A Politics of Place: Reading the Signs at Walden Pond / Joy Ackerman

"Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."
---Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

<1> Pilgrimage begins with a vision of place. Look down! The holy is here beneath your feet. The boundary of heaven and earth is not the distant horizon, ever out of reach. It shimmers on the surface of the water. As Thoreau ponders the sky reflected in Walden Pond, he sees the earth encompassed within the spiritual realm. The concept of ‘sacred geography’ also suggests such an embrace. Through the recognition of a pattern in the landscape or the orientation of a temple in the holy city, sacred geography claims that the landscape is a map of the divine order, the shape of the city is a key to the structure of the cosmos. These ascriptions of meaning may be as public and contentious as the land claims of competing religions, or as particular and personal as the anchoring of ideals in iconic places. Sacred geography asserts that our beliefs are revealed in the landscape, and suggests that our experience of place can transform the perception of the sacred.

<2> To speak of the sacred is to have reference to a breadth of phenomena that surpasses the bounds of formal religion. The term ‘sacred’ encompasses no less than the “image of perfection,” those ideals “that a human being sets out to encounter or become on a pilgrimage” (Morinis 2). Walden is the locus of such pilgrimage for some visitors, a node in a network of places connected by sacred geography. Memorialized in Thoreau’s essays about his years in a small cabin on the shores of Walden Pond, the place is embedded in a larger landscape of national heritage, literary tradition, and environmental history. Located in historic Concord in the eastern suburbs of Massachusetts, Walden Pond State Reservation now receives over half a million visitors a year, mainly recreational users and tourists. Walden has also been a pilgrimage destination since the time of Thoreau’s death in 1862, one marker of its enduring status as sacred ground.

<3> Sacred geography shifts the ground rules for the study of place. The term presumes a connection between the material and the spiritual and requires a correspondingly inclusive approach to inquiry. Pilgrimage suggests a means to bring both body and mind to the task of research, and so I went to Walden to explore the subject of sacred geography with the landscape as my guide and the literature of sacred space as my companion. This essay is part of an account of my journey, using the narrative thread of the pilgrim journey to explore the experience of sacred place.

<4> How does one approach the study of sacred space? In their introduction to *American Sacred Space*, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal distinguish the politics and poetics of sacred space. A politics of sacred space draws on a ‘situational’ view of the sacred as a socially negotiated reality, highlighting the play of human power in the contested nature of these places. A poetics of sacred space draws instead on a ‘substantial’ notion of the sacred as an ontological reality, or an essential characteristic of place. I have written elsewhere about the poetic approach to sacred space through a pilgrim encounter with the Thoreau House Replica at the park entrance (Ackerman). Here I use a reading of the signs in the park to uncover something of the politics of sacred space along the path to the site of Thoreau’s hut.

<5> Signs are one indicator of special places, characteristic of boundaries and thresholds. “Entering historic Walden Woods.” “No Pets.” “To site of Thoreau’s hut.” The messages invite, prohibit and inform. Unlike graffiti, signs are officially sanctioned. Their subtext may be read as a claim to ownership, an assertion of power over access, an exercise of the right to interpret the meaning of place. One signature of official presence at Walden Pond State Reservation is the display of solid wooden structures painted ‘park service brown.’ With their thickly routed white lettering, these gates, outbuildings and notice boards invite in me a sense of rugged outdoorsmanship even as they provide cues for behavior in these recreational places.

<6> Standing squarely in the space between the park entrance and the path to Walden Pond, I find several sturdy notice boards with narrow shingled roofs. Each supports an array of information, announcements and warnings pertaining to the park. A boy and his dad stand together before the larger of two signboards, reading about the life of Thoreau and the history of Walden Pond. The posters and pictures seem to support the centrality of Henry David Thoreau in the preservation of unique value, an idea of special place reinforced by the mute testimony of a “Thoreau House Replica” located close by. Not wanting to intrude on the father-son duo, I wander toward the smaller board and discover elements of another story about this place. Here the signs include…

- a job posting for State Beach lifeguards
- an announcement for a Hunter Education course
- a list of Park Rules and Regulations: No Dogs, No Fires, No Camping…
- a notice of elevated mercury levels in fish
- an accounting of donations made to the Conservation Trust Fund:

$1346.00 Junior Ranger T-shirts,

$200.00 bank restoration slide show

$148.38 Thank You plaques

These signs say nothing of the legacy of nature mysticism, but speak instead the bureaucratic language of pragmatic conservationism, an ideal of place accented by the presence of uniformed rangers complete with walkie-talkies.

