

**PILGRIMAGE SITES IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST:
A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF SACRED DESTINATIONS**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage Sites in the American Southwest: A Narrative Exploration of Sacred Destinations

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Literature Review

The study of pilgrimage covers a wide range of approaches: historical, personal, theoretical, literary, even artistic (Coleman and Elsner 8). No one view encompasses the richness of the pilgrimage experience, yet certain principles help define the practice and its significance. Most scholars discuss pilgrims as visitors delineated by their levels and modes of participation at a given site (Hendrickson 139, Coats 485). This may involve inclusion in a liminal community, which anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner call *communitas*, a group of people who leave the familiar and enter a more equalized society (Holmes-Rodman 44, Turner 135). Inhabiting the pilgrimage sites at the same time, visitors consequently embody what religious scholar Thomas Bremer calls “simultaneity of place:” each visitor has a unique understanding of the site, applying myriad interpretations of the same externalities: they choose how and if they will participate in rituals, obtain tokens from their journey, and allow the trip to affect their self-image (Coleman and Elsner 6-9, Olsen 134, Bremer 3). Those who run the pilgrimage site may ascribe to a modernist view of identity formation, in which the site reinforces a prior concept of self, or a postmodernist view, in which the site exerts influence over a visitor (Olsen 363).

Thesis Statement

Simultaneously curated, engaged, and contested, pilgrimage sites generate subjective narratives that emphasize arrival as an experience of return.

Theoretical Framework

My body of work explores pilgrimage at three major sites in the American Southwest: Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah; the Santuario de Chimayó in New Mexico; and Sedona, Arizona. I examine the historical background and anthropological frameworks of personal and communal pilgrimage experiences, as well as spiritual and touristic site curation.

Project Description

Research for the project was conducted through close textual analyses of narrative and academic writing on the three pilgrimage sites, testing and reconsidering contemporary anthropological and cultural geographical theories of the pilgrimage phenomenon. Balancing research with fieldwork, I organized informal and semi-formal interviews with people associated with the sites, including local Mormon missionaries, two historians at Chimayó (Richard Rieckenberg and Pat Oviedo), and contemporaneous visitors at Chimayó. While at Chimayó in March 2018, my experience provided immediate reflection filtered through my completed scholarly research. In contrast, I visited Temple Square and Sedona prior to and outside the scope of the project, which has afforded me a rich opportunity for reflection well *after* these experiences and *before* I understood them as pilgrimages. Finally, I examined tourism websites for Salt Lake City (templesquare.com), Chimayó (holychimayo.us), and Sedona (visitsedona.com) to examine their crafting of a virtual tourism experience as contemporary pilgrimage. My exploration of pilgrimage sites culminated in original works of prose and poetry.

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I am thankful for the people who made this pilgrimage possible. Dr. Stabile made the path clearer and gave me incredible guidance, as well as confidence in proceeding. The AVPA's financial support enabled me to travel, massively expanding this project's possibilities. My family, roommates, and friends gave me the space and motivation to keep walking. And a merciful God helped me return to the one pilgrimage that matters.

INTRODUCTION

“Happy are those who find refuge in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrim roads.”

Psalm 84:6 (NAB)

Whether they travel by foot across the desert or drive a rental car from the nearest airport; whether Catholic or Muslim or secular adventurer; whether provoked by religious ritual or sightseeing; every pilgrim sets out on a journey, carrying the hope of arriving at a specific destination. In my explorations of the pilgrimage phenomenon, I, too, have taken a journey of sorts, and have arrived at unexpected destinations, the most important being the pilgrimage sites I've researched and visited. The concept for this project began when I read the above Bible verse. I wondered: what compels people to make a pilgrimage in an age of global advancements, and how are such journeys still relevant, if at all? Though I set out to understand spiritual travel in a broad sense, my initial research kept leading back to three specific locations in the American Southwest: Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah; the Santuario de Chimayó in New Mexico; and Sedona, Arizona. I learned that the desert landscape of the Southwest is home to “the densest network of pilgrimage activity in the United States,” in large part because of its unique gathering of cultures that emphasize religious ritual—including Native American, Hispanic Catholic, and countercultural Anglo spiritualities (Fox 34). I also realized that if I was going to write with much authority on the subject, I'd need to go on my own pilgrimage, and the Southwest was perfectly accessible. Soon, Temple Square, the Santuario de Chimayó, and Sedona all beckoned to me. I made understanding these destinations my own “destination.”

For all their differences, the pilgrimage sites share a common thread: seemingly inconsistent components converge in a singular and concentrated area. The spiritual intertwines with the physical. History is enacted in the present. Individuals enter a larger (yet still liminal)

community. Pious, focused pilgrims and indulgent, irreverent sightseers blend religious and touristic intentions. It is these tensions and complexities that create what religious scholar Thomas Bremer calls a “simultaneity of place,” in which visitors “make distinct places out of a shared space” (Bremer 3-4). In other words, each pilgrim projects their own expectations and perceptions onto the location; one geographic site can offer as many experiences and hold as many meanings as people who engage it. Pilgrimage, then, is a form of world-making.

Such world-making illustrates how pilgrims’ engagement with and inhabitation of a site changes a generic location into a lived “place.” As cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argues, “space” is a quantifiable area, a geographic location, but place “has more substance than the word location suggests: it is a unique entity... it has history and meaning. Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people” (“Humanistic” 387). People make places when they project their interpretations onto a space and carve out a particular, unique understanding of their relationship to the physical location. Phenomenologist Edward Casey posits that the process of placemaking occurs through bodily emplacement, in which the bodily experience of travel to and existence within a space helps transform it into an interpreted, meaningful place. “Through hands and feet, knees and hips, elbows and shoulders,” Casey argues, “the body insinuates itself subtly and multiply into encompassing regions” (21). Casey describes emplacement as a mutual process: as the bodies create a place, so too does the place create meaning for the people who move to and inhabit it, affecting their self-understanding. Pilgrimages involve the bodily movement to a location as well as the experience of being in that location, and although some scholars focus on the journey, I have chosen to primarily focus on the destination—the pilgrimage sites themselves—and how embodiment within these specific spaces results in

visitors' creation of distinct places, as well as how their methods of placemaking affect pilgrims' self-image.

