of history unfolding at the tourist attraction.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose of the Study**

“There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon,” –said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger pastures. Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me (Thoreau, *Walden* 87).

The idealization of nature has produced a longstanding history of individuals seeking to escape urbanized environments. From the local park to the Grand Canyon, there has been a very high demand for the visitation of natural landscapes. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century societies became increasingly urbanized as more people moved away from rural areas and into cities. The contrasts between the countryside and the city were growing stronger. The opportunities to explore such landscapes became more widespread, as time paved the way for new roads through mountain regions and forests (Franklin 215). Travelers soon realized that the natural sublime created an embodied, spiritual awakening. The growth of nature consumerism, however, was a very slow process. Not until the 1980s did the influx of countryside visitors begin to take root. This countryside appeal was connected to what Urry calls the “romantic gaze” where there is an “emphasis on solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze” (45). While the gaze is a modern one, the spectacle of the countryside has become thematic in popular culture. For Urry, “the attractions of the countryside derive in part from the disillusionment with the elements of the modern, particularly with the attempt to effect wholesale reconstruction of towns and cities in the

postwar period” (97). The realization is that the spectacle of the countryside (as opposed to its use) has created a postmodern sensibility. Such a spectacle usually includes a pre-packaged, sanitized environment as part of producing an ideal image of rural living for visitors.

Thoreau’s claim that “There are none happy but those who enjoy a vast horizon,” certainly rings true, but as he further emphasizes, time and place *do* change. Perhaps that is why so many people have nostalgia for the past. Vacating to places that seem to make time stand still and that suggest a changeless utopia has become a common thread, especially in heritage tourism, which involves sites that serve to illuminate an appreciation for the past. Walden Pond is one of these tourist locations. In fact, many tourists visit Walden in pursuit of the very thing that Thoreau talks about in the above quotation. They seek a vast horizon, acknowledging that time and place do change, and they are pulled “nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history” that allure them the most. Indeed, Walden Pond represents an era in history, but we must consider how the representation and commodification of Walden *as* an era has also changed it.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Walden Pond as a tourist site. It is particularly interested in the touristic experience and the rhetorical performance of Walden Pond as a sublime body of nature which brings in 700,000 visitors annually. This study analyzes the rhetoric of the tour and the site itself, considering what tourism theory and research may tell us about Walden. In the current chapter, I offer a brief description of the park and explain the method of analysis for this study, namely, ethnography. I then explain the significance of conducting the study. In Chapter 2, I offer a history of Walden Pond to establish the different ways in which time has changed the area, including the inception of the pond, Thoreau’s time

there, and how his best-known work, *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, led to an overwhelming response of visitors and fans for over a hundred years. Chapter 3 is based on the field study that I conducted where I explore the markers at Walden and the rhetorical performance of the State Reservation tour. Chapter 4 extends the fieldwork further as it examines the performances of visitors and their perspectives on the site. In the final chapter, I emphasize the significance of the study as a whole and offer the results of my interpretative process and how these various elements intertwine with one another.

### **Subject of the Study**

Walden Pond is located near Concord, Massachusetts, and is now a national landmark. In order for a location to receive this designation it must possess national historical significance, and because Walden is considered to be worthy of remembrance by the population of the United States, national authorities have officially marked and protected the area accordingly.

The 102' deep pond was formed by retreating glaciers 10,000-12,000 years ago. It is 1.7 miles around and has an area of 61 acres. Along with the body of water and the surrounding wooded environment, the pond's features include two beach areas, the main beach and the Red Cross Beach. At the main beach, there is a large structure that holds bathrooms for visitors. In 1845, transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau built a cabin on the shores of the pond and lived there for two years, two months, and two days. While living at Walden, he wrote his most famous work, *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, which became one of the best known non-fiction books written by an American. His literary style and philosophical discourse quickly turned the area into an extremely popular visitation site. The popularity of the site has resulted in 700,000 annual visitors from all over the world to explore

the natural landscape, inspired by Thoreau's text, or simply to delight in its value as a recreational park, with frequent joggers, swimmers, and visitors who picnic there on a regular basis (Maynard 4).

The pond is considered a historic preservation site and officials therefore keep its natural resources safeguarded. Only a certain number of people are allowed in the area at one time, and officials prohibit dogs, bicycles, and barbecue grills as part of their preservation efforts. There is a gated parking lot across the street from the pond, where visitors pay a small fee to enter the park. Near the parking lot is a replica of Thoreau's cabin, an attraction that visitors have the opportunity to observe before they walk across the street and trail through the pond's surrounding paths. Visitors can opt to sign up for guided walking tours as a chance to learn more about Walden Pond as a historic site and the places surrounding it where Thoreau spent his time. There is a gift shop located near the beach area where visitors can purchase information booklets, maps, videos, and other souvenirs.

## **Method**

This project is primarily interested in the use of a qualitative research method which provides a descriptive and interpretative account of human societies. I therefore have relied on ethnographic techniques in my gathering of data, interpretation, and reportage. A close study of the tourists at Walden Pond must account for the experience that they have, influenced by their consciousness, the environment, and the commercialization of the site. Ethnography is one of the most commonly used methods in tourism research, because it helps target the reasons why people engage in tourism and how the tourism industry caters to the demands of tourists. Through close field observation of socio-cultural phenomena, ethnography focuses on the sociology of meaning. As Savage points out, "Most ethnographers today would agree



that the term ethnography can be applied to any small scale research that is carried out in everyday settings; uses several methods; evolves in design through the study; and focuses on the meaning of individuals' actions and explanations rather than their quantification" (1400). The understanding and representation of experience shapes the method, as the researcher situates himself within an interactive cultural context.

Ethnographic fieldwork requires a subjective process of description and observation that relies on the personal interactions with the individuals being researched and therefore leaves room for a multitude of interpretations. The results of the study are heavily contingent upon the experiences of others which are filtered through their own expressions, making them constructed. Ethnographers acknowledge the partiality of the research process due to the fact that "everyone censors or represses, or may not be fully aware of or able to articulate, certain aspects of what has been experienced" (Bruner, Introduction, 5). The dilemma rests in the strength of expression. In an artistic sort of way, inviting subjects to have a voice requires an invitation toward expression that is beyond a short and impersonal interview. Introducing myself to the tourists and capturing their perceptions took time and respect for those in question. Like many anthropologists and ethnographers, examining a diversity of individuals allowed me to explore multiple perspectives on experience as it occurs through human society and culture in the frame of the tourist site. I do not try to confirm or disconfirm Thoreau's experience based on my own or those that I interviewed. As awestruck as I was naturally, I still knew that Thoreau was using a philosophical discourse. I did not try to compare our experience with Thoreau's. I was more interested in how the experiences of others based on their interest in Thoreau's text were shaped and expressed in response to what the Walden of today had to offer.

The term ethnography literally means “to describe people,” however the process of description must also set the scene in some detail. The meaning making process is facilitated by offering an account of the location such that the report leaves little room for ambiguity. Consequently, I visited Walden Pond three times during my stay in Concord taking the guided tour once each day and remaining at the park for six hours throughout each day to capture not only the particularities of the park, but also to give myself ample time to gather data, closely study the visitors, and interview them. My technique involved a process of close observation, watching the tourists’ behavior and their responses to the ways in which the site was speaking to them. I often took the role of a bystander minding my own business, being especially careful not to be intrusive. I would reserve other times for a more direct interaction with the visitors, assuming a casual disposition. On the tour I took advantage of the video camera that I had with me by filming the tour. I did not film interactions I had with subjects, however. Instead, I spoke with them about their thoughts on Walden Pond and, when I had a private moment, jotted down their contributions. The tour itself allowed a more direct connection with the other visitors, because we were all a part of a group. I did benefit from other areas of the pond outside the tour, however, such as the different coves, the main beach area, the parking lot, and Red Cross Beach. In addition to my own historical research of Walden Pond, I also prompted the interpreter by asking him questions that appeared to have otherwise remained a mystery during the tour.

The methodology is concerned with learning about people’s lives and constructively listening to their own perspectives. What is important here is the notion that learning from others can result in new inferences about society and culture from the smaller nuances to the wider scope of things. Participant observation is the key ethnographic technique and is

notably characteristic of the practice. Accessing a group is essential in order to expect fruitful results. I knew that an entrance into a gated national landmark would promise a very particular group of people, especially because of the collective reasons that people congregate there. Also, narrowing the group to a pack of tourists following an interpreter around the park was an ideal placement. I was lucky enough to blend into a setting without any concerns about adaptability.

For ethical reasons, I was particularly concerned about the covertness of my research. I wanted to be sure that the subjects were not left in the dark regarding my motives for asking them questions. At the same time, I was concerned about the ways in which disclosure might influence the ways in which the interactions unfolded. I solved this problem by mentioning to them briefly that I was conducting field observations for a study, but quickly allowed the flow of conversation to remain smooth and natural. While they consented to the interview and were well informed of the objective of my study, I wanted to make sure that they remained as comfortable as possible and assumed that their experiences at Walden were not being dictated by the interviews or vice-versa. As O'Reilly points out, "gaining access will usually involve explaining about our research overtly and then settling into a semi-overt role, where participants know what we are doing but do not always have it in the forefront of their minds" (87).

One of the challenges of this study was the balance between participation and observation. I understood that in order to extract as much material as possible, I needed to be a part of the activity as much as an outsider. I learned very quickly that in order to gain access I needed to immerse myself in the group and live the reality that the tour evoked, yet also not allow myself to miss important opportunities to collect data from the position of an

observer. As a result, I put forth a particular effort to create a balance where the participants felt comfortable with my presence and felt that I was just as much a part of their Walden Pond as them, while taking mental and actual notes of things and leaving space between us. For O'Reilly, "Arguably, the objective part of participant observation is the observation part. If you are simply being there, hanging around, taking part, you are no more than a participant (as we all are in our daily lives), but as a participant observer you are someone who is observing as well as taking part" (97). Taking part also meant engaging in dialogue with the subjects. I was aware of the need to establish trust and rapport in order to expect sincere conversations to take place, even if I was interested in a simple answer to questions that were at the forefront of my mind.

Since I inferred that many Thoreau fans were interested in the transcendental experience that they expected from Walden Pond, I was concerned with how its aesthetic and connotative implications had impacted them (if at all). I depended on the venue of expression in order to make sense of their experience and understood that it was my job to do the interpreting. In the third chapter, I consequently examine the experience of tourists at Walden Pond through the interviews that I conducted. The performativity of their contributions allowed questions to be answered considering their time in the twenty-first century Walden, to what degree the site was sacred to them, their knowledge of *Life in the Woods* (or lack thereof) and its influence on their time there, the rhetoric of the house site, the appeal to nature, and the question of authenticity. Since researchers must also find ways to interpret these expressions, however, and then articulate their own interpretations through expression, they must go through a series of steps to achieve this. I found ways to overcome the limitations of individual experience in order to study the culture at Walden Pond through

maintaining a precise representation of what had occurred while still acknowledging the partiality of the study.

The interpretative process included the acknowledgement that I was constructing the observations that became part of my data. My participation in the social interactions clearly made the study a subjective one, and I anticipated that subjectivity would drive the research process. I realized quickly that reflexivity would be an important issue in order to gauge my interpretation. This turning back on oneself led to the realization that postmodernist critiques should be viewed as an opportunity to utilize creative research methods to create meaning, instead of a hindrance. That is, to “encourage incorporation of varying standpoints, exposure of the intellectual tyranny of meta-narratives and recognition of authority that inheres in the authorial voice...” (Davies 5).

The elaborate collection of data left me initially overwhelmed as I was faced with an extensive amount of potentially useful information. I was interested in walking away with as much raw material as possible, gathering notes about conversations, the tour guide’s narrative, the structure of the park, videos, and more. Gathering the information and storing it was almost as challenging as the more complex observations I was trying to make. I found myself looking at an array of variables and then finally considering how I was going to tell my own story. During the pre-development stage of this document, I was confident that I had accomplished a thorough descriptive account of what I had heard and seen. The next step involved sorting through and exploring what I had gathered. I examined the contemporary environmental changes and social perspectives in contrast to the historical narratives of the site to contextualize meaning. These changes allowed me to then see the ways that the State Reservation has framed the area for tourism and how it has influenced the tourists. Weaving

together the environment, the tour, and the tourists' contributions with the sociology of tourism created a picture from these puzzle pieces. I patiently went through this process and began to see new discoveries unfold and realizations being made. I understood that preparing what I had discovered in a way that was presentable to others while conducting an analysis of the raw material would be the key to my success. After sorting out what I had, I looked at the outline I had created before I took the trip that included the possible questions I might ask and the particular data I was looking for. It involved concerns regarding the tourists' inspiration to visit Walden, nature tourism's psychological effects on people, the presence (or absence) of authenticity at a tourist site, the (dis)satisfaction of their experience, and the performance of tourism at a heritage site that is intimately tied to Transcendentalism (which itself is a touristic practice). This outline was especially helpful as I was connecting my notes that I recorded while at Walden Pond with the direction that I was leaning toward.

### **Significance**

My motivation for this study or central idea is that, without a doubt, studying Walden Pond as a tourist site is a significant and very unique contribution to scholarship in its relation to tourism, communication and performance studies. In what follows I articulate the ways that this study achieves such contributions. Tracing Walden Pond and Thoreau through the ages would offer many resources on Thoreau and Walden Pond's cultural and social impacts on society. Unfortunately most resources carry more biographical information on Thoreau and less on Walden Pond itself. In fact, there is only one document on the pond that traces its social popularity through time.