<7> Standing at right angles to one another, these two signboards might be read as divergent discourses on the meaning of the place. Is Walden Pond to be considered sacred ground or play ground, the haunt of Thoreau’s spirit and central to his legacy, or just another place to take a hike? The substantial notion of the sacred emphasizes the power of place to draw people to a meaningful center. But a situational perspective examines sacred place as contested space – a site of tension and conflict around ownership, use and meaning that suggests the sacred is not autonomous but embedded in human power struggles.

<8> At first, the idea of a ‘politics of sacred space’ sounds sacrilegious. And in their work on this subject, Chidester and Linenthal turn Mircea Eliade’s model of sacred space upside-down [1]. Where Eliade sees the sacred center as set apart from ordinary space, these contemporary scholars of religion and culture observe that sacred space is “inevitably entangled” with profane space. Where the Eliadean model offers the idea of a center that connects different levels of reality, the natural and the supernatural, the situational model claims that sacred space is the site of another kind of hierarchy, one of human power relations involving “domination and subordination,

inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and dispossession." And in contrast to the idea that the creation of sacred space is the work of the gods, a manifestation of some extra-human reality, Chidester and Linenthal remind us of the human "symbolic labor" involved in "setting aside, . . . protecting, . . . and redefining sacred places" (17).

<9> So there is another kind of power at play in sacred space: the power to shape what is seen and accessed, to direct activities and attention in certain directions, to uphold or subvert messages about meaning. Attention to a politics of sacred space will require reading the landscape of Walden with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', an inquiry into the interests served by the particular design and story of place. Thus my pilgrimage will continue with eyes open to discern the various ways that ideas about the meaning and purpose of Walden Pond are mapped out or restricted. I will look for the ways in which a politics of position, of property, of exclusion, and of exile may be manifest here; all hints of the politicization of sacred space suggested in the work of another eminent historian of religion, Gerardus van der Leeuw [2]. My intent in this essay is merely to discover and begin to map out the traces of a politics of sacred space, and to invite further reflection and research on power. Who gains and who loses, whose interests are served and how, by the politics of sacred space at Walden?

The politics of position

<10> One way the sacred is seen as subject to human control is through movement and placement. In contrast to natural features like Walden Pond that are fixed in place, many sacred objects are movable. What established Santiago Compostela in northwestern Spain as a shrine to an apostle beheaded in Jerusalem? It was the myth-shrouded movement of his beheaded body, miraculously carried in a stone boat with no oars and no sails to the 'ends of the earth' (Frey 8-9). The positioning of such a powerful object, 'discovered' in ninth century Spain, had political significance in what was then the contested territory of Moslems and Christians. Suddenly a saint never known to wield a sword became Santiago Matamoras – Saint James, Moorslayer – and began to appear in the triumphalist visions of military leaders even as he stands today "captured in stone, his sword raised" atop the municipal offices across the plaza from his cathedral (Frey 155).

<11> The sacred object need not be portable for position to be at issue, for shrines can also be created in place. In the eyes of Mt. Rushmore's chief promoter, Doane A. Robinson, the positioning of the Mt. Rushmore memorial was integral to its meaning as a "shrine of patriotism" (Glass 161), "a monument to the American myth of frontier and conquest" (Glass 157). The sculptor himself argued for the use of Lincoln and Washington as central figures in place of western heroes like Custer or Lewis and Clark, seeing in the founding fathers 'the unique potential for a monument so definitely and dominatingly national that we will arouse interest in every American.' And it is no accident that this shrine of nationalism is positioned in a place long sacred to native residents [3].

<12> Although Walden Pond has not been moved, actions on the surrounding landscape have nevertheless served to reposition it. In Thoreau's day, the pond lay on the margins of Concord. The cabin was not remote, but still distinctly off-center, well-positioned for a critical stance toward the dominant discourse of the day. Although the pond retained its marginal position with respect to the town center, the valence of the margin changed from one of purity in terms of sacred nature to one of near-profanity, as those contemporary icons of society's fringe – the town dump and the trailer park – were positioned on the pond's eastern shore [4].