Simultaneous and sometimes conflicting “places” unfold as individuals apply their understandings to the site, including aesthetic, spiritual or religious, and touristic interpretations. Thus, narrative and creative explorations of pilgrimage sites serve an important role, since it is in the subjective interpretations of individual visitors and pilgrims that a depth of understanding arises. My thesis examines personal experiences at these sites. Cultural geographer Doreen Massey, drawing on Tuan’s concepts of place and space, states that “places are collections of [individual] stories, articulations with the wider power-geometries of space” (130). It is the stories of individuals that carve out places from the shared space, and as the stories converge, their simultaneous (and contrasting) existence adds layers of interpretation to a pilgrimage site’s more objective history and religious ties.

The three Southwestern pilgrimage sites in my study expand the anthropological and cultural geographical understanding of place to its curation. It seemed that the level of curation—that is, in what ways the visitor/pilgrim is guided, directed, and influenced—affects how and to what extent they are able to project their own meaning, as opposed to receiving a preconceived meaning from site curators or other pilgrims. In Temple Square, where the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a clear goal and mission, visitors exist primarily in a binary of belief or disbelief, since explanatory materials and tour guides provide scripted interpretations and the central temple’s limited access delineates clear exclusivity. Visitors are urged, in a sense, to take a side. Chimayó’s Spanish Catholic aesthetics and rituals, as well as some loose behavioral regulations, orient visitors towards an interpretation of the site’s sacredness; however, it also has wide cultural influences and spaces in which visitors can move more freely, allowing

for narratives that aren't necessarily tied to the site's religious meaning. And in Sedona, with a wider geographic area and more diverse groups influencing its founding, New Age pilgrims take a much less visible position amidst a thriving tourism industry focused on the area's art and topography. In addition, since the city's draw is attributed to its natural aesthetics rather than human creations (like a temple or shrine, for example), the elements to which some ascribe spiritual power are just as open to non-spiritual interpretation.

The curation of pilgrimage sites, I would argue, challenges the Turnerian idea of *communitas*, which leading pilgrimage scholars Victor and Edith Turner define as the removal of individual identifying factors in order to participate in the liminal pilgrimage community. However, if a visitor's "place" construction doesn't match that of others, the visitor will feel doubly out-of-place. This means people can feel disengagement, too, as opposed to engagement with the site; if they don't internally connect with the projected meanings of fellow visitors or site curators, they may be pushed to the "limits" of an already liminal community.

My own conflicted experience of placemaking at the variably curated pilgrimage sites at Salt Lake, Chimayó, and Sedona was an unexpected result of this project. As I moved through these spaces in personal experience, virtual tourism, and the stories of others, I quickly found that the *spaces* I studied—their histories and aesthetics and traditions—were quite different from the *places* I conceived and inhabited, places that were affected by the curated elements and the liminal pilgrim communities with which I interacted. It disappointed me that I couldn't enter into each site as fully as more religious pilgrims; sometimes, I felt like I was missing out.

At the same time, however, I realized that even a displaced experience is an enactment of a place's simultaneity: no one framework can fully summarize the pilgrimage phenomenon, and it is in creative understandings that narratives, theories, histories, and images weave together.

Even a story of disappointment has its place. In the pages that follow, I let such stories arise. I contextualize each site with a brief introduction, engaging the scholarly concepts on which the prose and poetry will expand. Some of the creative pieces come from my perspective as a pilgrim or writer; some, from personas I adopted based on my interviews with others. All of the works illustrate the joys and challenges of existing at a pilgrimage site and carving out a place from the shared space—which may be a place of community or exclusion; connection or distance; transformation, disappointment, or neutrality. As the pieces progress, they unfold the idea that a pilgrimage might be less of an adventure to a new destination and more like a return to something inherent and familiar, a place that exists within long before it takes shape in an external site. I have been transformed by arriving at and returning to these sites in study, story, travel, and writing, and it is a delight to share the journey.

PART I

TEMPLE SQUARE

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had a tumultuous beginning. In 1830, Joseph Smith received what he believed was a revelation from Jesus Christ, who urged him to start a new church based on the original intentions of the Gospel as found in the Book of Mormon. Christian leaders in his home state of New York persecuted Smith and his growing ranks of followers, thus initiating a process of displacement across the United States. Church headquarters began moving west, and after Smith was killed by hostile communities in Illinois, Brigham Young led early Mormons further, until he received a revelation that they would firmly establish the church in what is now Salt Lake City, Utah. A large temple, constructed by early pioneers for forty years, was the center of the city: everything from church administration buildings to residences to stores sprawled out from that central spot. It has become the “symbolic center point of the Mormon world” for its historical and spiritual significance (Hudman and Jackson 115).

Today, Temple Square not only includes that temple and commemorative monuments, but also the Tabernacle (home to the Mormon Tabernacle choir), two visitors’ centers, a museum of church history, meeting halls, and a family genealogy research building (called the FamilySearch Discovery Center). Each building has a specific purpose as outlined on the Temple Square website, templesquare.com. For example, the South Visitor’s Center “focuses on the temple and the importance of families” and features a scale model of the temple. The Beehive House, Brigham Young’s historic home, serves as a museum of the early Latter-day Saint (LDS) pioneers in Salt Lake City. Furthermore, within those buildings, placards explain the significance of such elements as paintings and statues, defining for visitors the exhibits’ intended meaning.