On a very general level, one of the ways the anthropological and ethnographic approach itself to Walden Pond as a tourist site will contribute to knowledge is through

interpretative processes which suggest the subjective sense-making of the study as the personal interactions and dialogue collected are unique to this study alone. In my fieldwork, I have trusted my own sense-making to understand and articulate the reality of a very particular group of people. Observations were made that considered not Walden Pond as a tourist site in its geographic ornamentation, but rather the people there and submergence of their experience as a sacred site, investigating how the site interpellates them. Consequently, this study will call attention to a social situation captured in time at a very unique place.

No one has done a study of Walden Pond as a tourist site through the lens of communication and performance. Individuals who come to see Walden Pond have carried their knowledge in scholarship of the role it has played across so many different areas: Thoreau's experience there, literary and historical movements, geographic features, a site of pilgrimage (in the traditional sense), and its ecological changes. The visitors' gazes to Walden are filtered through some or all of these areas and such pre-knowledge is hugely influential to their experience at a location in Massachusetts that is otherwise just an aesthetic formation of nature. These features of Walden Pond (aside from literature on Walden Pond as a site of pilgrimage) that much research has concentrated on over the past hundred years are extremely important in understanding Walden Pond as a location, but offer little innovative studies from an anthropological point of view, nor does such existing research unveil new understandings of nature and culture through the performance of tourism. Studies on Walden Pond as a site of pilgrimage concentrate on why people are so interested in reliving Thoreau's experiment, but do not situate their study so that it highlights tourism theory in a performative framework.

This study traces Walden Pond's social, cultural, and literary influences, acknowledging efforts by scholars who have written on the subject as it utilizes these

resources to build on the central focus of this study. The first history of Walden Pond was written in 2004 by Barksdale Maynard entitled, *Walden Pond: A History*, which suggests, because of its recent publication, tells us that there are very few historical publications on the landmark. The social, cultural and literary influences will be significant in establishing a perspective for individuals and their motivation for visiting the site, yet since these are important *historical* influences, the majority of this study will differ from the angle of Maynard's book in that we will be looking at Walden Pond from a less "historical" and more touristic/performative point of view. "History," in other words, is important to this study as a pretext for understanding how visitors interpret the site and for understanding their motives for visiting it. Although Maynard does not examine the embodied nature of tourism as this study does, he offers a tour through history of Walden Pond capturing its significance through the above mentioned influences, and his work provides a framework for the impact Walden Pond has had on the primary individuals that the site has interested and therefore will be a vital resource.

Studying Walden Pond as a tourist site is warranted because it and neighboring Concord are very popular tourist destinations. Buell argues that Concord is "America's most sacred literary spot" (Thoreauvian Pilgrimage 175). Concord had formerly accomplished and nevertheless proceeds at the present moment to be one of the most toured and the most frequently visited sacred locations. This knowledge brings tourists to an emotional level that epitomizes the motivations for travel, and renders them eager to be consumed by its offerings on a very visceral level. Journeys to what is accepted to be the ultimate place for the separation from the selfishness and corruption that contemporary society has built upon itself asserts that, although tourism is very much like pilgrimage and that individuals have traveled



many places before, their visit to Walden Pond would be their first *real* pilgrimage. Lawrence Buell, in “The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage: The Structure of an American Cult,” offers fruitful considerations of Walden Pond and its surrounding area as a pilgrimage site, which is an important connection to tourism. Buell discusses John Muir, a famous nineteenth century writer and naturalist, who went to Concord in 1893 under the command of his editor, Robert Underwood Johnson, and had offered an account of his visit. Buell’s review of Muir’s testimony shows that “although the Concord visit started as a forced excursion, it clearly became a pilgrimage in a deeply meaningful sense” (177). The distinctiveness of Muir’s report in the concern with consecration is particularly ostensible of Walden Pond itself.

One might argue that the sacred has changed to varying degrees at Walden Pond although there is difficulty in determining the changes on the social-cultural level that Walden Pond underwent in the 48 years between Thoreau’s experiment and Muir’s visit. It does seem striking that before the twentieth century had even approached, a visitor remarked, “You cannot get away from the Walden Fourth-of-July Picnic feeling,” just two years after Muir, “not even in Thoreau’s own cove,” where “great beams” projected out into the water where once a bath-house stood” (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 180). On the other hand, the 1854 publication of *Walden* probably popularized the site in enough time for society to, ironically, inverse the peaceful land of purity by its own intrusion. This conflict in authenticity, however, makes Walden Pond very ripe for tourism study because of debates regarding the authenticity question by notable scholars. Remarks about the experience individuals have at Walden Pond and their contested exigencies create even a greater curiosity about Walden Pond and how their experience there constitutes their visionary impulses. As much as those who have held the opinion that Walden Pond is not what it used to be and suggest that this

particular site of nature should have its own sacred criteria, such energies have been lost in time. On the other hand, others argue that Walden Pond's State Reservation does a remarkable job at maintaining the sacred atmosphere despite the popularity of the site over the last century. No doubt about it, there has been an ongoing, commercialized tourist market for Walden Pond for many years, and "even in 1979" another visitor suggested that, "the place seems pretty much as it must have been when Thoreau quit the cabin and went back to Concord" (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 181). This impression might seem to stem more from the bias of Thoreau fans, but a simple pilgrimage to the site will prove that, aside from the scattered visitors eating sandwiches and a few joggers, a delightful introspection inside the property may convince you that it *is* the same. In other words, I would offer that this bears witness more to the observer's inclination to visualize the park through the performative gaze of Thoreau rather than the indisputable condition of Walden at the time of inspection. Most assuredly, as Buell notes, "with the rise in Thoreau's prestige came an increasing tendency to envisage Concord as an oasis of pastoral felicity and Walden as its spiritual center" (182). There is a reason however, that Thoreau chose to spend his time at Walden Pond before he made it popular himself. Franklin reminds us that "Western forms of tourism and travel have a long track record of visiting areas of 'natural beauty'; of beautiful and 'unspoilt natural landscapes' and this is considerable as these places of nature, away from organized society provide us with a sense of the sublimity" (214).

From a grander scale, the changes that have affected Walden Pond are not due solely to Thoreau's influence and popularity. Concord was from the beginning of the Transcendentalist movement a location to which literary pioneers gravitated in order to escape the inner city to discover comfort in the cherished brushwood of the area. The development

of Thoreau's watering hole as an attraction for pilgrims was a magnification of a "liminoid structure extant from the time Margaret Fuller started visiting the Emersons in the 1830s" at a time prior to Thoreau's prominence (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 183). Further, although the repercussions of the post-Civil War era had arguably resulted in philosophical shift as literary scholars began to lose sight of Transcendentalism, Concord was a place where individuals sought refuge from the chaos that society had recently undergone. As a result, in comments about Walden Pond from the corresponding era, we discover two differing reports. First, that Walden, owing to the exaltation of Walden and accessibility via the Boston Fitchburg Railroad, had emerged as a recreational facility where people would go to relax and have family gatherings (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 184). Beyond doubt, Walden was quickly losing its hallmark as an acceptable spot to assemble a hermitage. In contrast, reporters contended that it certainly was not a commonplace location, but absolutely as unique and charismatic as Thoreau himself had insisted: "'a beautiful lakelet,' 'a picture of delight,' a body of water exceptionally 'Mediterranean in its kaleidoscopic tints,' etc. Walden was even being converted from Thoreau's sacred quarter into the linguistic alliance's sacred spot: Tourists who know the dreamer of Walden Pond look upon it as a shrine" (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 184). The spiritual intimacy assumed in the location of Thoreau's experiment is of greater value than even the above attributions or a vacation to Walden itself (Buell, 185).

Thoreau's Walden has become the icon for the escape from civilization and to "a simpler state of existence" for the purpose of a spiritual endeavor. Its effect on people, however, is arguably rooted less in Thoreau and more from the versions of its power dating back to over two-thousand years, "in both western and oriental culture, and had begun to take on new authority from the time New England settlement began to be conceived as an errand

into the wilderness” (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 188). The tension between these reports makes Walden Pond an incredibly diverse landmark for many different individuals and has evolved into bearing a collage of values across a number of perspectives. The international gathering of visitors to Walden Pond offers an intercultural opportunity of communicative exchanges. It succeeds at linking people together and bridging differences through the discourse of Henry David Thoreau, creating not just relationships between people and places but also a dialogue about these relationships, highlighting the importance of tourism in communication studies.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF WALDEN POND

In 1821, when Henry David Thoreau was four years old, he was walking with his family through the woods for a picnic. Little did he know that he would eventually turn this wooded area into one of the most visited tourist attractions in the world or that he would be responsible for writing one of the best known non-fiction books published in the past two-hundred years about it, *Walden; or Life in the Woods*. The wooded area that Henry journeyed through on that crisp morning of 1821 exhibited a massive pond, 1.7 miles around, that is known as Walden Pond. Speaking of his early childhood interest in Walden, Thoreau stated “that woodland vision for a long time made the drapery of my dreams. That sweet solitude my spirit seemed so eagerly to require that I might have room to entertain my thronging guests, and that speaking silence that my ears might distinguish the significant sounds” (*Journal* 2:174). A kettle that was formed as the result of melting ice left from a glacier that had escaped 15,000 years ago, Walden Pond has evolved naturally and socio-culturally over a very long period of time.

In this chapter, I will concentrate on the environmental and socio-cultural development of the area. I aim to put the pond in a historical context for readers who may be unfamiliar with it, and also to illustrate what it has become over the past 150 years partly as a result of Thoreau’s influence. By embarking on a chronological journey of Walden, perhaps the context of my ethnographic study will be seen with greater clarity. Moreover, the contrast between the Walden Pond of today and the Walden Pond of yesterday was one of the popular

subjects during my visit, and so it is appropriate to include this historical background for that reason, as well.

The evolution from a retreating glacier to a park that attracts over seven-hundred thousand visitors annually grew out of a century-long sequence of events that must be taken into account in order to understand its historical significance. Native Americans, according to modern archaeology, appear to have been present “as early as eight thousand years ago” and “camped for a few nights on sandy rises in Walden Woods, chipping stone tools” (Maynard 16). Such an account, along with other signs of habitation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reveal a site populated and frequented by human life before Thoreau had the chance to claim it his own. The town of Concord, Massachusetts, which was founded much earlier than Thoreau’s birth, discovered that Walden Pond could be a resource for wood and other natural commodities (Maynard 17).

As much as Walden provided economic benefit to the town of Concord, residents have testified that the “flow-through lake” had attracted more than wood choppers during times prior to Thoreau’s inhabitation. The pitch pine and white oak retreat was utilized for recreational purposes and “at all seasons of the year by hunters, sportsmen, boys, and landowners” as well for at least half a century before Thoreau (Maynard 24). These earlier occupants had no idea, however, that an experiment was about to take place at Walden Pond, or that the experiment would become one of the most famous in all of history.

As the signs of a more intellectual dwelling were still being developed, Walden, because of its proximity to Concord, had always been ripe for inquisitive strolls by the residents and literary scholars of the town. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau’s mentor and friend, had quickly decided that Walden Pond was a treasured place for his “meditative

strolls” (Maynard 31). Born in Boston, Emerson moved to Concord in 1835 and found that Walden Pond was a mere thirty minute walk from his house on the Cambridge Turnpike. The convenient distance led to his discovery of the “little pond in the bosom of the hills” (Emerson, *Journals* 5:109). Such a discovery proved to be ideal for Emerson, because he would walk to the area frequently, more for a spiritual connection rather than an exercise of the body.

While Emerson’s active focus on the woods and influence on the intellectual culture of Concord were just beginning to take root, Bostonians were increasingly becoming aware of the novelty that nature and extensions away from the inner city had offered them especially during those emerging rises in recreational time and American affluence (Maynard 34). A couple of years had passed in Concord, and Emerson struggled to visit Walden Pond on a regular basis as he became bombarded with responsibilities as a professor at Harvard. Nonetheless, it was during this year (1837) that he had first crossed paths with Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau had looked up to Emerson and their cohesion became so intense that Henry “had fallen deeply under Emerson’s sway, unconsciously imitating the older man to the point that the sound of their voices in conversation could hardly be distinguished” (Maynard 35). As Thoreau and Emerson continued to spend more time keeping journals and discussing Transcendentalism, Walden Pond earned a designation as the focal point for sacred pilgrimages among the crowd of intellectuals who gathered in Emerson’s sitting room. Their appreciation and humility toward Walden Woods had created a significant rapport between them, and Emerson’s influence was equipping the intellectual circle, particularly Thoreau, to become active saunterers of nature, in the highest and most elite sense.

Emerson's visionary impulses were clearly established in the minds of his followers, and his drive led them to adopt his highly inspirational view of nature. Transcendentalist and husband of an illiterate flax farmer, Bronson Alcott met Emerson in the late 1830's and was very impressed with his guidance. In his journals, Alcott explains that his time with Emerson had "done me good. . . . He lives to see and write. He looks abroad on Nature and life and sketches their features with his pen. He sits in the theatre of Nature and draws the players and scenes. He is an observer, an eye, an ear, a pen" (Alcott 128). Because Emerson did not document his frequent visits to Walden Woods, Alcott not only provided a more accurate account of Emerson's ritualistic endeavors, but revealed the importance and centrality of Walden Woods as a site of pilgrimage for him.