<13> In the course of time the pond was also re-centered at another scale and with another meaning by means of changes in transportation. The Boston-Fitchburg railway was built alongside the pond in Thoreau's time, putting Walden within easy reach of urban pleasure-seekers in those early years of leisure excursions. In the 20th century the development of Route 2, a major thoroughfare connecting western suburbs to the metropolitan area, delivered Walden's amenities to the doorsteps of anyone with a car in a 50-mile radius. This busy four-lane highway also effectively cut off the place from continuity with the local town center. From its integral though peripheral place in the wild fringe of historic Concord, Walden Pond has been repositioned as a regional recreational resource.

The politics of property

<14> Another aspect of the sacred that is subject to human action is the availability of a space or object for ownership. The exclusive possession of sacred property can serve political interests by validating the authority or legitimacy of its holder (Chidester 8). Young Arthur and the fabled sword in the stone come to mind, a (hi)story in which possession of the sacred object affirms the birthright of the holder. The appropriation of intangible, symbolic objects can also serve political, social or economic ends. The (mis)use of Native American myth or ritual by some environmentalists (to cast a stone at my own glass house) might be seen as a bid for legitimacy, an attempt to transfer an ethos of ecological nobility on the particular organization or discourse appropriating the tradition.

<15> Possession of sacred property can empower the owner. But similarly, the sacrality of place can be asserted and maintained through claims and counter-claims on its ownership. There's little question of ownership at the park gateway. The state flag flies, Department of Environmental Management logos are everywhere, even the ubiquitous brown paint all announce the Commonwealth's claim on this space and on its meaning as a public recreational facility. At Walden, it isn't just land ownership, but land use that is evidence of a politics of property. If the actions of appropriation, possession and ownership can contribute to the power of place, perhaps its sacred character can also be read and contested through assertions about appropriate use and behavior. After all, a "space is sacred if it is at risk of being stolen, sacred if it can be defiled" (Chidester 19).

<16> What actions, from amusement parks to dog-walking, from the impingement of trailer parks or the threatened construction of high-rise buildings, are seen as desecrating to the place's sacred character, and what behaviors are compatible with continuing consecration of Walden? [5] Taking my hermeneutics of suspicion to a reading of another of the Park's signs, an informational brochure posted at the threshold, allows me to read one history of the Pond as a story of competing ideas about appropriate use. The DEM brochure posted on the large signboard at the park entrance tells the story of how an assemblage of privately owned woodlots in one of the Commonwealth's oldest towns came to be a State Reservation. The text outlines as well a twofold vision of the place – "for recreation and inspiration" ("Walden Pond") – that underlies the pond's contested uses and meanings [6].

<17> Thoreau's ideal of this place, its purity and changelessness, contrasted with and to some extent contested his contemporaries' exploitation of the pond and woods as natural resources. In his day, this area of Concord was no remote wilderness "untrammeled by man." This sandy sloping land had been protected from development prior to 1845, the year Henry built his house, more by its unsuitability to farming and susceptibility to wildfire than by any public sense of sacred value. The railroad track past the pond had been completed just a year earlier, and was in

daily use while Thoreau resided at Walden. And during one winter of his sojourn there, a team of ice-cutters harvested the solid surface of the pond and warehoused the goods on the shoreline (Thoreau, 293-97). Less than ideal for farming, not much good for fishing, the pond and its environs nevertheless held a few commodities worth the taking. Yet Thoreau's own final vision for the place included its preservation from any kind of material harvest.

<18> Outside Walden, and making inroads even there, the Industrial Revolution was underway, as was another movement, more aesthetic and less material. The painters of the Hudson River School presented an alternative view of nature's values. The image of Walden is one of contrast; the author's cabin on the quiet lakeshore with the noisy passage of the railroad train; and is iconographic of the themes of some of these American artists. The contradistinction of 'Nature as Raw Material' with 'Nature as Sacred Inspiration,' contested meanings at a societal scale, are evident in Walden's Thoreauvian origin.