Outside “I’ll Walked Where Jesus Walked,” an art space for children in the Church History Museum, hangs a lifelike painting of Jesus handing flowers to children. A placard beneath the painting reads, “Learning the stories of Jesus helps you to have faith in Him . . . We hope you feel His love as you look, play, and create in this exhibit that is all about Him” (“I’ll Walk”). The explanation gives visitors a purpose and vision for their intended experience, limiting their subjective interpretations of the exhibit by urging them towards specific goals: learn about Jesus, feel His love. Everything in Temple Square redirects visitors to the site’s central religious and historical meaning, down to the female missionaries (trained by the overarching hospitality coordination) who guide visitors through the area, answer questions of church doctrine, and share their personal testimonies of the Mormon faith.

This careful coordination aims to make sure visitors understand the significance of the space through an LDS lens. Visitors to Temple Square will likely experience a less spontaneous or personal simultaneity of place, as the prearranged interpretations from placards and tour guides mediate and limit individual interpretation. This is an intended effect, though; church leaders make sure that church information is accurately conveyed because they recognize that Temple Square could serve as a catalyst for conversion if a visitor associates positive feelings with the site and Mormon doctrine (Olsen “Strangers” 129-134).

One of these doctrines includes a belief that LDS family units will be preserved in the afterlife (Davidson and Gitlitz 109). This is why the genealogy center in Temple Square exists—families can research the names and stories of their relatives, orienting themselves within a larger ancestral context. In fact, when I sat down with local LDS missionaries in College Station, one missionary echoed the way her connection with the site came from that ancestral context. Her ancestors were part of that initial group of pioneers who built the temple. She said that seeing the

temple gave her a sense of strength and feeling of closeness to these family members, who had faced persecution, yet persevered to create a place of refuge that she could now enjoy with her present family (Cottrell).

I examine this concept in the poem, “Axis Mundi,” a phrase meaning “world’s center” that researcher Daniel Olsen used to describe Temple Square as “a major center of worship, ritual and instruction” (“Negotiating Identity” 362). I applied it in a more personal sense in the poem, drawing on Sister Cottrell’s words about familial bonds and ancestral strength to write from the point of view of a young Mormon visiting Temple Square.

The second creative work, “Outside,” is a flash fiction story about Temple Square’s deliberate curation: the constant references to LDS history, the ubiquitous explanatory placards, and the way these choices can limit pilgrims’ experiences and interpretations of the site. While it clearly communicates the Church’s mission, it can also inhibit non-Mormons’ (and reluctant Mormons’) interaction with this “holy” place. The story centers on a young Mormon girl who grapples with how the Square—and the people who understand and agree with its mission—makes her feel more excluded than included. It’s a risk site curators take in limiting the width of simultaneous interpretations: some pilgrims may find themselves spiritually distant from their physical destination.

Axis Mundi

Existing at the center,
like pressing my ear to my father's chest.
He can fit his arms around my whole small frame,
he pulls me close.
I hear a steady baritone
thudding under his button-down—
certain and heavy
with the weight of times I cannot comprehend.
That same pulse at my birth
and long before:
an unimaginable history sprawling beneath me.
His hands made firm by years outside
guarding against the ones who do not understand.
This steady shelter. This backbone place.
The rising rhythm of his breath
lulls my chaos thoughts
and the sharp earth softens
beneath heavy eyelids.
That is how it feels to be here
the *axis mundi*
where beginnings and endings run together seamlessly.
Generations unfurling: a family tree
with leaves and branches unobservable
canopying me
in decades of earned strength.
Here, where I can slip into the heart's tide
and the world falls away.

Outside

The girl could see the Temple spires twisting into the cornflower sky, the granite peeking out above the yellowing trees like it was playing hide-and-seek. The gold Moroni statue, almost too small to make out from the parking lot, and the metallic Tabernacle dome glinted in the morning. She took her mother's hand and they walked toward the center of the Square. The girl had a tendency to study her mom's hand when Sunday services started to get long. It was bigger than hers, with shallow wrinkles and veins that web around the bones. Once, her mind wandered to a word she learned in science class. Decomposition. How a dead body would melt and dissolve until only the skeleton remained. What would her mom's hand look like then? Those unmoving fingers? She snapped her mind to what she knew was true: perfect bodies and families forever. She'd get to see her mom's hands redeemed in Heaven and her own too. No skeletons.

The girl and her mom arrived for their tour of Temple Square hand in hand. A fat man with a face as round and harmless as the moon arrived at the same time. The girl's mother leaned over to chat with him.

"Have you been here before?" the mother asked.

The man shook his head. He said he wasn't Mormon, but had lived in Utah all his life, and suddenly had a curiosity.

The girl turned to give her mother a sly smile, as if say, *See! There is something special here, people just don't know what it is*, but the mother just politely nodded and continued the conversation. A pair of sister missionaries in long, crisp skirts arrived to take them on the tour, and when they got close to the temple, the man spoke up.

"Now, I'm not a Mormon, so I can't go in there, right?"

One of the missionaries nodded. "Right."

The man puffed his bubblegum cheeks and tried to joke, “So there must be some good secrets in there, huh?”

The missionaries spread rehearsed smiles on their faces—the girl didn’t want to think that, but that’s what she saw—and told the man what the girl’s mom had told her when she’d begged to be let into the temple for a cousin’s wedding: “It’s not a secret place, it’s just sacred.” They all kept walking, and the girl lagged behind, trying to read every placard so that one day she’d know enough about the Church to be let into the temple, too.

The group walked into the South Visitor’s Center, where a miniature model of the temple stood stoically in the lobby. The cutout rooms taunted the girl with their tiny couches and chandeliers, like if she could just get small enough, she could walk through the glass display case and into the temple and go down its neatly-guarded, carved granite halls.

They arrived at the end of the tour at the North Visitor’s Center, passing through the lobby and into a rotunda, and the white walls became deep purple, and images of the cosmos unfurled around the girl: a galaxy flinging stars, planets floating in orbit, black clouds stretching across the room. She turned around and saw two kids standing still beneath a tall white statue of the Resurrected Christ—their heads tilted back, staring at the statue’s outstretched hands, wounded palms. He seemed to be gazing at them. His eyes were set under gentle brows and soft lids, but without pupils. She walked forward and studied the eyes; they had all the makings of kindness, save the empty center. Carved clothing draped precariously across Jesus Christ’s body. One move and it would all come slinking off.