In 1840, Emerson's association to Walden had facilitated an intense eagerness to spend time there and Emerson found it challenging to articulate. Although it would be nearly five years before Thoreau would begin his two year undertaking, he appeared to be the transcendentalist who most fully realized the implications of Emerson's views and, coincidentally, projected the experiment that Emerson so desperately wanted to fulfill, but could not. In the meantime, Thoreau and his brother John were employed in Concord, and conveniently accessed Walden with their colleagues so that they might conduct a "running lesson in Botany, Geology, Natural History, & c, at Walden, Fairhaven, the boiling springs" (Maynard 42). Inviting academics to Walden Woods led Thoreau to encourage his family to join him as well. The experiences compelled him to document his observations and served as a ground zero narrative for the themes that would be revealed in *Walden*.

The common misconception that seems to currently exist about Walden Pond is that Thoreau's primary reason for living at Walden Pond was solitude and to be a hermit. The



fantasy of the experiment to live at Walden Pond, however, must be understood in the context of Thoreau's intentions and his deeper reasoning. Sixty-three years before Thoreau had pursued the idea, William Gilpin introduced the modern picturesque, an English aesthetic. The *Home Book of the Picturesque* became one of the featured "Putnam coffee-table" books that had been popularized during the 1850's, consisting of a collection of previous works from various artists and scholars (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 408). Buell notes that although he "never contributed to nor, as far as we know, looked at this volume. . . . It is a major ingredient of the Thoreauvian intertext nonetheless. Both it and Thoreau are obsessed with how land is seen aesthetically: as landscape, as scenery" (409). It is in this larger frame that Thoreau's prospective endeavor must be understood. Therefore, attention to landscape aesthetics was of greater interest to Thoreau than living in complete independence. In fact, there were a number of nearby locations that he explored that "would have given him considerably more solitude than he had at Walden..." (Maynard 47). His admiration for solitude was great, though he also appreciated guests on occasion, as is clearly evident in *Walden*.

Although there is no dispute about Emerson's role as mentor, Thoreau's *Walden* exhibits a closer and more direct connection to Emerson than one might presuppose. The themes that appear in *Walden* have only recently been concretely traced to Emerson. Emerson's lectures, given two years prior to Thoreau's settlement at Walden Pond, reveal the overlapping ones that are evident in Thoreau's work (Maynard 51). It was during this time (around 1843) that Walden Pond was not only soaking up the acclaim of the transcendentalists, but also undergoing a pivotal change. The beginning of the Fitchburg railroad saw technological and economic change and the disruption of paradise and serenity

that appeared to be so evident at Walden Pond before Thoreau even had a chance to settle in. Emerson, however, had great faith in the outcome though he knew its potential threat, “fear haunts the building railroad but it will be <power> American power & beauty, when it is done. And these peaceful shovels are better, dull as they are, than pikes in the hands of these Kernes” (*Journals* 9: 23). His optimism seemed to be grounded in the more important picturesque contribution that the railroad had provided and therefore was not discouraged about its intrusion (*Journals* 9: 7).

Environmentally, the Fitchburg railroad development was creating hazards that gave birth to the many discomforts of Walden Pond, including noise pollution, easier access for people, and littering on the account of railroad workers. The number of Irish workers occupying the site was the first time that Walden Pond saw such a large quantity of visitors and, as Maynard points out, “their numbers hinted at the great unruly crowds of visitors to come in a later era” (Maynard 53).

The placement of the railroad brought even greater challenges than those limited to construction. Traveling a mile every 105 seconds, their first run was in the summer of 1844 and the trains proved to be pretentious displays of defilement along with being accountable for consistent damage to the natural forestry as “flying sparks would routinely ignite fires along the right-of-way” (Maynard 54).

Convenient for many traveling from Boston to Fitchburg, the refuge of Walden Pond, still, was overwhelmed by the locomotive transit system. Despite the primary picturesque interest of the woods and landscape, Thoreau was especially concerned about the effect the railroad was having on the mystique of Walden. What’s more, his thoughts on moving to Walden Pond were distracted by the work he invested in writing his first book, working as a

tutor, working in a pencil factory, and helping his family build a house in Concord village. Thoreau's distractions and time away from Walden Woods allowed him to realize through reflective distance the appeal the area had for him, while equipping him to undergo it (Maynard 56).

In October of 1844, Emerson was casually strolling through the woods of Walden and the time was finally ripe for Thoreau to fulfill his dream. Thoreau's time spent away prepared him psychologically (particularly because he helped build a house), but he also needed practical accessibility and property accommodations. A few men were conversing with Emerson explaining that they had specifically come "to sell & to buy a field" and offered him a price of "eleven acres for \$8.10 per acre" (Emerson, *Journals* 3: 262). Although he had no particular reason to purchase the lot, he enthusiastically urged Thoreau to live there (Maynard 61). The hut would soon become a reality on the Wyman Lot overlooking the beautiful shore.

Eight months later, the construction of the hut was underway. We learn from George and Burrill Curtis that "one pleasant summer afternoon a small party of us helped him raise it--a bit of life as Arcadian as any at Brook Farm" (Cooke 95). Building the 6' X 6' shanty would allow Thoreau to write his masterpiece without distractions while reflecting on nature. Emerson understood that the hut was an ideal structure located at a very particular place in the woods that would allow Thoreau to pursue, enact, and live the transcendental archetype. Now that Thoreau had his house, his experiment began. For Charles Anderson, arguing that the details of Walden Pond during Thoreau's stay there are obscure and that it is difficult to track the true account, "*Walden* keeps secrets" (39). One thing is for certain: he knew that he would experience particularly challenging weather conditions when the winter came, and that he would have to work very hard to stay warm. He prepared timber from trees behind the house

by cutting them down with an axe that is believed to have been borrowed from Alcott (Maynard 67).

Neither Walden Pond nor Thoreau was completely isolated when he was living there. On the one hand, his knowledge of the railroad that handicapped the picturesque features of Walden Pond *did* discourage him, but on another the tracks provided a pathway to civilization, which he admired. It is important to realize that Thoreau was part of a larger group of writers who understood that withdrawing from society should be temporary. Even the hut was designed in a temporary, slapdash sort of way. Consequently, Thoreau was much more interested in the delights of both company and solitude, although many folks have trouble coming to terms with his balance. Maynard points out that “to see Thoreau’s sojourn in the context of this larger rustic-retirement phenomenon helps solve problems that have long troubled readers, including the apparent hypocrisy of the ‘solitary’ author’s frequent trips to the village” (68). The scholar’s visits to Concord were more frequent than many individuals presume, and his house site is located in an explicitly open area of the pond, asserting the public nature of the man. Thoreau practiced, accomplished, and embarked on a number of physical and introspective activities during his stay, though his second year was lighter, spending a great deal of time in Concord. And while his reasons for leaving at the particular time that he did are unknown, he packed up and left on September 6, 1847.

His departure from Walden was limited insofar as he discontinued his overnight stays. He was very aware that his return would be soon, perhaps the next morning. Emerson arranged a transaction with Hugh Whelan, his gardener, to rent the Wyman Lot to him with the option to remove the house. Whelan, however, impoverished, left town “without a penny in his pocket” (Harding, *Correspondence* 203). The aftermath of Thoreau’s experiment took

on a progression of events that gave birth to the fame and, in some sense, demise of Walden Pond.

In the six years after Thoreau quit the cabin, Walden Pond experienced only minor changes. Notably, trains regularly passed through Concord along the Fitchburg Railroad and the engines emitted sparks onto the woodlot. Fredrick Hayden and James Baker, two farm workers, reported a fire to Thoreau that they had witnessed and the damage to the trees gradually took a toll on Walden Pond (Emerson, *Journals* 4: 110). *Walden* was not published yet, and Thoreau was still actively dedicated to the area. Just two years after his last day of residency at the pond, he conducted a lecture for the Concord Lyceum entitled, “White Beans & Walden Pond.”

In the summer of 1849, Concord underwent extreme heat temperatures that the town had not seen in over a quarter of a century. The blistering heat caused several Irish workers to collapse and die as they were working on the Fitchburg railroad. Instinctively, the survivors took a break from working and sought refuge (Harding, *Correspondence* 246). Nonetheless, Thoreau extended his walks in the sweltering heat. As the fall came around, he enriched his life by walking longer and farther out to new ponds and hills. Thoreau wrote to H.G.O. Blake, “I cannot help feeling that of all the human inhabitants of nature hereabouts, only we two have leisure to admire and enjoy our inheritance” (*Correspondence* 251). The psychological and physical rewards were comprehensive, and with Ellery Channing’s move closer to Thoreau’s home, Channing could saunter with Henry with greater convenience, “pioneering a new approach to the out-of-doors” (Maynard 99). The company that Thoreau often had beside him along with his venturing out beyond Walden Woods are significant in order to understand the reality of his daily life.

In the winter of 1851, Walden Pond lost many of its forests because of workmen hired by George Heywood, which seriously affected the beautiful kettle hole. Thoreau was very upset about the destruction, and the eastern and northern shores were becoming more open as time passed. The following January, the wood chopping continued and Henry struggled to come to terms with it. The axe men even disturbed the fisherman “because of the woodcutters felling trees onto the ice” (Maynard 108). Henry, optimistic as he usually was, attempted to view the project more positively than he originally had, “the destruction of Walden’s forests ironically stimulated his interest in the place by creating a sweeping view . . . and by triggering a cycle of plant succession that he would follow intently” (Maynard 108).

Walden Pond remained fairly stable for the next few years, and Emerson and Thoreau were walking independently because they lived too far apart. The geographic distance was not the sole cause, however. Henry began to explore nature on a much more literal and horticultural sort of way, while Emerson was staying faithful to poetry and literary studies. Thoreau became so engulfed in sauntering and pond exploring that he procrastinated from working steadily to publish. Emerson struggled to accept this, but the publication of *Walden*, in fact, was accomplished not long after Thoreau’s drifting interests had begun. During the spring of 1854, Thoreau finished his seventh draft of *Walden*. Boston’s Ticknor and Fields published the book later that year with two thousand copies (Maynard 117).

The publication of *Walden* excited many and would become the most compelling event of Thoreau’s life. Contrary to popular belief, the masterpiece was not only taken from journals that Thoreau had written while he was living at Walden Pond, but parts of it were written at different times, reworked, and modified after he had moved back to the town. Although the book was initially a huge success, it was put under scrutiny by a number of

critics. The negative criticism was not able to withstand the acclaim, however, and the text became, as Joel Myerson notes, “arguably the most widely translated and available book by an American author” (5).

In the fall of 1854, Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, a student studying Transcendentalism at Harvard, took a trip to Concord to visit Emerson. They discussed Transcendentalism and whimsically strolled around Walden Pond. As they went their separate ways, Emerson kindly gave him a copy of *Walden*. As an editor of a Harvard undergraduate newspaper, Sanborn published an essay that was written on Thoreau early the next year. While Sanborn and Thoreau did not formally meet during his visit to Concord, Thoreau left a copy of *Walden* in the place Sanborn was staying as a gift to the gentlemen who wrote the essay, “Thoreau and His Books,” for the *Harvard Magazine*. To show his appreciation, Sanborn wrote Thoreau a letter that also included his thoughts on Henry’s completed work. While he explained that he appreciated the “aspects of Nature in, and for the marvelous beauty of your descriptions,” he boldly stated that he did not think much of his philosophy. A year later, Sanborn moved to Concord and accepted a teaching position. His active life in Concord meant visiting Walden Pond regularly (Harding, *Days of Henry David Thoreau* 1: 352).

Channing, Thoreau, Emerson, and Sanborn enjoyed their usual dedications to Nature and walking through Concord. Despite the hearty exercise that the ritual provided for them, it was not long until Thoreau began experiencing some health problems. Unpublished letters suggest that he suffered perhaps due to inhaling graphite packing dust. In 1855, he became severely ill to the point of not being able to walk, thus rarely visiting Walden for about five months. In June, he wrote to H.G.O. Blake, “I have been sick and good for nothing but to lie on my back and wait for something to turn up, for two or three months” (Harding,

*Correspondence* 376). His insistence on being faithful to Walden was too great for him to stay indoors for long. He obsessively surveyed the area, taking measurements and examining the snow (Maynard 126).

Two years after its publication, *Walden* started accumulating a significant number of fans, one of whom was Daniel Ricketson of New Bedford. Ricketson was an attorney, but he also had a “private income” and spent more time behaving like Thoreau than practicing law. He was one of the first to visit Thoreau in response to *Walden*, and, although Henry was initially apprehensive about a stranger, they got along quite well. Ricketson was certainly not an apprentice when it came to solitude and sauntering. He even built his own “shanty” in New Bedford around the same time that Thoreau was living in his cabin. While Thoreau and Ricketson both had their own hut that year, Daniel would not become aware of Thoreau’s experiment until after he read his book. They spent a significant amount of time together, but Thoreau was still preoccupied with surveying the ice and snow. More people became eager to visit Walden Pond as a result of reading Thoreau’s book, and the birth of tourism at Walden had begun. Emerson was certainly a contributor to this phenomenon, too, because as Maynard notes, “a visitor to Concord in autumn recalled how Emerson ‘drove me from his own house, through the woods, on a bright October afternoon...to see Walden Pond, and the ruins, or rather the site of Thoreau’s cabin,’ which points to how Emerson would play a key role in promoting the house site as a place of touristic pilgrimage” (Maynard 131).