<19> But railroads and romantic notions moved more than poets and painters to seek out nature. Not long after Thoreau's death, the structures on the shores of Walden Pond included bathhouse and baseball diamond, dining and dance halls, boating facilities and concession stands. As the railway company developed an excursion park, Walden became the setting for recreation rather than the substance for inspiration. The pond continued to be a popular destination for recreation into the 20th century, even after the railroad park's demise. Automobiles and new patterns of middle-class activity brought thousands to the teeming shores of the 60-acre pond. The popular perception of the place as a recreational resource, rather than a raw material resource, now contested the ideals of solitude and sanctuary associated with the idea of nature as inspiration.

<20> But throughout the 20th century, Walden was also the site of repeated assertions on behalf of its Thoreauvian meanings. One such claim was marked by a transfer of property: the 1922 grant of 80 acres from private holdings to the Commonwealth. Along with stipulations for continued bathing, boating, fishing and picnicking, the donors required that the land be managed to "preserve the Walden of Emerson and Thoreau." Whether the transfer of property provided more protection or supervision of the place than private ownership, it seems to have done little to alleviate its popularity. The summer of 1935 saw as many as 25,000 people visiting Walden Pond in one day. Is this the Walden of Thoreau?

<21> By 1945, one hundred years after its construction on the shores of the pond, few traces of Thoreau's dwelling remained. In this year an amateur archaeologist carefully excavated the original site of the house and located the chimney foundation (Robbins). A newly formed Thoreau Society inscribed and dedicated a stone to mark the place. These actions – the excavation and the establishment of the monument – attempted to re-appropriate a place for Thoreau at Walden. Like a claimstake, the stone was a visible marker that anchored the image and memory of Thoreau's Walden cabin in place at the pond for those who cared to notice.

<22> The relationship of the Thoreau Society to Walden's Commonwealth-appointed managers is not made clear in the brochure. Were these activities carried out with official approval? Or did the members enter the site secretly, like native Hawaiian traditionalists who access by night their sacred sites, now under National Park Service supervision, in order to ritually reconsecrate the ground (Chidester 2)? Whatever the official relationship of the fledgling organization to the State, the establishment of the stone may be conceived as a political act, a marker of resistance to the dominant recreational use of the land, a place to ritually recast the meaning of Walden in connection with Thoreau's sacred center.

<23> The contentious story of recreation versus inspiration over the succeeding fifty years and more includes many more players and events and organizations, a play whose script is lodged in the memories and archives of people and places peripheral to the pilgrim quest. Suffice it to say that, just as traces of a politics of position is evident here, so are there ample signs in place to read a politics of property at play in Walden. Is there a politics of exclusion at work as well?

The politics of exclusion

<24> One way that a politics of exclusion works is to insure the "sanctity of the inside . . . by maintaining and reinforcing boundaries that keep certain persons outside the sacred place" (Chidester 8). The sanctity of home is available to family members because its doors and walls act to keep out most other people, most of the time. Historically, the sanctity of nature in this country's national parks was defended by excluding people from living therein, even to the point of displacing longtime residents. At Walden, politics may be less a matter of which persons are excluded than how many [7].

<25> Sanctity in some form is protected by restricting access to the reservation to numbers much lower than those Depression-era Sundays that brought tens of thousands of visitors in a day. As the park visitor brochure tactfully informs me, the role of the gatekeeper is to limit the park population to no more than 1000 at a given time, a "people capacity" designed to ensure a positive visitor experience and to maintain the integrity of the resource" ("Walden Pond"). Bold NO PARKING signs on the entrance gates are meant to turn away would-be visitors once capacity is reached and those gates are closed. Visitors seldom experience anything like the solitude that Thoreau enjoyed, and which pilgrims might long to emulate during their own sojourns here. As one commentator notes, "To devotees of Henry David Thoreau that number [1000] is 990-999 too many" (French 68). The restriction in visitor numbers, as an act of exclusion, supports the notion that the purity of nature is better protected in the relative absence of humanity.