She giggled, then caught the laughter in her throat. Thinking of the naked Savior! The missionaries would have a fit! She walked to the windows at the back of the room and sat on a quilted bench, the warm sunlight stretching over her spine.

Her mom came into the rotunda and spied the girl sitting down. She scooted in next to her and studied the statue and the swirling murals. “Pretty cool, huh?” she asked after a long silence.

The girl nodded, looking directly ahead.

“This is my favorite part of the Square,” the mother said.

“I thought the Temple would be your favorite.” The girl had watched her mom hang up a picture of the Salt Lake Temple in their hallway.

Her mom conceded, “Yeah, okay, that’s the best place. Then this is my second favorite. This room... this room reminds me of the bigger picture.”

“What do you mean?”

“The bigger picture.” She pointed at the painted Earth on the wall behind the statue, and said, “See? That’s where we are. Our lives feel so important, and they are, but there’s this whole galaxy and realm outside of our lives. Like, look how big Jesus is compared to the Earth. And that’s the whole Earth there! You have to zoom in and in and in to be able to see people on it. We’re smaller than the bristles on the paintbrush that this mural was painted with!”

The girl wrinkled her brows. She suddenly didn’t like feeling that small.

Her mom turned to face her. “It’s a perspective thing. Heavenly Father is bigger than our little worries here on earth. We have to keep our eyes on what really matters, keep our eyes on getting to heaven so we can spend eternity with our families. Does that make sense?”

She dipped her head one time, to say she understood, but her mind spun. A mess of thoughts splattered like stars in a black sky: the blank eyes of the Christ statue, trained on the speck of earth she occupied, and His big hands, clumsy in holding her.

The moon-faced man talked in a corner with the missionaries, glancing up at the statue. Into his pudgy hands they slipped a Book of Mormon, and he walked out of the room, beaming.

PART II

SANTUARIO DE CHIMAYÓ

Spanish settlers arrived in the Chimayó valley of northern New Mexico in the late 1700s. According to local legend, in 1813, a settler named Bernardo Abeyta miraculously found a crucifix buried in the dirt on his plot of land. Three times he tried to bring the crucifix to the local Catholic church, and three times it reappeared in the ground, signaling to him and the other faithful Catholics that the dirt was blessed. Locals constructed an adobe chapel, the Santuario, around the hole from which Abeyta dug the crucifix, and they began a practice of gathering the dirt for physical and spiritual healing (Kay 40-42). Some rubbed the thin, sandy earth on their bodies; some ingested it; some carried it with them. Word spread about this healing dirt, fueled by stories of miraculous healing. Today, the Santuario de Chimayó is a testament to its historical and religious roots as well as to the nearly 300,000 visitors who come to gather dirt from the hole, pray, take photos, purchase art, and leave offerings of rosaries and candles. Each night, believers say, the hole miraculously refills itself. Site managers, though, will admit that they are the ones refilling the hole with clean dirt blessed by a priest (Hendrickson 133-136).

In contrast to Temple Square's constant, detailed reminders of the site's mission and history, the Santuario places less emphasis on communicating an exact meaning and more on crafting an environment of respect, prayer, and reflection. Pilgrims are encouraged to follow basic guidelines (use short candles, avoid loud conversations, and refrain from taking photos indoors) and are welcome to read explanatory material (some of which is simply printed on basic printer paper and hung in thin photo frames), but there is a freedom within Chimayó for personal exploration and meaning-making.

When I visited Chimayó in March 2018, for instance, I met families who came as an annual tradition, tourists who thought the chapel looked interesting in their guidebooks, academics intrigued by its religious significance, and Catholic young adult pilgrims who walked one hundred miles to the site during their spring break. One visitor told me she was seeking to understand the feminine energies of the place; one said that he admired the arid natural environment; another, a Pueblo Indian, felt the site embodied Native American spirituality. And we all felt welcomed.

At Chimayó, pilgrims' stories about the place converge, making it difficult to distinguish myth from fact and intended tradition from improvised ritual. The overlapping narratives I heard represent a larger tension at the sacred site. During my tour with local historians Richard Rieckernberg and Pat Oviedo, they explained Chimayó's internal conflicts: some locals think that the simultaneous meanings—though sources of cultural and religious diversity—have overlapped so much that the site's true purpose has been obscured. Additionally, some worry that commodification has begun to usurp the religious background, as touristic elements like gift shop trinkets and snacks are sold in the area surrounding the Santuario. These controversies take form in the poem "Palimpsest."

The next work, "*Genius Loci*," is a creative nonfiction essay that details different objects (art pieces, offerings, souvenirs for purchase) with which pilgrims can interact at the Santuario. I found that these connections help pilgrims construct meaning at the site, giving rise to simultaneous places in the singular space. Because the Santuario does less to curate how and why such interactions occur, people craft more diverse understandings of Chimayó. The piece centers on my own unexpected experience at Chimayó: I was reluctant to engage with the objects, the site, the spirituality of the Santuario. Bothered by a sense that everything was a bit

superstitious and kitsch, as well as preoccupied with completing my research, I found myself recoiling from chances to participate. This confused me; I am a practicing and devout Catholic but did not at first feel a connection to the site. However, as I spoke with visitors and leaned into that discomfort, I became more aware of the way a sense of the divine permeates ordinary matter—maybe only because others believe it does. My interactions with and observations of the visitors prompted me to ask whether the site itself contained a “spirit of the place”—a *genius loci*—or if that “spirit” was simply a projection of a pilgrim’s predispositions and prior understanding of the place.