Thoreau’s sickness grew worse, and his friends and family gathered in close proximity to him, tending to his needs. Neighbors brought him sentiments such as flowers, serving him with company and good cheer. His primary interest during this time concerned his writings and corresponding with Ticknor and Fields for new editions. The time of his death was close,



and on May 6, 1862, he died in his home, “imperceptibly with neither apparent struggle nor pain” (Canby 439). His funeral was a public one, and he was buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. The end of his earthly existence would gain him wider recognition and eventually give birth to his stature as a literary icon.

Initially, however, the stage of grief had to manifest itself among his closer friends and family members. Thoreau’s 1862 death marked a very important time for the intellectuals that he knew so well, particularly Emerson. Emerson was struggling to keep his spirits up, and he was spending more time reflecting on the loss of Henry and the impact of the Civil War than his usual daily routines. In the year of Thoreau’s departure, Emerson remarked, “Henry T[horeau]. remains erect, calm, self-subsistent, before me, and I read him not only true in his <j>Journal, but he is not long out of my mind when I walk, and, as today, row upon the pond” (*Journals* 15: 261). Emerson understood that as long as he had Henry’s journals, the loss would not be so harsh, and such resources kept the flame of Henry burning, no matter how faintly.

A different temperament was occurring, however, for those who did not know Henry so intimately. As the word had spread about Thoreau’s death, Walden Pond became a locus of memory and tribute. The fame of *Walden* consequently brought an increasing number of people to Henry’s favorite spot, although those that were particularly close to him exhibited a much more introspective state of mind than the mere admirers of his work. While the visitors who were only familiar with *Walden* felt that they were honoring Thoreau, the veterans and close friends of Thoreau had trouble coming to terms not just with his death, but the influx of people in *response* to his death. Ricketson, for example, wrote a letter to Henry’s sister in 1866, just two years afterwards, venting his feelings on the rude awakening: “I should like to

come to Concord once more, but since the death of Henry I have hardly felt equal to the undertaking . . . now that he is gone, the river, the woods, the landscape, and even Walden Pond, with all its beauty, have lost for me their greatest charm. I could not have joined the party of forty strangers who lately had a picnic on the spot of Henry's hermitage" (Ricketson 169). The strength of Thoreau's cult disregarded the veterans of Walden Pond and, like many visitors today, they just wanted to see where he lived, and even for a day, stroll the woods as he once did.

The greatest structural change of all to Walden since the Fitchburg Railroad was about to take place that influenced by the pond's growing popularity: "Lake Walden." Charles Heywood, a wealthy railroad employee, purchased land and developed "an elaborate picnic ground on the west shore," initiating the sudden and expeditious commercialization of the pond (Maynard 160). The change created a "beach, see-saws, swings, picnic tables, dancing platforms, and merry-go-rounds set out for public amusements. Gala boats floated on the pond, bedecked with colorful ribbons and streamers. Within a few summers, pavilions for public speakers were added and paths cut through the woods for walkers. Near the main park grounds, the railroad cleared fields for football and baseball and set out a race track" (Blanding, *Concord Saunter* 20: 24). At the time, it was like the Coney Island of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the wake of intense recreation, picnicking, and tourists, a close follower of Emerson gave a whole new meaning to the kitsch nature of what Walden was becoming. In 1869, Edmond Hotham constructed his own cabin close to Thoreau's quarters, though he reportedly had no interest in mimicking Thoreau and his vision. Rather, he had financial difficulty and needed an opportunity to escape from urban living, though he was a lover of nature and

explicitly chose Walden Pond to camp. Edmond's stay at Walden just seven years after Thoreau's death was put under scrutiny by the media, but his presence marked Walden Pond as an historic site prematurely (Buell, *Thoreauvian Pilgrimage* 186).

Although the playtime, dancing, and football games were common during this period, many admirers of the area felt a spiritual connection to the kettle hole. Spiritualism began as a movement in 1848 under the premise that paranormal experiences and psychic phenomena are actual and that there is a continuation of life after death. There were five day camp meetings in Massachusetts with thousands of people in attendance. Meetings were held at Walden Pond as well, but were limited to individuals seeking more of the entertainment value of spiritualism, and less for social reform. We might infer that they were seeking communication with Thoreau, but with more informal discussions amongst each other. Howells indicates that there were spiritual meetings held there, "On Sunday, he went to the spiritualist meeting in the grove at Walden Pond. Most of the spiritualists were at a camp-meeting of their sect further up the road, and the people whom he met seemed, like himself, vaguely curious" (254). By 1874, the spiritualists held a meeting at Walden Pond bearing a huge tent with over 3000 people. The tension between "park" and "sacred oasis" is clearly evident as early as the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In 1872, the sacralization of Walden Pond became more evident. Mary Alcott, on a walk to the pond with her daughter and husband, decided that memorializing the site of Thoreau's cabin by building a cairn would honor Thoreau and mark the site for future visitors. Many visitors *did* catch on and began adding inscribed stones themselves. As the cairn began to increase in girth and in height, Thoreau lovers became increasingly drawn to the *cairn*. A black and white postcard was even published with the cairn as the focal point in 1902. The

cairn also acts as a symbol for all of those who have visited the site since the Alcotts. As Robbins notes, “The cairn itself spoke of the several generations that had played a part in pyramiding its construction. Stones of many sizes and shapes had been piled one on the other by pilgrims from the world over, pilgrims who had brought with them wishes or ambitions which they hoped to fulfill” (8). The cairn was recognized as an official landmark of Walden Pond in 1945, before the archaeological discovery of the actual house site, and was inscribed with a bronze sign bearing the phrase, “Site of Thoreau’s House.” The cairn would later be moved to the shock and protest of many Thoreauvians. The moving of the cairn was in an effort to maintain its significance while allowing the Department of Environmental Management to monitor vandalism. The fact that it was a “fitting memorial to Thoreau” motivated the department to return the cairn to a more appropriate *location*.

Ralph Waldo Emerson continued to take long walks, but in 1882, he was noticeably hoarse and would often ask bizarre questions, such as, “Where are we, who’s house are we in?” His sickness developed into a severe cold, but like Thoreau, he continued to saunter nonetheless. His speech became impaired and he also experienced dizziness. Not long after his impairment began, he was diagnosed with pneumonia. He struggled to survive yet he insisted that he was able to perform everyday tasks. As Rusk notes, “He ran lightly upstairs with a lamp in his hand but stumbled badly, to his disgust, before he reached the top” (507). By late April, he passed away just three years before Alcott and it became clear that an “era in Concord’s intellectual life ended” (Maynard 188).

In 1885, an auditorium was erected at Ice Fort Cove, as well as a tabernacle-shaped facility for telegraphing. A number of boats were added to the formation as well. In June, picnickers featured a congregation from Harvard Street Baptist Church and, in the fall, 2000

excursionists at which event “one lady of color undertook to dispense spirituous beverages to the thirsty multitude” (Maynard 195). Development of the area was continuing progressively, with the installation of an annex in 1886. That summer, a dry spell led to another fire which incinerated a considerable section of the precious land.

The influx of travelers to Concord was so substantial by 1896 that the town itself became, in effect, a souvenir gift shop for Thoreau memorabilia. From photographs and artwork to trinkets including pencils manufactured to appear as though they were handmade from tree bark, the privacy of Concord and the serenity that it was known for began to quickly dissipate. The engines from trains continued to take their toll on the historic site, creating a fire that had such a dramatic impact on the picnic grounds of the pond, they were burned away in 1900. The loss of the grounds, however, did not discourage visitors from east-shore swimming.

By the turn of the century, the town of Concord became more accessible, and there was an increase in the literary pilgrimage business because of more varied forms of transportation. Many people were hired as guides to accommodate the pond’s rising tourism demands. In 1905, a School of Philosophy student noticed signs of tourists and picnickers everywhere. Modernity was taking prominence and creating a shift that would transform the earlier connotations of Walden as a nature preserve into a permanent amusement park, even in the absence of baseball fields and swings (Maynard 218).

Walden Pond would soon face a symbolic and literal turning point that no longer had private control. In 1922, The Concord Enterprise announced that the Emerson family and the property owners of Walden would agree to pass their ownership over to the state. The commissioners were lent authority over management as long as they agreed to prohibit

festivals, amusements, and sports activities from taking place at anytime. This was part of a larger effort to protect the modesty and virtuous aura of Walden and to maintain it as a historic place of natural beauty. As a proactive approach, the state executed an extensive cleanup of Walden, including the removal of dead trees, the improvement of parking lots, and stationing benches near the water. The manifestation of automobiles had an enormous impact on the number of tourists, as Maynard notes that Herbert Gleason, a professional photographer of Walden, observed “eighty-one cars zipping along Walden Road in ten minutes time,” causing a disturbance to the employees of the reservation (Maynard 231).

While not much changed in the next twenty years, in the summer of 1945, the centennial of Thoreau’s experiment, saw an enormous rise in the number of visitors to the site. At the peak of occupancy, the main beach bore thousands upon thousands of visitors, some without any concern for the association that the park had with Thoreau or its significance. Others, however, retreated to the site of Thoreau’s cabin. Nearly one hundred visitors were there exclusively to pay tribute to Henry, one of them being Roland Wells Robbins. His archeological background motivated him to explore the cairn and its surrounding area. In “Discovery at Walden,” Roland gave an account of his findings: “Digging several feet back of the cairn, in a place where I had probed many times before without evidence, I was surprised at the number of nails and pieces of nails I found after digging a foot deep . . . Pushing my probing rod down until I had penetrated to more than two feet, I struck something solid” (vi). The discovery was a marker for the centennial of Thoreau’s experiment, and nine granite posts were installed around the area where the house once stood. Middlesex County Commissioners funded the operation, and today it is admired by Thoreauvians every day of the year.

Before the shores of Walden Pond became aggravated with trash and polluted with disgusting garbage, composer Charles Ives would clean up after the picnickers because of his interest in preserving the aesthetic nature of the area. Ives had trouble keeping the area tidy, as the degradation was getting out of hand. The cove especially was ugly as sin. The Commissioners were notified and were sent a letter indicating the different “kinds of litter” that impacted the cove. The protest was highly effective, as “authorities bulldozed barriers across incoming roads to keep automobiles out” (Maynard 252). The Reservation staff quickly realized that the build up of litter was not going to end as long as tourists entered the grounds, and that a daily maintenance program would need to be executed in order to control the masses.

The 1950s indicated the beginning signs of confusion and even more change, but of a different kind. The main beach at Walden Pond was holding about 35,000 people on the weekends. Construction projects were just beginning, and the state would soon spend a fortune on maintaining the safety of the water conditions, trying to prevent erosion, while also enlarging the beaches. Town meetings and arguments between different community organizations caused a great amount of distress among everyone who enjoyed visiting for the sole purpose of laying out in the sun and swimming, and also those who were interested in preventing the site from further becoming something that less resembled Thoreau’s vision than it already had become. Walden Pond’s fame started out with the admiration of Thoreau’s simple experiment and memory of his death, but then rapidly changed into a place that was merely famous for being famous. What needed to be realized is that Walden Pond originated as a place of its own, where very few people (in comparison to today) would enjoy the sounds of nature, and the serenity of silence. Advocates of serenity and followers of Thoreau

appeared to be outnumbered. Reflectively, Walter Harding perhaps said it best, “In the modern world, one-third of humanity has chosen forms of political and social organization which exalt the State so high above the individual as almost to cause one to forget that the latter has any rights or that he is anything but an interchangeable spare part in the vast machinery of production” (Harding 116). The authorities needed a first-aid strategy to bring Thoreau “back” to Walden while accommodating the flood of 700,000 visitors each year. A clean-up had to be initiated, not simply of paper plates and plastic cups, but a more important, philosophical kind, aimed toward bringing the aura of the mid-nineteenth century back to Concord’s transcendental refuge.

To understand the context of Walden Pond today one must understand a brief account of the past 50 years and the State Reservation’s efforts to “authenticate” the site as a place that has not changed since Thoreau’s presence in 1846. Before the Don Henley’s Walden Woods Project which was founded in 1990 in an effort to preserve “the land, literature and legacy of Henry David Thoreau to foster an ethic of environmental stewardship and social responsibility,” Walden Pond was going straight to hell (<http://www.walden.org/WWP-brochure.pdf>). From a cultural perspective, the habits of consumers were quite similar to those of today, but visitors were storming through Walden Pond like they would through Disney World. The year of 1962 marked the one-hundredth anniversary of Thoreau’s death, and gave the Wilderness Society an opportunity to propose a bill that would promote the preservation of national forests. The poor treatment of Walden Pond was especially addressed, as Justice William O. Douglas called attention to the “116 beer cans, 21 milk bottles, and much other debris” near the shoreline of the House Site (Maynard 267).



In 1968, the poisoning of fish caused an extinction of eel and fall fish. The chemical, Rotenone, was used to exterminate fish that were particularly too large or of little value to fisherman, so that they could be replaced with more desirable species. The poisoning turned the pond over into a trout pond, which is what dominates the pond today. However, the poison did not succeed at killing all of the fish, as Maynard notes, “In 1971, pumpkinseeds, perch, shiners, and killfish were still present,” which were recognizable to Thoreau (275).