<26> The signboard I've been studying provides the visitor with a historical outline of the park, but it also provides a physical map of the place. The outline of the trails includes one that leads to the Thoreau House Site. Rather than a replica, this site of the real dwelling place must certainly be part of my pilgrimage circuit, perhaps the shrine at its center. Making a mental note of the route around the pond, I cross the intervening road and begin to make my way toward the water. The paved walkway I follow runs at a diagonal across the slope toward the beach. All around the pond the land angles sharply upward from the water's edge, the tops of Spring's nearly bare trees accentuating the topographic difference between the pond and the surrounding hills.

<27> A high fence borders the path as I descend the slope, partially blocking my view through the trees to the pond. The tight wire mesh seems out of synch with the blocky wood décor typical of state parks, and I am puzzled by its impenetrability. I suspect that the barrier is meant to keep kids from taking a shortcut straight down the hill to the water. Steep slopes on sandy soil are prone to erosion. When I reach the shoreline, I find a low granite sign pointing the way to the "site of Thoreau's Hut," another arrow on the pilgrim path.

<28> However, the trail to the site is not just marked, it is mandated. The path is enclosed upslope and down by wire fencing meant to confine foot travel to a narrow armored route. The fences, about four feet high on either side of me and firmly anchored with tightly spaced posts, mean business. But whose business? Plywood plaques placed along the fencing hold signs that explain the meaning of the barriers and the significance of the landscape beyond them.

<29> The park is facing a dilemma that many sacred sites experience. Its very popularity brings problems, and the very qualities that contribute to its attraction are compromised by the impact of the visitors it draws. The activities of the faithful, the curious, the fun-loving, often through the influence of sheer numbers, produce a more material form of desecration from which the place must be protected. With so many visitors, the dilemma over how to maintain the purity of Walden is addressed through another 'rite of exclusion' – the physical restriction of visitors from sensitive areas by means of fencing along a carefully constructed pathway. To understand the biophysical impacts of intensive and long-standing use at Walden requires knowing something of its peculiar geology.

<30> A kettle pond, Walden is a deep divot in a thick blanket of sand and gravel formed at the end of the last glaciation. The continual outwash of meltwater from retreating ice spread layers of sediment seaward from the glacial edge, burying the former landscape in sand and gravel and insulating the occasional land-locked iceberg. As these isolated blocks of ice slowly melted away, the sandy surface above them sagged into somewhat circular depressions, the deeper of the holes filling with groundwater to form the natural ponds and lakes common to southeastern Massachusetts. Walden Pond is the water filling the bottom of one of these sandy bowls.

<31> Half a million visitors a year have taken their toll on the place, defiling the green shores and slopes of Walden Pond through the erosive effect of their activity. It's a familiar story in this kind of terrain. Disturbed by the impact of continual foot traffic, easily erodable soil washes away. Shrubs and trees are undermined by erosion and die, then fail to regenerate in the dry, sandy soil. The loss of their subterranean root systems leads to further instability on the steep slopes. And the absence of the annual leaf fall – organic matter that helps hold moisture – impoverishes what soil is left. As one path becomes unusable through erosion, alternate paths into undisturbed areas are made and the deterioration of the shoreline advances to a broader and broader swath. The pond as well as the land around it is affected by these changes. Sediment washes into the water decreasing depth and clarity. The near-shore habitat loses the vegetation that provides shade, cover and nutrients. The integrity of the pond's natural environment is gradually worn away under the eager feet of its admirers to a gullied, barren halo of human impact.

<32> At Walden Pond, sections of the shoreline have been fenced off in succeeding years, in order to protect the soil while it is being armored against further erosion ("Restoring the shore"). The technique used here, called bioengineering, involves stabilizing the surface with organic material while establishing plants with extensive root systems to provide even more stability at depth. What appears at first glance as natural vegetative cover is actually the outcome of skillfully designed emplacement of carefully chosen plant species. A close look at the ground reveals coir rolls and matting, staked into the hill with pegs of live wood; and bundles of live cuttings dug perpendicular to the slope in a similar manner. Now two or three years since planting, the low growth of shrubs and herbs fills in the area between the fenced path and the pond.