Since my connection with Chimayó took shape through people’s words and stories, my poem “Designing at the Loom” explores how Chimayó became my own distinct place *because of* our shared inhabitation. While on a tour with Pat Oviedo, she took me up the road from the Santuario to a weaving shop nearby and introduced me to a master weaver in the Chimayó valley, Lisa Trujillo. Trujillo’s work, and the work of many local artists, is more culturally than religiously driven. I learned that Chimayó has an art community practicing Spanish and Native traditions that is largely detached from the Santuario, although some artists contribute paintings and sculptures on commission (Oviedo). The weaver’s words took on particularly spiritual meaning for me, one that connects to spontaneous creativity. Trujillo told me that she rarely has a plan for a final product when she begins weaving. I wondered how she could so confidently set out on a creative venture without a destination in mind, while pilgrims journey towards a specific place with the same confidence. In comparing these experiences, I found a desire for my writing to “arrive,” and took heart in the adaptable journey of artist and pilgrim. It was in this poem that I realized I created meaning out of my time in Chimayó, if in an unexpected way.

Palimpsest

Chimayó—you weave distant strands into a single tapestry

Braid my white skin with Native tongue

Patricio's brown calloused palms wrapped around a German traveler's dainty fingers

The feminist book tour and the walking pilgrimage of Catholic college students

Traced the same map

Arrived on the same day

And without speaking, overlapped

A baby's whimpers collide with Father Julio saying Mass with Helen's thudding Hail Mary's

All ricocheting against the adobe chapel walls into one clunky song

Sing community into us, Chimayó

Unite us, *las tres culturas*, kiss us with the same holy water

No one is exempt from kneeling to gather dirt

From remembering the sand that will hold our unmoving bodies when our souls leave

We are families coiling like cotton vines on a cross-covered gate

And histories ground into fine chipotle powder

Red and green and yellow candle wax dripping together

Tears layered on laughter

A prayer for healing melts into the mourning of healing that never came

Chimayó—

What do we lose when we yield to your gravity?

Do we forget the topography of *abuela's* hands?

The smell of Leona's fresh bread, given without cost to hungry pilgrims?

Do we forget how to be hungry?

How Jesus' ribs became visible on the cross?

Do we know that Jesus looks so different with white skin?

Is this knotted history too quickly forgetting its first thread?

Genius Loci

Rosarios

When I step out of my car and into the Santuario de Chimayó courtyard, it is not the statues I notice first, but the rosaries that hang from them. Bright beads drip from saints' limbs and hang around their necks like bumpy plastic scarves. I am surprised baby Jesus' hands don't fall off from the weighty prayers he holds. In my backpack, I know I have a rosary somewhere, but I don't add my offering, resolving to wait until the Santuario really means something to me.

Reredos

I slide into a pew and drop the heavy kneeler; and though I get to my knees and fold my hands I never close my eyes, staring instead at the *reredo* behind the altar. The carved and painted wooden backdrop frames a large crucifix in off-center patterns and folksy symbols of Christ's passion—nails, a pierced heart, the crown of thorns—in rainbow hues worn down by time. I cannot look away, though I do not think it is beautiful. I sit and study the other *reredos*: two on each side wall, also faded, depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe with a cocked-forward head and Teresa of Avila with jutting limbs. None of the saint portraits prompt me to pray. Mass begins. But I'm preoccupied with my research project and before I know it the service has ended. A woman beside me crosses herself and leaves me alone, surrounded by sleepy candlelight and the blank eyes of disproportionate saints.

Pocito

The elderly congregants have filed into a side room. I wait in line, and when my turn comes, I duck under a low doorway and find the sacred well of dirt, *el pocito*, at my feet. It's smaller than I imagined. I move to the corner of the room. I don't have a container, so I wait for people to fill their bags and leave. The security camera's glassy black eye stares at me as I gather

some confidence and kneel at the edge of this little hole in the ground. I poke my fingers into the cool dirt, fine powder and full of clumps. I do not have a bag with me and rubbing it on my aching knee feels superstitious. I wish someone would tell me what to do.

Fotografias

Leaving the from the *pocito* room, I find a sign telling me what to do: “Many visitors to the Santuario leave photos of their loved ones. **Please pray** for those whose pictures you see here. If you wish to leave a photo, please bring it to the Abeyta Welcome Center.” On all four sides I am surrounded by glossy, unblinking faces, cut into squares that line the hallway.

That afternoon, my tour guide tells me, “Every time I come, it has new pictures. People used to just tape them on the walls, but it was a mess. Now the staff has got this whole system to keep them orderly, so people bring pictures, and they’re collected, then hung up nice and neat.” I ask why people like to leave photos. He pauses, staring at the wall of anonymous faces. “Being included here, it makes people feel good. Connected. And it looks pretty nice, huh?” I nod.

What does it mean to whisper prayers for names I do not know? To ask God for...what? Their healing? Redemption? Forgiveness? Do these people realize that I have seen their faces, and that there are so many, I cannot remember a single one?

Tierra Bendita

On the second day of my trip, a woman digs through her purse and tells her husband she forgot a container. I offer her my sandwich bag. “Oh!” she says. “*Un milagro, como la tierra bendita.*” I think, the bag’s not really a miracle, just a Ziploc from Walmart. She fills her miracle container to the brim with the miracle dirt.

A girl squats and spills spoonfuls of sand into an Odwalla bottle speckled with orange juice. When she walks away, I see the dirt mingling with the juice, becoming blessed mud.

Dirt sifts between an old man's fingers before he can empty it into his pill bottle. He tilts his palm and the grains rush into the cylinder. He pops the lid in place and leaves.

In the gift stores, you can buy delicate vials as small as fingernails to take the dirt home. You can buy necklaces with silver containers shaped like hearts and crosses and flasks to hold the sand close. Bags of every size. Hand-painted clay jars. Plastic bottles, beaded bottles, Virgin Mary bottles. The clerk tells me that some people use their empty cigarette boxes.

At the checkout desk, a gift store worker has a bucket of blessed dirt, a scoop, and hundreds of plastic bags. I ask her how many she'll fill up in the three weeks before Good Friday. "At least 5000," she sighs, adding that online orders could make for even more.