In 1970, Walter Harding went to the house site to investigate the behavior of visitors who came to the area, spending just a few hours there as he pretended to read. He was very attentive to what they were saying and carefully watched a little over 200 people walk by. At least during that era, he remarked that they were mostly “young people.” Most of them had lowered their voices in reverence to Thoreau and took off their hats. They even brought the book *Walden* with them and read for about thirty minutes, leaning against the posts. The experiment was repeated by another historian thirty-two years later and differences were noted. Namely, the visitors’ nonverbal reactions to the house site seemed to be of a smaller scale, exhibiting less intense feelings in their disposition, and it had a lower impact on them (mainly as the result of a culture changes of young people through time). So while many were awed by the sacralization of the site, the cultural mindset of the visitors in the late 1960s to 1970s was primarily responsible for the difference (Harding, *Report from Walden* 6).

Meanwhile, the 1970s brought mischievous behavior at Walden Pond and many visitors were “testing the waters” to see how many pranks they could get away with. For example, Superintendent Lenox recalled a man who called himself “The Dancer” who streaked into the woods and often swam naked in the little cove. Others would convert the picnic tables located around the pond and build a hut with them. Another prank involved a

group of hippies who dumped a Volkswagen into the pond from a concrete pier. Around the same time, the movies *Dealing* (which involved a shootout) and *Papers and American Democracy* were filmed there as well. In 1975, three people drowned and there were two deaths of unknown causes in the previous fifty years. Crime continued to elevate and the authorities had trouble regulating the safety at Walden Pond, especially when there was evidence of an attempted rape that same year. In 1985, Anne LaBastille built a cabin that she named Thoreau II near Black Bear Lake and made every effort that she could to replicate Henry's cabin. The 1980s saw continued crime, and there was an endless amount of alcohol, parties, drugs, and muggings. The chaos became so out of hand, the police enforced security by assigning officers on horseback to patrol the area. The Thoreau Society had an interest in constructing a Thoreau house replica but were worried that placing it at the original site of Thoreau's cabin would run the risk of it being tampered with by misbehaving visitors. Consequently, they decided to erect the house closer to the main road where the pond's entrance is located so that officials could keep a closer eye on it.

The lack of preservation and restoration of Walden Pond became so evident, that there was even talk of building hotels right across from the bean field. Arguments over this idea continued for a number of years, and the beloved Thoreauvian Walden was losing its grip. Management problems were becoming more evident, as the Middlesex County Governmental Task Force observed shortcomings of the State Reservation. The saturation of visitors created a continual release of dirt from the shores trailing off into the pond. The water was being used as a trash hole, dogs were fighting, and engine noises from motorcycles and trucks surrounded the area. The advisory council offered suggestions to fix these problems, and explained that the popularity of Walden Pond, together with the policy of allowing as many people as

possible an opportunity to have a place to relax and take advantage of the cool water during the summer time, was creating too many problems. They theorized that a big reason for these problems was that there was no admission fee into the pond, and that creating one would slow the momentum of visitors down (Maynard 281). The balance of recreation and preservation was vital in order to ensure a strong landmark in Concord, and my visit to Walden Pond gave me an informed insight to the attempt at this balance. In the next chapter, I will concentrate on my visit there.

## CHAPTER 3

### WALDEN POND TODAY

#### **Visit – The Formal Tour**

Driving down Walden Road, I noticed that there is nothing but forested areas on both sides of the highway. Other than the paved road leading into the area, there are no signs of civilization or businesses, and for those who have never been to the greater Concord area, it would be easy to suspect that they have lost their way. Just a minute or two after the turn onto the road, however, there is a gigantic sign that reads, “Walden Pond State Reservation” on the left side. Almost immediately after the turn, there is a parking lot with a security guard entrance. Although the tour itself is free of charge, the visitor must pay five dollars in order to park in the only available area within a mile radius. The tour begins at the site of the replica of Thoreau’s cabin, which is across the parking lot down another fairly secluded street that marks the site with a huge sign, “Entering Historic Walden Woods.” Facing the cabin, there is a black statue of Thoreau to its left that many visitors were admiring as the crowd began to increase in size, anxiously awaiting the tour guide’s promised arrival. As some were curiously peeking inside of the house replica, others were exploring the gift shop, which offers an array of souvenirs, including many different versions of *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, t-shirts, magnets, walking sticks, postcards, and photographs of the site taken at different times of the year.

The first official location that the tour guide “stops” is the very meeting place of the tour: in front of the replica house. Here, visitors are welcomed to Walden Pond and are asked where they are visiting from, and the tour guide offers a brief, but lively commentary about each geographic location. The tour guide then provides an introduction to the site by talking

about the replica house, and explains the limited conditions that Thoreau lived under during his dwelling at Walden. As he leads the group, many are gazing at the architecture of the replica cabin and are eager to wander around inside, while others are looking at the statue. The guide's remarks regarding the house are minimal, and he waits a few minutes for everyone to examine the small interior of the house.

The tour guide leads the visitors across the street, where there are steep, dark gray ramps that funnel down toward the main beach area, passing a sign that reads "No Pets," where they learn of Walden Pond's origin. A melted glacier broke off into five pieces of ice to form five different coves: Long Cove, Deep Cove, Little Cove, Iceberg Cove, and Thoreau's Cove. The guide tells us that the Pond is 102' deep and that it is highly prized for trout fishing, stocked by the Massachusetts Wild Life. The main beach area has a boating dock, park benches, and bathhouses in a huge building that has been used for a multitude of reasons over the past fifty years. The guide explains that when initially the deed was handed over to the Congress of the State in 1922, the Emerson, Forbes, and Heywood families all indicated that they wanted a park for boating, fishing and swimming.

Facing the pond and to the right of the beach, there is a wooden rectangle-shaped sign attached to a wooden post with white letters at the beginning of a path, entitled "House Site," with an arrow pointing in the direction of the path. Visitors are then directed toward the path, where the guide socializes informally with those who are walking at the head of the group. The path is marked by a 2' high barbed wire fence with green posts which conveniently blends with the surrounding trees, while the tour guide switches to a louder voice that indicates the group should pay attention. At this point of the tour, and only after walking a few steps down the path, visitors are instructed to stop and are informed that about ten years

ago, the shoreline and the slopes were significantly eroded as a result of excessive rain water. They are told that the banks were consequently built up by a number of engineers and their use of machinery. The visitors' gaze is directed toward the green fence and trees planted at the time of engineering, indigenous to the region and native to the area during the era of Henry David Thoreau.

Another wooden post is located at this same point of interest, this time with two rectangle-shaped signs, the top sign reading "Help Fight Erosion," the bottom sign reading "Please Stay On Paths." Two frames are nailed at the bottom of the post, one with a map of the pond, another with a stack of pamphlets on Thoreau. The tour narrative then focuses on the different kinds of trees that were planted, including white pine, white oak, red oak, and pitch pine. The visitors are then advised to proceed down the path, where the gentleman teaches everyone how to identify the trees. He selects a pine leaf off a tree, and counts the letters in the word "white." The guide concludes that there are five letters, and therefore the tree that it came from must be a "white" tree, because the pine leaf has five prongs.

The corridor-like path leads to Red Cross Beach, the next stop, which is introduced as a densely historical area of the pond. Much smaller than the main beach, Red Cross Beach is so-named because the American Red Cross held swimming lessons in the area between the 1920s and 1960s. At this stop, the tour guide explains that the depth and circumference of Walden Pond are 102' deep and 1.7 miles around, connecting the statistics to Thoreau's first survey of the pond in 1846.

Walking farther down toward the house site, visitors encounter Thoreau's Cove, which the tour guide explains is a very popular area for swimming, kayaking, and fishing. He further explains that its popularity is grounded in the 1846 survey that Thoreau conducted of

Walden because the townspeople thought that the pond was bottomless. They are told that, to get to the bottom of it, he used a stick as a handle, and he used twine to measure down in length and used a heavy rock to drop the weight down to the bottom with knots to mark it off in increments, finding the greatest depth to be 102 feet.

Proceeding farther down the path, another wooden rectangle-shaped sign with the words “house site” appears before a bend in the trail. The visitors walk anxiously around the bend and encounter a rock cairn behind a larger sign than any so far, bearing a quote from Thoreau’s *Walden; or Life in the Woods*: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. And see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” While this quote is one of the more popular and famous quotes from Thoreau’s text, it answers the question that many people, including a very confused and oblivious middle-aged woman on the tour, ask when they visit the site. They somehow find Walden Pond’s fame, and/or the reason why Thoreau would *want* to live in the woods, a mystery.

Facing the pond, the cairn is located to the right of the house site. It consists of thousands of rocks in a huge pile, all of the same color, but many of different sizes, some with names and dates carved into them. After explaining the definition of a cairn, “a tangible object that pays tribute, and something that lasts a long time, such as a gravestone,” the tour guide suggests that the visitors grab a rock, and that he will grab a rock, too, so that they can all “pay tribute to Mr. Thoreau” by adding their rocks to the pile. Most assuredly, visitors are then invited to take photographs of the cairn and the quoted sign.

Visitors are then asked to focus their attention on the house site, marked by upright granite posts, all connected by chains. Here, the narrative explains that the area was purchased

by “one of Henry’s friends, Ralph Waldo Emerson.” On the front center post is a caption that reads, “Site of Thoreau’s Cabin: Discovered Nov. 11 1946 by Roland Wells Robbins.” A featured rhetorical device of the tour’s narrative unfolds, as the visitors are told that the shadows of Thoreau have been seen on previous tours, sauntering through the house site’s proximity, examining and surveying the area. The tour guide even invites the visitors to “watch carefully, and the shadows of Thoreau might be lurking among us.”

The tour guide explains that, before he became a park interpreter, every week his coworkers would come out and do a lot of labor intensive activities at Walden Pond, such as trail work, park upkeep, and restoration. He explained that it was “pretty fun, we would joke around, sometimes we would have snowball fights.” He quickly and cautiously warned, however, that they “would get a lot of work done compared to some other groups that would come help. It was a great learning experience, a great path to kind of pave the way for employment. And in a way that kind of honors Mister Thoreau’s life too, because he was kind of an intensive day laborer too, he was a stone mason, and a surveyor as well.”

Exiting the house site, the tour continues on toward the opposite end of the pond, at the last stop, the Fitchburg Railroad, which, according to the narrative, was laid through Walden Pond in 1844, just a year before Thoreau began his experiment. The railroad is distinctly set apart from the trail and divided by a fence. Although the railroad is not a part of the State Reservation itself, rhetorically, the tour adopts the railroad as such through historical anecdotes. The guide proceeds to justify the railroad as an important “stop” because of its effects on Walden Pond, through noise pollution, fires (as a result of engine fuel), and the “convenience” that it facilitated for consumers traveling to Walden. He remarks, “I don’t want you to think that the railroad had all negative influences on this great land, there were



positive impacts as well.” The visitors learn that, as early as 1866, the Fitchburg Railroad Co. built an excursion park along the shores that was intended for social gatherings, including dancing, concessions, fourth of July picnics, boats, dancing, swinging, etc. He justifies the significance of the railroad even further, commenting that, “there was even a baseball field that was built later, and so a lot of people appreciated the Fitchburg Railroad Co. for that as well.” When a visitor inquires what happened to it all, he quickly states, “it burned down in 1902.” As the guided tour ends, the park interpreter concludes by thanking everyone for participating and contributing to the State Reservation. He concludes by saying “The tour does not end here. Another way that you could honor Henry David Thoreau is by taking a scenic walk around the rest of the pond, and see if you might experience some of the same things that he did. Some say that they’ve seen him most commonly on the log at Little Cove. After that, feel free to browse around our gift shop, and take with you a memento of your choice.”

### **Reading Walden’s Tour**

#### *Cabin*

As I have noted, the first marker of the tour is the replica of Thoreau’s cabin. The cabin’s presence seeks to reconstruct the historical Thoreau, which includes a desk, two chairs, a fireplace, a bed with sheets, a pillow, and a blanket. Unlike many tourists sites, the State Reservation calls attention to the artificiality of the cabin by using the term “House Replica” instead of suggesting that it is, to use Ada Louise Huxtable’s term, an “authentic reproduction” (Bruner, *Culture on Tour* 149). If the house replica had been at the original house site itself, its rhetorical impact on visitors would probably be much different than it is currently. The replica’s explicit separation (across the street) from the pond begs no

contextual role except as a souvenir or novelty of Walden Pond. The replica, however, is meticulously detailed, and the visitors have a chance to sign the guestbook on the desk. The guestbook contains a long list of anecdotes that visitors have written to Thoreau, mostly discussing their love of his work and their love of Walden Pond. Although the visitors understand that the cabin is artificial, they appeared to be as mesmerized by its presence as they would with the real thing, which supports Urry's observations that many tourists delight in the inauthentic reconstructions at tourist sites (Franklin 198). The guestbook even invites visitors to participate in a novel form of ritual, pretending to "leave a note" for Thoreau, as though he would be returning to the cabin shortly.

### *Fence*

The fence speaks of the ecological preservation of Walden Pond as much as it frames the experience of the site for the tourists. While it is a modest fence, camouflaging itself from the natural environment, the visitors move through the site in what Bruner calls *experience theater* (*Culture on Tour* 49). For Bruner, tourists "move through the site in order to experience it" through "an imaginary space into which tourists enter and through which they negotiate a physical and conceptual path" (49). The fence confines the travel through the overwhelmingly large area, appropriating, dictating, and limiting the experience of those who journey through it. The fence operates as a symbol, if nothing else does, for the contemporary period and is nothing more than a large circle around the pond. As visitors walk through the path, they are faced with joggers listening to walkmans desperately trying to clear the path so they can continue on without any obstruction. Movement through the site becomes explicitly confined in the same way as running around a track at a gym or a park. The fence creates a path that separates the freedom of strolling whimsically that Henry David Thoreau knew so

well for many who desperately seek the same experience. Admittedly, the narrative explains that the Emerson, Forbes, and Heywood families *wanted* a park as early as 1922, and therefore have undergone intentional efforts to make Walden Pond exactly that. Rhetorically, the sign asking the visitors to “Please Stay on Paths” to “Help Fight Erosion” instigates an incentive that guides them along unlike any other. While the fence operates as a kind of marker for the present, it also divides the present and the past, as the territory beyond the fence stands in for history, of which visitors have an opportunity to gaze throughout their whole journey around the pond.