<33> Thoreau described a pattern of rocks ringing the pond in his day, most likely lag deposits caused by wave action on the boulder-pocked glacial outwash of the shoreline (Thoreau 183). The resulting 'walled-in' effect could, in his fancy, have given the pond its name while mysteriously marking it off like private property. But now the pond is walled-in by other means, the extensive armoring of bioengineering materials and the fences that protect their work and defy access to the shoreline. Regular rock lined runways are set into the hillside, providing a route for water moving downslope to reach the pond without making new gullies. And, as I walk the chosen path, I begin to see the occasional stone stairway as well, available to allow limited human

access to the shoreline for fishing. Approach to the pond is possible, but carefully controlled and circumscribed by these guardrails of fence and stone.

<34> Another type of exclusion is occurring behind the wire fences. It is not just human trespass onto these sites of active restoration that is controlled. The vegetation is also under orders. The informational signs about the bioengineering project are careful to note that 'native' plants are being grown in this effort. And when the project is finished, and the vegetation well established, "the shoreline will be restored to its native condition, not seen in 75 years" ("Restoring the shore"). The process of exclusion at Walden Pond includes a purifying activity that reveals another facet of our contemporary ideal of nature, for the restoration of what is native implies the exclusion of what is not native. Restoration of the shoreline is not only about ecological integrity, but the establishment of an idealized organic community. What is more sacred in nature is what was there 'before.'

The politics of exile

<35> The sun is warm, the path stretches out before me, and I am becoming accustomed to the narrowness of the way. I stay alert for other pedestrians, needing to stand aside to let by those who pass me from behind, as well as those coming from the opposite direction. As I walk, I rethink my route. How should a pilgrim approach the house site, how should I prepare? I realize now that I had expected to have a quiet moment by the pond, collecting my thoughts and savoring my time here, adopting the pace of pilgrimage and the proper gestures of approach. The unanticipated restrictions of the shoreline have limited my opportunities to wander at will toward the water. Now on the lookout, I eventually come across an unoccupied fisherman's landing and descend the stone steps to the pond's edge.

<36> A flat rock, winged with densely branched and freshly budded blueberry bushes, forms a private niche for my meditation. Sounds drift down from the path behind me: the regular slap-slap of a jogger's sneaker soles, gravel crunching like the sound of steady chewing- the regular stride of a determined walker; loose threads of dialogue from unseen partners float by like dust motes in sunshine.

You have to find other people who want to do it . . . That's the problem with society . . . you can't just drop your job, drop your kids, drop your . . .

<37> The passing voices come into range and retreat again like the hum of the commuter train across the pond, a series of excuses dropped like wishes into the still water. Though coated with reason, the words reveal a longing to be like the imagined Thoreau: solitary, unencumbered, dwelling in nature's midst. This nostalgia for paradise reveals something of the modern conviction under which we live, believing ourselves cast out from nature and forever unable to return. The best we can do is to speak lovingly and longingly of the imagined homeland, and make periodic pilgrimage to its holy places. The "problem with society" is that we imagine ourselves a diaspora – a community that lives in exile from the nature it still thinks of as somewhere in the past, or somewhere 'out there' far from home.

<38> Walden, as a sign of our exile from nature, complements what is considered to be a modern alienation from the sacred as well. Although we may still hold the home as an ideal of sacred space, in much of American society the experience of sanctuary is generally missing. The functions of home are displaced or replaced, the boundaries weakened and dissolved by the

sporadic presence of the household members or the intrusion of the outside world through electronic media.

<39> What does exile mean for our sense of the sacred in nature? Only that “the most sacred places [are] remote, and the most authentic religious experience in relation to sacred space [is] homesickness” (Chidester 9). The aptness of exile as a description of the modern condition affirms our movement away from or out of the sacred landscape, even if only through nature’s erasure or desecration.

<40> In the historical study of some religions, when people migrate or are driven out of the homelands where religious place and practice are intimately intertwined, fundamental changes in theological concepts result (Smith xii-xiii). One way in which some diasporic communities differed from their rooted counterparts was in the gradual severing of ties between land and religion, a growing emphasis on freedom from place, and the development of a utopian cosmology. Place allegiance shifted to from ‘here’ or ‘near here’ to a heavenly or otherwise ‘ideal’ place.