I think of all the Santuario dirt in pockets and at bedside tables and tucked into medicine cabinets and spilling from worn-out baggies at the bottom of womens' purses. Pilgrims want to keep God near and sprinkle Him on mundanity. It feels irreverent, how they so easily mix their faltering flesh with something blessed. And I still haven't gathered dirt for myself.

Cristo de Esquipulas

An old brochure reads: "The [Cristo de Esquipulas] crucifix was placed in the niche of [the local church's] main altar. The next morning, the crucifix was gone, only to be found in its original location: Chimayó. A second procession was organized and the crucifix was returned to Santa Cruz, but once again it disappeared. The same thing happened a third time. By then, everyone understood that El Senor de Esquipulas wanted to remain in Chimayó, and so a small chapel was built." On a sign in the Welcome Center: "The most distinguishing characteristic of the [Cristo de Esquipulas] crucifix is the green color of the wood on which Jesus has been crucified. Truncated stems on the cross signify that the wood is alive."

Life springing from suffering, insistent on returning to its place of origin. I wish I, too, felt like I belonged in Chimayó's earth. That I found, like other pilgrims, a welcome return.

Zapatitos

Color spills from the children's chapel, not just the hand-painted decorations, but also the offerings to the Child Jesus of Atocha, Spain, the Santo Nino: *zapatitos*. Baby shoes. Lines of small, stubby footwear trace the edges of the room and sometimes stand on altars, around statues. Some have braces attached to them, a testament of ailments shed in the presence of God. I almost leave without giving them notice—another offering I have no reason to make—when a small plastic animal perched on a shelf catches my eye. I recognize it as a movie character, likely one of those toys that comes in a fast food bag, and for some reason I am able to picture a child with sticky fingers setting his favorite toy on this ledge beneath a picture of the child Jesus and asking to be remembered. I move away. I look at the shoes again. I wonder where the feet that once occupied them are standing now, and if the God of this place stayed with them when they left.

Bultos

With another tour guide, I discuss the art in the Santuario. “What's the significance of this one?” I point to a carving of a bloodied Jesus with long hands and a bent spine, looming two feet taller than me. The knots in the wood make ragged gashes; tributaries of crimson drip to the toes. He wears only a small loincloth and the rest of Him is uncomfortably bare.

My tour guide explains that *bultos* are a Spanish art form that local artists are trying to revitalize. “You can feel His pain. It's made out of proportion to emphasize certain parts—”

“Like His hands?”

“Yes.” She leans forward and stretches her fingers, crossing her hands together like the carving. “Christ condemned. It's a very popular image. Very distressing.”

That night, I take a bath, and extend my naked body under the water, my soft flesh exposed. If someone walked in, I think, I'd have no way to cover myself. I cross my hands together, make my fingers long, and wonder how God felt in a vulnerable body like mine.

Pan

My last day at Chimayó, I arrive early for Adoration—when the consecrated wafer from Mass is placed in a round gold display for personal prayer and devotion. I am tempted to beg for the experience of pilgrimage, for the “aha!” moment I have read about, when the purpose of the journey makes sense or the prayer is answered or the spiritual revelation cuts to the heart, but I am too tired even for that. Instead I write a prayer disguised as a poem about confidence and learning as I go. It's pretty bad. The flimsy wafer-God stares at me from the monstrance, the circular glass framed by a golden ring, and I have to remind myself that I do believe He is here.

Mass begins. and I fall into the familiar ritual: sit, stand, sit, kneel, bow, sing. When it comes time for communion, I move into line mechanically. My mind cannot rouse itself from some distraction—the bad poem, perhaps, or all the people I want to talk with—and I lean forward and open my mouth to receive the *pan*, the bread I believe is Jesus' body, and it grazes my tongue, but the priest lets go too early and it falls to the ground.

“Can you get Him!?” the priest nearly yells. My face turns hot. I bend down and pick up the little white host, and a broken piece now spotted with dirt, then scurry back to my pew. My mind has cleared like morning; I swallow a God who lets Himself be dropped into the dust.

Velas

Helen's work stops for no one, not even an eager student who wants to hear her story for a research project. While we talk, she scrapes the candle stand with a kitchen knife and picks off wax with her fingernails before running wiry bristles in between the candles. She tells me about

her years volunteering, constantly interrupting herself to ask if it looked clean, or if it was getting close to 3pm, when she'd need to go lead a group rosary. I listen, sort of. I mostly watch her vein-covered hands, the deep wrinkles pulsing with dedication. She is not paid for this work, she says. She does it because this is a special place. I purchase *una vela* from a gift shop and light it before I leave the chapel. When I am gone, and when it melts all the way down, Helen will be the one to pick it up, and being remembered by such diligent hands feels holy.

Chile

Over the three days of my trip I have passed his table crowded with Ziploc bags of chile powder countless times, and without fail, he always calls after me flatly, “Chimayó chile and art for sale,” as if he knows that casual visitors this time of year are not much worth his effort. Still, I'm intrigued—he wears a black do-rag and a plain white shirt, and tattoo-littered arms bulge from his sleeves. His table is set up on a precarious slope and he squints against the sun to watch passerbys. He seems surprised as I approach. Before I am within conversational distance, he is talking, a familiar spiel about the Chimayó's famous chile. His quick hands reach for bags in a choreographed display, and he lets me sniff each one, lists ways the piquant spices can be used—“Oh, just a pinch in brownies, your friends will taste the kick!”—and before I know it I am offering a five-dollar bill in exchange for the crimson powder.

We get to talking. I give him my spiel, too; I'm doing research for a school project, I've been here for three days, yes, I wish I could have come for Good Friday, yes, I know it's a big deal around here. When I ask him his name, he whips out a card.

“LowLow, that's my name, and here's info on my museum.”

I've seen his sign: LowLow's Lowrider Museum.