If Walden Pond is considered to be one of America’s most sacred spots, a close analysis of how the State Reservation attempts to honor that should be conducted. If pilgrimage, in Franklin’s terms, “can be defined as journeys away from the everyday, mundane world of work and home to specific sacred sites formalized, recognized and maintained by major religions,” and if tourism mimics pilgrimage (and vice versa), the minimalist theme present during the tour of Walden Pond seeks to invoke an experience where the visitors are “confronted with the essential facts of life” (Franklin 123, 125). So the State Reservation does not have very much to present to the tourist except Walden Pond itself. It is an invitation to gaze upon nature and to gaze upon the past.

### *Signs*

Signs have always been a feature that nearly all tourist sites have in common, as they indicate the meaning of objects, places, and people. They are indicators of the “uniqueness” of places and are also boundary markers. In order for places like Walden to become sacred, they must go through the stages of “sight sacralization,” which include the naming, framing and elevation, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction, and social reproduction phases.

MacCannell points out that such signs are very important in recognizing sacred phenomena, as they are a part of this sacralizing effort to mark and frame Walden (44-45).

The signs at Walden Pond offer a variety of messages that both inform the visitors and guide their conduct. For Edensor, they serve to create an “enclavic space” which is made up of boundary markers that structure and order the experience of tourists, regulating the site and its environment (328). The signs point to different locations but also to the mediated ideal standard of the State Reservation to run a smooth influx of visitors through the site while preserving the environment. While they communicate so much more about Walden than the white lettering that they contain, they call into question the idea that Walden is considered one of the most sacred sites in the United States, because their very existence implicitly asks, “Is Walden Pond to be considered a sacred ground or a playground, the haunt of Thoreau’s spirit and central to his legacy, or just another place to hike?” (Ackerman 7). While there is no dispute that the State Reservation has turned the site into a park, a large number of tourists presumably seek an authenticity at Walden that invites a transcendental pilgrimage reminiscent of Thoreau’s day. The signs appropriate their experience, like so many other tourists sites, and they are left with a restrictive experience, either by direction or behavior, as emphasized by Edensor. The immediate realization is that Walden Pond, although in the heart of the woods, is a relentlessly framed experience, set apart from the freedom that Thoreau lovers desperately hope to encounter. Perhaps the hundreds of thousands of people who have visited the site have milked the Thoreauvian pilgrimage of the pond dry, and the State Reservation understands that, these days, the majority of local visitors are there to simply swim or get some exercise, which is indeed a very common practice there. The “uniformed rangers complete with walkie-talkies” could testify to that (Ackerman 1).

## *Walking*

I've discussed some of the ways that the fence and the signs at Walden Pond mark it as a different site than it once was, and if Walden Pond has become a tourist site because Thoreau began "touring" there himself, *Walden; or Life in the Woods* simply encouraged people (after his death) to do the same. On a general level, what visitors are doing is not all that different from Thoreau and Emerson's practice as they are walking and observing nature. Tourists come to Walden Pond to essentially "get away" and walk through the area. Consequently, the tourists' embodied act of walking speaks of Thoreau and Emerson more than anything else. Even without the fence and the signs, however, tourists are trapped in a performative stroll that closes down the transitive experience. Their knowledge and the evidence of Walden Pond as a historic site obligates them to see it as such, and their attention to the site renders a museum-like gaze, divorcing them from an intimate connection. For Edensor, "they amble in the carefully regulated space of a theme park, march attentively during a purposive, guide-led collection of sites, strain their bodies on trekking adventures, and meander through the complex space of a bazaar or festival" (Edensor 339).

What their walk shares in common is the general touristic escape from the everyday and a performative stroll, but their specific gazes are quite different. They walk with additional objectives that shape their perspective of Walden Pond. Some (TYPE A) are looking for the traces of Thoreau that they expect the State Reservation to have framed for tourists, such as artifacts and the house site, and are less interested in the woods. These visitors are quick to turn their attention to the points of interest, but this does not mean that "nature" as a touristic destination is not rewarding for them as opposed to a different selection. Others (TYPE B) are there for a more spiritual experience, and look for inspiration

in spite of the merry-go-round structure and directional signs. Many visitors were, in fact, attempting to keep a safe distance from the tour group, adopting a more Romantic Gaze. As the gaze is commonly associated with the “solitudinous contemplation of nature,” their distance encouraged “solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze” in order for the shift to take place (Urry 45; Walter 298). Also, their respect for Walden Pond could be a part of a larger embarrassment that tourists often experience that makes them feel like “unwelcome intruders who keep appearing at cherished field sites,” especially since many visitors to the park who are seen jogging, constantly passing by the tour groups, seem like locals (Bruner, *Culture on Tour* 96). One of the paradoxes of Walden Pond is that, regardless of what type the visitor is, their commonality, on a general level is their pursuit of nature. But part of nature’s appeal is that, according to Franklin, people seek “above all an absence of a planned, regulated space; and vernacular architectures, winding lanes, and minimal social intervention” (Franklin 216). Walden Pond, however, is the epitome of an enclavic space in nature, and tourists struggle to come to terms with it.

### *House Site*

The house site is considered to be the only trace of Thoreau that exists at Walden Pond. Even the house site, however, reveals no actual remains of the architectural structure that Thoreau inhabited, with the exception of a furnace hole. The upright, granite posts are nothing more than markers for where the house once stood. Nonetheless, some visitors were awe-struck and quieted at the sight of it and did not know how to respond to its presence, while others seemed indifferent toward it as they read the captions and jingled car keys in their pockets. All of the visitors, however, were focused on the cairn, the house site, or the

captions, and impulsively took photographs of all three objects. These objects are simply enhancements of a location or space on the ground, in which the house of Thoreau once stood, yet the sacralization of it is quite heavy. MacCannell's "Stages of Sight Sacralization" are explicitly performed here. The *naming phase* involves marking the site as an authenticated object after close examination to determine the social value. At the house site, the captions and cairn function as these markers. The *framing and elevation* phase entails either "putting on display of an object—placement in a case, on a pedestal or opened up for visitation" or "the placement of an official boundary around an object" (MacCannell 44). The chain-linked posts around the area where the cabin once stood facilitates the performance of this phase. *Enshrinement* refers to when the stand-ins for the house obligate the visitors to ritualistically honor it by, as the tour guide encourages, paying tribute to Thoreau by placing a rock on the cairn or by some other means. Visually, the three markers of the house site allow them to build an image at Walden Pond that centers and grounds their journey around an otherwise forested area in the outskirts of Concord, Massachusetts. The largest connotation of Walden Pond is Henry David Thoreau, and even a multitude of written signs do not suffice. Tourists need a centerpiece, or exhibit that satisfies their search for something that interpellates them to the location in the first place. Through narratives and historic markers, they capture a long awaited experience. For Bruner, "Tourists construct a past that is meaningful to them and that relates to their life and experience, and this is the way meanings are constructed at historic sites" (*Culture on Tour* 165).

The tour guide's narrative reinforces the meaning and credibility of the house site, remarking that the "shadows of Thoreau have been seen on previous tours," while encouraging the visitors to adopt a Thoreauvian gaze as they lurk around the area to "find"

Thoreau. Perhaps more importantly, the interpreter at Walden Pond follows a larger demand of the tourism industry, fulfilling a mystification of transcendental heritage. The suggestion that Thoreau's ghostly presence still haunts the site ensures the high value of tourism at the park because, even though many hold a questioning gaze, others are more easily swayed and it lures enough people to create an extraordinary experience. So if tourists are seeking an escape from the everyday, the State Reservation knows, as do staff members at many other tourist sites, that meeting the expectations of tourists and fulfilling their agendas will generate satisfaction. What's more, the "authenticity" of the site is more easily justified, because suddenly the environment is dynamic and open to possibilities; the uncertainty and ambiguity of the experience increases, and hence, the unpredictability caters to their time spent there. As Inglis and Holmes put it, "The places where ghosts are held to live out their spectral non-lives are constructed as being authentic through the very presence of the ghost, which operates as a hallmark of the archaic nature of the locale in question" (7).

In summary, the touristic experience at Walden Pond is far from a reproduction or vicarious Thoreauvian one. While the tour guide encourages tourists to take a stroll around the pond at the end of the tour, the tour itself has an emphasis on history, and not a reproduction of it. It appears that the closest reproduction of the Thoreavian experience is to not take a tour of Walden Pond, and instead, walk in solitude. Group tours are contradictory to the very reason why lovers of Thoreau go there in the first place. The State Reservation appears to be well aware that the people have arrested the attention, and the popularity of the site in and of itself suggests the expectations when traveling there. The cabin allows insight into what Thoreau's house may have looked like, and the house site serves, at best, as a place to capture the angle that Thoreau stood as he rose each morning. The trouble with Walden Pond is its



name. Although the body of water is a centerpiece, the woods surrounding it are not that much different from other areas of land in North America. The philosophical discourse of Thoreau is where the meaning of the site is found, and there are many people who have never read *Walden* who have been visiting the site for decades. Their reward rests in the fact that it is *still* a place of nature, no matter how many visitors frequent the site annually. People who have never read Thoreau's work *do* find value in visiting there. The opportunities for swimming and relaxing are always present, and it is by no means a disappointment to those who go there for that reason. The problem that many people experience is related to their agenda. Although the tour guide claims that you can still find Thoreau at the site, the absence of Thoreau as a spiritual entity is evident simply because of the presence of others. We imagine him alone or at least surrounded by very few people. His words and his introspective solitude constitute the experience that so many of his fans desperately seek. The name of the pond connotes far too much, running the risk of disappointment, resentment, and even hostility. By negotiating and recognizing the site as a park, one yields to the overbearing number of people there. Assigning Walden Pond as America's most sacred site bears a lot of responsibility, and its recent transformation into a museum might be the only justification for that claim. In the next chapter, interviews that were conducted at Walden Pond will determine to what extent it may true.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTERVIEWS

Most visitors who visit Walden Pond are aware of Thoreau's experiment, but their knowledge of his work is limited. The area's natural appeal and accommodating characteristics make it important in itself. Wraparound fence and posted signs aside, its proximity to urban life makes it convenient for large numbers of visitors to get away to a relatively remote area and enjoy the shade that the trees provide along the trails, or relax on the beach, or simply get some exercise. The tourists who are on a search for Thoreau as part of their main interest, however, are confined to the guided tours that the State Reservation provides for them. Such visitors vary from those who admired the premise of his experiment or were inspired by his famous quotes, to those fewer who have a more thorough understanding of Transcendentalism, his journals, and his connection to Alcott and Emerson; although there are certainly a number of visitors who participate that have little or no knowledge of Thoreau as well. Like many tourist locations, Walden Pond shows itself as a site that attracts visitors with a general knowledge of what made it a legacy, and focus their attention on what is visually and aesthetically stimulating. In what follows, I cover four central themes that were evident in visitor perspectives as well as of interest to me: the sacred, the house site, nature, and authenticity at Walden Pond. After each theme I then move to examining the performances and the underlying meanings behind them.

#### *The Sacred*

A woman about 50 years old from Boston had approached me after the tour and asked what my interests were in coming to Walden Pond. I was initially taken aback by her inquiry because, due to her proximity, my plan was to ask her the very same question. Having a

tourist switch the roles between ethnographer and tourist left me in a liminal state as I began to process how my responses would influence her own. I told her that I was interested in how tourism was practiced at Walden Pond and that I wanted to see if Walden Pond was as surreal as Thoreau claimed it to be in his famous work. After she expressed her amazement at my coming all the way from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, she said that she liked coming to Walden and that she was happy to have learned so much about the history of Walden Pond from the tour guide. “This place seems so special,” she said, “it is so divine, it’s like an oasis! It’s easy to see why Thoreau admired this place so much. Look at the trees and the landscape, oh my god!”

I stood there with her for a few minutes in silence and examined the surrounding area in my field of vision. She then turned toward me and said, “Well, it was nice meeting you, I’ve got to get some lunch!” When she began walking in the other direction, I asked if she would ever consider an experiment like Thoreau’s. “Oh, no, sweetheart, I wouldn’t be comfortable here,” she said, “I’m not taking a bath in that water!”

Although many people were actually swimming and laughing in the pond’s water at the time, a number of visitors reportedly were not interested in living in the woods, highlighting the classic tourist objectives of temporary travel. Their admiration for Thoreau’s courage, however, left them eager to imagine what the experience must have been like for him roaming around in the very place they were standing. As I was exploring the area where the tourists were gathered when the tour was over, several of them commented on how impressed they were by the State Reservation efforts to maintain the area as a pleasant place for visitors. One visitor told the interpreter, “This is such a lovely place, I would put this cigarette out, but

I'd hate to just throw it on the ground." Their respect for the legacy of Walden Pond and Thoreau as a historical figure was very explicit.