<41> Continued connection to a homeland might be fostered through practices such as pilgrimage. But these journeys can be as much a visit to the symbol as to an actual place. Jerusalem or Walden: either might stand for the future expectation of the exiled; or the longed-for idyllic past recounted in song and story in the diaspora; but relatively few see the holy ground as a potential dwelling place. After all, “you can’t just leave your job…”

<42> A politics of sacred space at Walden Pond includes the affirmation of our exile from nature. The place works to remind us that the sacred is out of reach, yet still desirable; sought, but never realized; valued and visited, but never lived in. From the perspective of a politics of exile, the power of nature is both affirmed and subordinated. Its value is affirmed by the action of preservation; its subordination assured by its restriction to a reservation. Here on the path to the House Site, the power of Thoreau emerges for me through his incarnation of modern man dwelling with nature – neither fleeing away, nor fencing it out. This nineteenth century green man holds out the prophetic possibility of restoration with nature, and in doing so reinforces our own sense of exile from it.

<43> What does a reading of Walden from the perspective of a politics of sacred space tell us about the power of place, and the role of the pilgrim? From this critical perspective, the sacred is not an essential aspect of place but one constructed and maintained by human effort, through the signs we make, the stories we tell, the rules we follow. Sacred places are not revealed, made holy by an indwelling power; rather, certain spaces are sacralized by the “cultural labor of ritual” (Chidester 6). Intentional human effort, rather than divine agency, produces and reproduces sacred space through the “hard work of attention, memory, design, construction, and control of place” (Chidester 6).

<44> Such a critical, political view of sacred space casts not only place but pilgrims in a different light. From this perspective, pilgrims are not only humble seekers after enlightenment or healing, but potentially powerful players in a political field. My claims about the meaning of Walden run counter to other assertions about the meaning and the appropriate use of the space. My presence here as a pilgrim, bearing my copy of Walden rather than my beach towel, walking slowly and meditatively rather than jogging, seeking in a public park solitude and silence - the accoutrements of privacy- are actions which constitute a claim on this place. Whether or not we intend it, pilgrimage is a political act.

Notes

[1] In Eliade, see Chapter X. "Sacred Places." In Chidester and Linenthal, the editors' literature review and theoretical framework for a politics of sacred space are presented in their introduction to this collection of essays on American sacred space (1-42). [^]

[2] Chidester and Linenthal (6-9) draw on van der Leeuw's much earlier work (first printed in English in 1938) to develop a lineage for their theories of a politics of sacred space in the phenomenological work of the eminent historian of religion. [^]

[3] Part III of Glass's essay concerns American Indian Movement (AIM) activities at Mount Rushmore, or Paha Sapa, and the site's use as a locus of protest regarding injustice to Native Americans. At issue in the contested nature of sacred space is not just the question of secular/sacred; but sacred to whom? A measure of the possible differences in the meaning of Mount Rushmore can be summed up by the term "the faces of killers" which Glass uses to sum up its symbolic power for several Lakota people he interviewed (185n66). [^]

[4] Edmund Schofield notes in Henley (33) the movement and enlargement of the town dump to its position across Rt.126 from the pond between his first visit in 1955 or 1956, and his return 25 years later. The landfill has been closed and capped, and was being used as a transfer station when I made this pilgrimage to Walden in May, 2001. At that time, the trailer park had been 'grandfathered' by the town and only a few residences remained. [^]

[5] In 1984 Brister's Hill, a part of what was once and is now once more called 'Walden Woods' was slated for the development of a three story office building and another location, Bear Garden Hill, was under consideration for a condominium development. It was partly in response to these threats that Henley's book of essays by American notables was produced, and a major fundraising project to protect a larger area around Walden Pond – the so-named Walden Woods – was begun. See the organization website http://www.walden.org for further information on its history and connection with the Thoreau Institute and Thoreau Society. [^]

[6] Unless otherwise noted, the historical events discussed in this section are presented in the DEM brochure "Walden Pond." [6]

[7] The issue of which persons are excluded is not unimportant, but less obvious from this particular pilgrim vantage point. On a hot summer day when the park is filled to capacity with day long bathers, those tourists and pilgrims who wish to visit the place will not find parking space. A related issue is that of excluded activities. See Chidester and Linenthal for an interpretation of the Park Service regulations as *kapu* laws (ritual observances for sacred space): "No picnicking, sunbathing, or smoking" (2). [7]

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