“And—come here, come here—” he says and gestures to come behind his table, “—this is my favorite one.”

On his phone screen, he shows me a picture of a blue car. Wrapping around the car are shapes I can't quite make out. “What am I looking at?”

“The Stations of the Cross. I painted them.”

“On a car?”

He corrects, “A lowrider.” And he smiles. “Jesus loves lowriders.”

Maybe the God I've been looking for loves lowriders. Maybe He isn't asking for much. Maybe He is the one offering Himself in dirt and bread and children's toys and homegrown chiles, reaching out with long, disproportionate fingers through the things I least expect.

Designing at the Loom

The weaver's hands tangle between spools and thread—
quick fingers, nimble grips—
and she tells me there is more beauty in beginning without plans,
that her hands create unthinking
these woven wonders unraveling
from somewhere hidden in her bones.

The pilgrim, with that same confidence,
treads a mapped path,
a destination as the guiding light,
adapting to hill and rainstorm like the weaver
with new patterns emerging.
Nimble in step and unraveling new sights.

Oh, if I could trace my own hidden place!
Return to that site of origin, where creativity comes without knots.
So I take heart in the weaver and walker, their changing ways.
Their making it up as they go,
wanting, also, for arrival
but hoping first for a journey worth my effort.

PART III

SEDONA

Sedona's most distinct features are the massive red rock formations that surround the city, its mild climate, and its riparian spots. Throughout the area's recorded history, native inhabitants and diverse settlers have noted its physical beauty, and some have gone so far as to ascribe that beauty to a hidden, spiritual meaning. Hopi and Pueblo tribes, who were displaced when the U.S. ceded the Southwest from Mexico in 1850, considered the land a possible location for earth's genesis. As the country began to industrialize, new railroad systems brought cattle ranchers and gold miners who sought to make use of the area's natural resources. Hollywood westerns shot in the area starting in 1923 proceeded to "etch Sedona's landscape firmly into the viewing public's mind," eventually attracting artists, sightseers, and permanent residents, all interested in experiencing the natural beauty and retreating from increasingly commodified urban centers (Ivakhiv 150-159).

While all of these groups paved the way for Sedona's development into a pilgrimage site, it was New Age practitioners who delineated the location as a place of spiritual magnetism. The term *New Age* has been used to encompass a number of diverse and decentralized spiritual movements outside mainstream practices, yet rooted in Eastern, Transcendental, and Gnostic belief systems. Their beliefs evade clear definition (as adherents often choose their preferred practices) but they are usually characterized by living in harmony with nature and natural forces; integrating the mind, body, and spirit; and experiencing individual healing. Often, New Age practitioners utilize alternative scientific and psychological language to describe such concepts as energy, consciousness, psychic power, and natural phenomena (Davidson and Gitlitz 437).

Page Bryant and Dick Sutphen, New Age gurus and leaders, spoke about the “aura” of the Sedona starting in the 1970s. They described vortices of energy that channeled around the red rocks—specifically, four formations were marked on “vortex maps” as sites of otherworldly power. New Age organizers declared a series of “harmonic convergence” events in 1987, in which the great cycle of time described in the Mayan calendar would bring about a convergence of humanity’s power. Bryant said that Sedona would be a major pool of those cosmic energies, and in August of 1987, thousands of people descended on Sedona for the event, thus solidifying the place as a sacred spot for New Age pilgrims (Coats 488-489, Davidson and Gitlitz 437).

Presently, New Age devotees interact with Sedona by entering what religious scholar Curtis Coats calls a “marketplace of spiritual practitioners—from aura photographers to spiritual retreat centers.” Psychic readings, yoga classes, and meditation workshops all take place against a backdrop of red rocks, with which practitioners can also interact. Some go on jeep tours of the red rock vortices; some use books as aids in meditating within the landscape; others simply go into nature and dance, pray, or interact with the earth as they please. Yet, the majority of visitors do not visit for these reasons, preferring instead to hike, observe the natural beauty, or relax in more typical touristic fashion—including visiting spas, spending nights in lush hotels, and eating local food (489). The city’s tourism website, visitsedona.com, includes links to “spiritual and wellness” opportunities but primarily promotes commercial interests.

The span of interpretations ascribed to Sedona is broader than both Temple Square and Chimayó in part because its foundations are relatively less religious than the other two sites, ensuring room for simultaneous and even conflicting views of the site. While New Age gurus and teachers may curate experiences for pilgrims who seek them, the space is primarily public and uncurated. It is a pilgrimage site to some and a non-spiritual adventure for others. A visitor

could easily come and go without noticing their fellow New Age travelers, who believe they've unlocked the "real" meaning of Sedona. When I visited Sedona in the summer of 2017 (much like other visitors with whom I've communicated), I recognized it as a "spiritual marketplace," but dismissed its alluring "aura" as phony or unimportant.

I tried to understand the New Age perceptions I rejected at Sedona in my poem, "*Revolver: To Return*," using their language of energy and earthly connection to explore the believers' experience of landscape's supposed supernatural powers. Although the beauty may be what draws them, they celebrate Sedona "less for its scenery than for the experiences to be had in it" (Ivakhiv 102-103). These experiences are mystical and "felt" rather than "seen." In the poem, then, I explore the New Age belief in a unity between earth and its inhabitants, and I contemplate what they describe as an intimate familiarity with a site they've never visited. That familiarity, I've learned, suggests their pilgrimage to be more of a return to a viscerally known *place* than an adventure to an unknown *space*. Given Sedona's topographical and visceral enchantment, this poem takes an internal rather than visual approach.

Sedona proved my greatest research challenge, not only because of the vagueness of its spiritual significance, but also because relevant individuals were less accessible for interviews. I turned that challenge into a poem, "Today's Work," characterizing my writing process as a journey—an internal pilgrimage. Like a New Age practitioner, my writing journey unexpectedly took up the concept of return: I had to continually return to my thoughts, impressions, and memories. Untethered from a walking path and site-specific destination, my pilgrimage is a collection of *topoi*, or "places in the mind." I end, therefore, with the prose poem, "Arriving, I Do Not Arrive." It began as a reflection on my visit to Sedona and how I struggled to find the proper way to interact with the area. This time, I was a lost rather than reluctant pilgrim.