For even more, the sacred Walden was very much a part of their experience, claiming that, Walden is the most sacred place they had ever been, suggesting that it reigns superior over even the oldest remnants of our time. "It is so beautiful and pure," a woman said, "I wish that I could wake up every morning and look out my window and see Walden. I don't think there is any place on earth that compares to Walden." To put it another way, "Walden is like a sanctuary away from every place else," one man told me, "I would love to take my granddaughter here but she's in New Mexico." It might be inferred that these folks have not been everywhere in the world, but their perspectives and opinions demonstrated high value of Walden Pond as a sacred site in North America.

The uniqueness of Walden in terms of the sacred can be envisioned in the merging of pre-modern and modern versions of the sacred. While the tourist is generally a contemporary pilgrim, the attraction of Walden is instigated and rooted in a spiritual ideal that the Transcendentalists so heavily advocated. Thoreau's religious objective was to achieve an elevation of purpose through his pilgrimage, and his influence (at least partially) resulted in social practices of tourism there. Consequently, the activity at Walden involves tourists who are classified under modernist pilgrimage objectives, yet are 'getting away' to tour the very icon of transcendental/religious pilgrimage itself. This combination shows that the tourists are escaping contrived touristic experiences, escaping, instead, to a place that will offer them the ultimate experience for their vision. The performance of tourists at Walden highlighting the contemporary pilgrimage is unavoidable, but they struggle to stay within a frame of

modern day temporary travel methods with the expectation that Walden Pond markets itself as the very thing that it is known for: escape.

Society has an inclination toward nostalgia for the more recent past, yet desire to live in the present with respect for historical landscapes and artifacts, which appears to be a common thread in heritage tourism, in part because of the familiarity with the present. Some visitors appeared to be so easily compromising of the appropriated space that it seems as though they expect it and treat it as a minimal or non-existent interference to the sacred, mainly because they follow a common practice in tourism consisting of “daydreaming and anticipation of new or different experiences from those normally encountered in everyday life” (Urry 13). Many tourists presuppose Walden just as extraordinary as they imagined before critically examining the way it is appropriated for the visitors. To be sure, I asked how these present modifications to the site might have influenced their time at Walden and their rendering of it as a sacred site. Many were so prideful of their own conclusions they had already expressed that it was difficult for them to negotiate their previous claims. One woman remarked, “The fence doesn’t bother me, I think it is a convenient way to explore around the whole pond.” Another couple stated, “I am glad the trash isn’t here, the trash wasn’t here when Thoreau was here and it isn’t now, clearing all of that away gives me a better idea of what Thoreau was looking at when he lived here.”

The favoritism for Thoreau and his book, *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, was a popular theme among many visitors, yet some reported never having read Thoreau’s work. Those who lacked the literary background on Walden Pond did agree, however, that they prized the upkeep of the pond and that it demonstrated respect toward him. Learning about Thoreau and his vision on the tour gave visitors a greater esteem for the site. A Cambridge

man explained that it was his first trip to Walden Pond and that listening to the tour guide talk about Thoreau made him see the pond in a new way, “I have never read anything that Thoreau had written, but my son has, and he inspired me to take a visit to see what all the fuss was about. I used to take this area of Massachusetts for granted, but after hearing about Thoreau and why he came here, I appreciate the area a lot more.” The tour’s narrative became a framing mechanism for his and many others’ outlook on Walden Pond and inspired them to ask the tour guide further questions before being directed toward the gift shop, where they could purchase copies of Thoreau’s works, gadgets, trinkets, and other souvenirs. Since the objects “seem to embody and retain something of the place (and its significance),” the tourists can mobilize the sentimentality of the sacred by taking these objects home (Franklin 108).

The nature of tourist travel bears a ritualistic process. There are those who are seeking an escape from the everyday, thereby entering into a contrast from mundane social structures. The ritual, which involves a time sequence such that an individual alternates between sacred and profane states, allows them to experience the transitions at any location of their choosing. Practicing the ritual enables an experience of pilgrimage, where the tourist returns arguably as a different person. While this is a common understanding in tourism studies, even those that have little or no background on Thoreau or his work have heard many people reference Walden as sacred, and are driven to attend in the hopes of a spiritual experience. A Minnesota man, who admittedly lacked any background on the place, was examining the Red Cross Beach and remarked, “I knew for a long time that Walden Pond was a special place. My siblings have always suggested that I come here, and I am sure glad I did!” As Concord has had a longstanding literary reputation for being one of the most sacred sites in America, and Walden Pond being its spiritual center, many tourists are motivated to visit there because they

feel that the trip will offer an existential pilgrimage (like all tourists sites), but will gain more out of the experience because of the objective sacred location. The difference lies in the intensity of the sacred. The visitors that had read Thoreau's work were performing a more grounded touristic gaze while the others were trying to make sense of their vision.

The debate of the sacred at Walden because of many factors including the overpopulated visitors and the wraparound fence certainly questions the validity of the claim, even though many visitors attest to the highly sacred nature of the site. The debate of Walden as a sacred site lies in the dichotomy between those who are appalled by the intrusiveness of the fence and the actual efforts to preserve the sacred Walden. So it is worth considering that the fence itself is an effort to *maintain* the sacredness of the site, not take away from it. The fence is an example of the "enshrinement" phase where barriers are used to protect and preserve the "sacred" at tourist sites. At all sacred sites, there are efforts that are made to "enshrine" what's valuable and security is highly prominent. Fulfilling this stage keeps places separated from intentional and unintentional common threats brought on by people. The *real* sacred at Walden Pond lies in the unchartered woods beyond the fence where the interpreter claims, "Thoreau can be found." As Hubert points out, "The concept of sacred implies restrictions and prohibitions on human behavior—if something is sacred then certain rules must be observed in relation to it, and this generally means that something that is said to be sacred, whether it be an object or site (or person), must be placed apart from everyday things or places, so that its special significance can be recognized, and rules regarding it obeyed" (11). Perhaps the interpreter's message should be looked at more figuratively, that the deep woods beyond the fence is Thoreau's space, and therefore we shouldn't go mucking around in it. What is essentially going on is a form of ecotourism. There are specialized treks all over

the world especially designated for tourists, and they create “a profitable hyper sublime” which serves the needs of the industry (Bell and Lyall 36). Even so, the observance of Walden as a sacred site, in reality, has only been a recent one. Not until the last fifteen years or so did the State Reservation intervene and take responsibility for the increasing chaos that was so prevalent since the 1950s. The preservation of Walden is one that began when they “cleaned up after the party” instead of a continuous effort since Thoreau’s departure. The rhetoric of the tour’s narrative, however, presents Walden as an unspoiled and pristine literary gem.

### *House Site*

The house site of Thoreau offered a perfect opportunity to ask visitors what their impressions were of the landmark. A man from Florida who had spent an extended period of time examining the house site, cairn, and wooden captions appeared as though he did not want to be disturbed. I was equally interested in the markers and tuned out the distractions coming from the other tourists. He approached me after a few minutes and asked, “You here alone?” I told him that I was and that I thought that I would get more out of the experience. The Florida man said that the house site was the most interesting stop on the tour, despite the house’s absence.

When I asked him what interested him about the house site he sighed and began walking away from me. I followed him and as he focused his attention on the cairn, I stared at it and heard him say, “It just makes you think about all of the people who came to see this place; I am amazed to see all the rocks and to think of everyone who has come before me, to pay a tribute to him.” He stood there in silence and the only sounds were of the faint conversations in the distance and the sound of the wind blowing the leaves across the ground. He then turned toward me and expressed another thought, “It reminds me of a tribal memorial



of some kind, and it just makes you want to think about the historical significance of this place.”

Most assuredly, the cairn at the house site has a number of different signifiers. Just as the house site for Thoreau offered him a place where he had many moments of reflection, cairns are often meant for the same purpose. A cairn is a heap of stones or rocks that are built on top of one another to form a cone-shaped monument. Their purpose is to serve as a landmark to memorialize the dead, mark a burial site, or summits of mountains. They also may be used for general commemorative purposes. As visitors leave their own traces, the cairn can help visitors of Walden Pond identify and unite with those who are working for peace, traveling to find the “Thoreauvian family.” It serves as an assemblage of respect and tribute to one of the most influential literary authors in our history. The ritual of stone placement allows visitors to participate in history, and thus, gives them a sense of worth, satisfaction, and a physical connection to that history by adding their own stone.

In as much as the visitors were mesmerized by the cairn, the granite posts that surround the area where Thoreau’s house was built stole the most attention. The very absence of the house leaves the visitor with only his imagination. Consequently, the visitor cognitively builds Thoreau’s house himself. After a Cincinnati woman was taking a photograph of the posts, she noticed me standing near her. She smiled and remarked, “It’s kind of silly, taking a picture of nothing.” I commented (with reassurance) that it was nice to finally see exactly where Thoreau stayed and that *plenty* of people were taking photographs of it. On a similar note, a man from Minnesota added, “It’s a shame the house isn’t here, now that would be a real treat.” When I asked him why he came to visit Walden, he replied, as if it was a no-brainer, “To connect with Thoreau!” After his chuckle subsided, he kept his eyes on the posts

and the furnace hole for a few minutes and said, “I really wish they would’ve at least kept the house up, it’s bad enough with everything else they’ve done to this place. I really like the furnace hole though.”

Without a doubt, the house site is merely a metonymic signifier for the past. The absence of the house appeared to create an intense longing among the visitors. While there are many historical artifacts that *have* been preserved in various locations across the world, even their presence articulates an absence, an absence of the past. The nonexistence of Thoreau’s house creates an even greater disconnection, for there is no object of reference to the past, just the commemorative chain-linked posts. The discrete furnace hole, however, is a metonym of the house, which operates as an important prompter for visitors. As whole objects in themselves leave partial traces of the past, small fractions of historical objects leave even more distance. Jackson reminds us that “the connection with the past they seem to offer is always thwarted by their failure to do so” (280).

Despite their disappointments, the house site indeed created a longing among the visitors and was responsible for their impulses to honor Thoreau in some way. The visitors were disappointed that there were insufficient references to him and seemed to get caught up in the materialistic potential of the area (or lack thereof). The lesson learned is that the nostalgia for Thoreau’s house is one of the major draws of Walden Pond because visitors are engaging in a cultural and performative act of remembrance which becomes much more significant than fragmented objects and debates over contemporary modifications. The cairn is the most important feature of the house site, as Thoreau fans commune to engage in and exchange their own historical reflections, creating new meanings and thus, constituting public

memory. Situated in an embodied context, the discontinuity and differences among them leaves things open, and becomes a site of history itself.

### *Nature*

When I spoke with a few others, I noticed that several comments were made regarding the aesthetic landscape of the area. One couple from Atlanta, Georgia, expressed how stressful their lives were living so close to the city and that having the opportunity to escape urban life was very profitable for them. As we would walk down the trails and around the pond, they were fascinated by the natural environment. “Look how beautiful the trees are here,” the woman said, “you don’t see this in Atlanta.” A local man from Concord, who carried a walking stick with him, informed me that he has a group of saunterers that meets on a weekly basis and they often come to Walden Pond. When I asked him what inspires them to participate in the club, he stated, “Well, no particular reason, except that we like being outdoors, we like observing mother earth,” reasoning that Walden Pond is important to people in itself, and not limited to its literary connotations.

The appreciation for nature was certainly widespread. As the group began to walk back toward the souvenir shop, a woman that questioned the roots of Walden Pond, its popularity, and the reason for Thoreau’s experiment, turned around and faced the pond again. “This is such a beautiful place,” she said, “I don’t think people get out into the open often enough. Can you take a picture of me with the pond in the background? My sister won’t believe this.” Many of the positive impressions that were drawn by the visitors were as a result of the landscape, which they attested turned out to be a very positive experience for them.

Natural landscapes have a history of hailing people toward them. Long before Thoreau's day, mankind has sought after a refuge from inner city life. As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, escaping urban areas became a highly sought after practice. To many, the landscapes serve as an opportunity for folks to interact with them, as they create psychological benefits. An accountant from Boston visiting the site perhaps said it best, "Nature doesn't talk back at you, and if it does, it has nothing but good things to say. The seasons of nature have a certain stability and assurance to them, and you don't have to worry about anyone watching over your shoulder." Author Alain de Botton was in the same frame of mind when he pointed out, "Natural scenes have the power to suggest certain values to us—oaks dignity, pines resolution, lakes calm—and therefore may, in unobtrusive ways, act as inspirations to virtue" (145). The more urbanized societies become, the commodification of nature will increase because nature is an active symbol of tourism in industrialized cultures that are searching for the "other." For them, the epitome of "other" is the rural area.

The role of Walden Pond as an icon of nature has created questions concerning the standards of experiencing nature. While many tourists that I interviewed had a general appreciation for the escape from urban society and the picturesque features of the pond, others were more focused on their admiration of Thoreau. I became increasingly aware, however, of the lack of visitors on both sides who were seeking an experience that was *truly* like Thoreau's—that is, to invest themselves into nature and extend themselves away from a mediated experience--even for an hour or two. As much as visitors commented on their desire to be like Thoreau, the irony was the lack of a more intimate drive toward the "sensual knowledge of nature through having more direct contact with its sonic, textual, olfactory, and visual presences" (Franklin 220).

The efforts of ecotourism appear to have distanced visitors from a more social-anthropological experience, and contained them within a Romantic gaze of Walden Pond. While responsible ecotourism strives to minimize the negative impacts of traditional tourism, Walden Pond has catered to the demands of the influx of tourists at the expense of the very reason many people at least *think* they go there to visit. Even though there are a large number of people who express discontent with the “fourth-of-July picnic” feeling of Walden Pond, the “success” of its annual (and increasing) visitation rate might be attributed to the expectation and pleasure of convenience and accommodation inherent within the tourism industry. Consequently, the site has become the prototype for the soft variant of ecotourism. As Weaver remarked, they include “participants who make relatively short and physically comfortable visits to serviced sites as one component of a multipurpose experience that is facilitated through the formal industry. It is associated with a superficial or veneer commitment to environmental issues, and the pursuit of a shallow interaction with nature that is mediated through formal interpretation” (447). The strong division between those expecting hard ecotourism and soft ecotourism shapes the experience at Walden and we are left with our imagination, to help us speculate what it must have been like before the State Reservation intervened.

### *Authenticity*

The quest for authenticity was a well known objective of Henry David Thoreau, and was a popular subject in MacCannell’s study, *The Tourist*. Since then, it has become a controversial issue in tourism studies that has been given continuing attention. Scholars have tended to focus the question of authenticity less on nature tourism and more on other varieties of tourism, however. One of the reasons that the subject involves a trend away from nature

tourism is because nature tourism usually involves a natural environment devoid of objects that are subject to questioning as authentic or inauthentic. Also, natural environments are a part of the earth's makeup, and tend to carry a certain irrelevance to authenticity in MacCannell's sense of the word. The ambiguities and pervasiveness of the term have created problems in centering the usage and creating a clear distinction of meaning. While there is certainly no dispute regarding the authenticity of the pond itself and its origins, authenticity still plays an important role in the touristic experience there. In fact, the question of *existential authenticity* at Walden Pond may be the most important of them all. The daily herd of tourists and wraparound fence are just examples of how the existential-authentic experience could be impinged upon.

The State Reservation's pride for their upkeep and maintenance of the site overshadows the ways that accommodating such a large number of people may compromise the Thoreauvian experience that so many seek on their visits. Many visitors did have remarks about their disappointments about the number of people that are let in at one time in addition to protests about the green fence. "I didn't expect the fence trail," one man complained, squinting and raising his arms in the air as though to suggest displeasure. He pointed around the pond and then exclaimed, "You can't even explore the surrounding area of the pond." Another visitor, a homemaker from London, offered her frustration as she was eager to walk back to the main beach area which is close to the parking lot: "There might as well be a train track on the trail where you put a quarter in the machine and circle around the pond and then go home." Her admiration for Thoreau and her expectation before the tour began were clear, and I felt sorry for her when she remarked, "I came all the way from London for this? I'm sure that the little old ladies in tennis shoes were happy, but I'm a true explorer. If Thoreau

was here to see this he wouldn't be happy." She turned around as though she was done expressing her discontent, and then quickly turned toward me again and added her thoughts on the overpopulated area. "I expected a fair number of people, but I didn't think it would be like *this*, and even so, I planned to at least go deeper into the woods so that I could have some time to myself without all the hustle and bustle of all those joggers and all those people with their kids." When I asked her what her purpose was in coming to Walden, she said, "To experience Walden Pond, Thoreau's Walden Pond."

The group of visitors that I spoke with seemed to express either utter satisfaction with the aesthetic characteristics of the site, or complete disapproval of its limitations. Nearly all of the visitors who commented on how glorious the site was to them tended to consist of those with a full devotion to him, or those who had little or no knowledge of Thoreau or his work. On the other hand, those visitors who were troubled made reference to him, acknowledged *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, or mentioned that it inspired their visit. As an avid fan of Thoreau in my younger years, I often acknowledged that the transformation of the site into a public parkland was disconcerting, to both groups. Those with less knowledge of Thoreau had difficulty accepting my comments, snapping back with multiple versions of a Nashville woman's defense, "Look at the water, look at the trees. How could you not fall in love with the foliage? The Red Cross Beach is just adorable, and the trail makes it so much easier to make your way around the whole pond! It's so real!"

The dispute that began to unfold prompted the tourists to examine what constitutes authenticity at a tourist site, and I let them work it out for themselves. Some of the other tourists who were walking by and on their way to Thoreau's house site stopped where we were and listened to their debate. I found myself in a state of disorientation between the two

sides. A part of me was quick to favor the more literary-minded visitors; another part of me was trying to reckon with the others. One man who was observing the discussion commented that he visits Walden about three times a month, and the proximity of the pond to his home makes it convenient. He added that he believes that Walden is a nice place to take a stroll, but he thought that it is not a place for exploration and discovery: "That was for Thoreau, and he sealed it in his book," he said. One Australian woman questioned the necessity for the fence, and remarked that it dishonors the pond and cuts off the experience. Her thoughts drove another woman from Concord to respond with the suggestion that, "Now that the word is out, that this is where Thoreau recorded his thoughts, and this is where he stayed, it has lost its serenity, and the Emersons and Heywoods knew that, and there has to be some control over this precious place. It's a spectacle now, a place of observation, and no longer a place of meditation." If what she says is true, the fence is a deliberate attempt at museum transformation, looking beyond it, far off into the woods, is where history resides.

Walden Pond affords a blend of different perspectives and inquisitive undertakings. The varying degrees of (dis)satisfaction exhibited by the visitors leave the site open for opportunities to extend and question their experience. Quite often, there is a dialectical tension between the visitors who continue to enthusiastically return to Walden and those who feel cheated by the mediated structure, large number of people, and absence of Thoreau's house. The division lies in the perceived authenticity of Walden to Thoreau's day. The performative opportunity for them to engage in a dialogue concerning contested views of Walden Pond allows room for the creation of new meanings, however. As Bruner reminds us, "It is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience, re-live, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture" (Introduction 11-12). As a result of their experience at



Walden, their performative expressions indeed enabled a sort of cultural renewal, at the very place where the foundations of personal experience began. Ironically, the important message and experience of evolutionary development in Thoreau's work was happening at the exact site in which the idea was grounded. The result of this performance is their realization that authenticity is "pluralistic, relative to each tourist type who may have their own way of definition, experience, and interpretation of authenticity" (Wang 355).

In the larger scope, the realization is that Walden Pond is marketed as a natural attraction but is a distinctively socially constructed place. Since MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* this is not a new idea in tourism studies. In fact, the idea of a tourist site as a staged performance leads us with little or no surprise to the debate over authenticity at Walden Pond. Those who were surprised at the inauthentic, however, need to consider the direction in which tourism is headed. Tourism has become so heavily saturated with dramaturgy that the question of authenticity is beginning to lose value because there are "no real places anymore" (Chaney 198). Discounting the cultural value of authenticity would be a mistake, however. If folks can start considering tourist productions as cultural artifices that use devices in certain ways to meet cultural demands, values, and practices, perhaps places and objects can start being used as a means toward authenticity, not as constitutions of it.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

I was walking down the east end of Walden and noticed a log on the shores near Thoreau's cove. I sat on the log and examined the landscape one more time. The number of visitors had noticeably decreased and it was getting darker. Visitors on the beach were packing up their belongings, and trying to redirect their children towards the parking lot. Others were lingering along the shores, but slowly walking to the entrance. Sitting on the log felt good, because I had been walking mostly during my stay. I thought about how excited I was when I had first arrived to finally get to the place that I had been longing to visit all of my life, and how time was running out. It did not occur to me until this very moment that my stay was just a temporary one. There was no cabin waiting for me. The State Reservation began scanning the area to make sure that everyone was on their way out. It was closing time. I knew I had about ten more minutes, and so I stayed put on the log and became challenged to juggle all of my thoughts. I thought about what Thoreau said, that retreating from society should be a temporary endeavor. I was okay with that. Looking through the trees and over the water, I felt the Thoreauvian experience. I was finally at Walden. I thought about the tour, the people that I spoke with, Thoreau, the pond itself, and my approaching transition back to my "normal" life. The show of Walden was over. I asked myself what was really going on at Walden from what I gathered, and what, from the remarks of the visitors, I can conclude about it as a tourist site.

I was thinking about the disappointments that the tourists expressed and the ways in which many of them believed too much had invalidated the site. Then I thought about the

voices trying to get others to see the magnificence of the place. I even asked myself, “Where is the Walden Pond that I know?” I could feel the light rain coming down and started to think solemnly about what still makes this place a product of tourist consumption. For me, it was important to ask myself, “What happened here?” What I found is that Walden is what tourists hope it to be, but through a different lens. It is a representation of itself and a constant reproduction and performance of history, but of a different kind. It is not a reproduction of Thoreau’s famous inhabitation performed by designated actors, nor an opportunity to re-experience it. Not until the very end of the day, sitting on the log, did I start to sense this about Walden: By understanding Walden as a representation of itself, we begin to see fewer problems, dissatisfaction and ambivalence that are connected to all the reasons I’ve listed, and more performances of history unfolding right before our eyes. It was *us*, we made history come alive. The emphasis is more on what had *occurred* and less on what was *seen* (Pollock 20). While the scattering of Walden occurs through pictures and souvenirs, the fixed and ordered space that it creates a “performativity of place” where visitors are engaging in the performance of history the whole time (Simon and Crang 10). Its signifying structures have set the scene for history. As many visitors attested, people decide to go visit Walden to experience what Thoreau so elaborately talked about in his work, but unknowingly create history in a different way. The result is that “the present is made more unified against its past” as the tourists seek to relive a past event (MacCannell 73). They create meaning through discourse that references the past, and therefore it is the “ultimate historical performance” (Pollock 13).

As the tour guide took us on a journey through Walden, I thought about how the story he told called attention to its own partiality. The narrative is strikingly fragmented, yet

contextualizes the past. He begins the story with the replica of the house, explaining the living conditions of Thoreau, moving to discuss the origin of Walden. Afterwards, he jumps to the twentieth century detailing the wishes of the property owners to open the pond to public recreation. He moves to discuss the shoreline erosion that occurred ten years ago, and then focuses a good bit of time informing us about tree leaves and tree identification. He structures the narrative event in a significantly insufficient sort of way. In contrast, the stories of Thoreau and Walden Pond (although never fixed and closed) often have a linear, more detailed structure in historical narratives. The tour guide, however, reshaped the story of Walden, using a narrative construction that *enabled* a narrativity which allowed him to talk about “what *goes into* history as a discursive formation” (Pollock 13). In so doing, the very utterance of the interpreter established the historical performance of and at Walden Pond. The same is true for me. I’ve told a story about the people I’ve studied. My story has made meaning out of our experience. The challenge was to take what I experienced and put it in a time sequence. Unlike the fence, this narrative does not form a circle around the entire pond, but we have to acknowledge that there is “a dialectic between story and experience” and efforts to maintain the dominant narrative structure allow a fruitful outcome (Bruner, *Culture on Tour* 146). A dominant theme of this study is the partiality of narrative. From the park interpreter, to the interviews with the visitors, to the written text itself, we see the inscription of history into culture.

The tour also functioned to help us make sense of what we were experiencing. Walking with the other tourists created a unity among us, which I was lacking now. Our walking signified a unity of culture and the fence created a unity of place. We were gazing at the panorama of Thoreau’s Walden. The framing of the woods helped us appreciate the

natural wonders of his trails *together*. My discussions with them and ritualistic performance of remembrance became an active engagement with the past. We were *contemplating*, a practice that was Thoreau's central ritual (F. Turner 83). I became aware that I was as much a part of the performance as they were. I also (almost) unknowingly achieved a goal that I hoped to accomplish. I conducted an ethnographic study *with* a group of people, and not *of* them, while (re)constructing a history simultaneously.

So I am sitting on this log at Walden Pond. I have decided that I do want to be here. This place is still a refuge. The breeze is cooling me. I have made meaning with like-minded people; they are under a tree of their own, as discrete as they would like to be. I am still learning about culture. I am far off from the sun on car hoods, sucking the marrow out of life. Walking around this place can leave me thirsty, but it is a thirst signaling my thirst for this place, a thirst for reshaping history through restored behavior. I feel as though I will not be here long, because of my company, searching for me, searching for my departure. We are divided for a brief period, a sample of solitude. The tour guide was right. My time walking around the rest of the pond facilitated some of the same experiences Thoreau probably had. This is the heart of my self expression here, where all stimuli are gone, except for my clarity of mind and nature. Walden Pond is an attitude, even at Walden, when the sky gets dark.

Now I know why people come here in the twenty-first century. It provides a space to talk about the past, while using our reflexivity as a paper weight of life. The storms of change, however, will not allow it to be held down for very long. I came to experiment, to see. I hope that this time in solitude you will be with me. The spirit of Thoreau is created here, not found. The water is clear, but it is tainted. Tourism, however, as an economic infrastructure, depends on the in-authenticity of everyday life to thrive. My study involved a trip, a trip to another

place and another time. I speak of another time as in another context *and* another era. In order for it to work, time has to run out though. Time runs out at Walden Pond. I have my own cabin, my Louisiana cabin. I must return to it soon. As I walk through the pathways, I walk as Thoreau did, and I think about the uniqueness of this place. The sign pointing me into the direction of the main entrance confirms *that*. What we did here was more important than what we saw, and our roles as tourists has given us the opportunity to, in the wake of questioning authenticity, escape the everyday mode of being, and situate ourselves in a performative framework that uses *communitas* to talk about a space that has cultural significance. This cultural renewal at Walden Pond showed us that our conversations *led* us to authenticity, at the very place that Thoreau found it as well. Gazing at my footprints, the shadow of Thoreau follows me, even out to the main highway.

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## VITA

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