Revolver: To Return

Has a flower ever been grafted back to its roots?
This must be what it knows:
That shocking energy of reconnection,
The dirt pulsing life into the stem.

My feet have landed on red rocks,
Then stretched to the core of the earth,
Soaked up the soil's spirit—
A familiar, necessary verve.

A transplanted growth, I am reuniting
To a set of roots I'd forgotten existed,
And the soil catches me gently
As I begin blooming anew.

Today's Work

I'm not sure I moved forward;
the ground on which I stand looks the same.

The sun greeted me and departed,
but my feet do not ache with the walking I want for.

But has a pilgrim ever been defined by a day,
or a day defined only by its missing steps?

Tomorrow, then, tomorrow, I'll dirty my feet a bit more
and be just as "pilgrim" as I am today.

Arriving, I Do Not Arrive

We raced up Arizona's spine to escape our stuffy office
The promise of broken routines and unbroken landscapes enchanted us weeks before
When Sedona flashed across our computer screens: wide, even in the digital rectangle
Our getaway car left dust and music in its buzzing wake
And the moment crimson rocks spiraled into the sky, we let our lungs fill all the way

We wanted to hike until the cars disappeared, but vortex jeeps kept spewing sand at us
The sweat-rivers dripped down our backs
Salty tributaries seared across my cracking skin
And we remembered how much easier it was to sit.

We did not sit, not at first, and Sedona rewarded us.
A plunging canyon appeared beneath an overlook and echoed all the quiet we forgot
The sky grew like a parachute we did not know was there
And suspended us in rock-carved infinity

But in this finite world, I have found, endless moments are fleeting as a weekend

I felt obscene when we stopped to take pictures and eat mediocre ice cream
Embarrassed for the store owner who urged us to absorb the energies of inanimate formations
Confused by the healing crystals dangling like a shimmering jungle in every gift shop
Unwelcome in the Hindu tea cafe, where we read our Bibles, drank chai, sat outside

Months later

I reason that we were never trying to escape, or to find something new
Not even the sacred place that looked like my roots held me like I wanted it to
A pilgrim drags their feet to the path even when they're sore from sleeping on unfamiliar floors

And I've tasted familiar, no doubt
In a missionary's words about family I took refuge
I spilled holy dirt in my backpack and now it's constantly with me
I disappeared into red rocks for a weekend

And I will keep returning
Until I find the home I'm made for
Until arrival presents itself like endless dawn
Until my walking ceases.

CONCLUSION

As lovely as it is to speak about pilgrimage sites' rich simultaneity of place, to comment on the diversity of others' experiences and on the narratives that coalesce, I realize that, at the end of it all, I only really have my experience. My narrative. The places I've created. And although I've grown in respect for religious traditions I knew little about, although I've fostered a curiosity about places that once barely crossed my mind, I cannot say any of those places feels perfectly familiar. I heard the stories of my fellow pilgrims as they spoke of sacredness and transformation, even hearing their words unintentionally support my research on "emplacement" and "embodiment" and "space becoming place" as they encountered a site's objects and people; and still, I felt like I'd never fully carved out a place of my own. Maybe it was the constraint of conducting research, or having too many predeterminations, but it seemed like the sites with which so many others felt connected defied my desire for that same connection.

The final poem in the Sedona section, "Arriving, I Do Not Arrive," expresses a level of ambivalence that permeated my experiences at each site. My understanding of each place is deeper, no doubt, but I never engaged like a fervent pilgrim. When I visited Salt Lake City with my family in 2012, and a missionary offered my dad a Book of Mormon, he said no, and I knew I wouldn't take the offer either. In Chimayó, the place I thought I'd most relate with, I collected dirt because I wanted to participate, not because I believed it'd heal me. As the previous poem illustrates, my trip to Sedona was marked by both aesthetic awe at the landscape and emotional discomfort. The most unexpected destination of my project has been this: I don't know if I've really arrived.

Part of this feeling can no doubt be attributed to the conflicting pilgrim/tourist narratives and levels of site curation. For example, it made me uncomfortable that to enter into the spiritual

realm like other pilgrims at Chimayó I had to participate in the touristic economy by purchasing a candle. In addition, I did not share the belief systems of religiously-motivated pilgrims at Salt Lake City or Sedona, and I found it difficult to trust their sincerity because their God looked so different from my own. My constant wish was to share their enthusiasm; my constant struggle was finding myself intellectually intrigued but emotionally unmoved.

This could be disappointing, no doubt, but as this project became intertwined with my life, I discovered a different personal connection. In the thick of my writing, I went to a chapel near my College Station home (likely to recover from some research-related discouragement) and wrote the poem that follows, appropriately titled “Prayer.” It speaks to a deeper belief I’ve fostered: a pilgrimage is a trip that feels less like an adventure and more like a return. When pilgrims spoke of being “drawn” to a space and discovering that they could personalize it, they seemed to be describing an experience of rediscovering the familiar, as if that place had existed inside them long before it took shape in a physical site. And that makes sense: if “place” is a projection brought about by embodiment, then of course it exists first within instead of without. Of course visiting a pilgrimage site can awaken an internal reality—one carried but never noticed fully until arrival. As phenomenologist Edward Casey explains, this as an experience of remembering, sensing that places gather “various recollecta ... securely in place” (25). Pilgrims who had never visited the site before sensed that they were remembering their heritage, family, religion, hope, joy, connection to the divine. They were even remembering themselves.

In writing this poem, I was reminded of the Bible verse that opens this thesis. It describes a heart set on pilgrim roads: a heart with arrival at a destination already etched into the pilgrim’s chest. As the pilgrim sets out, they often find that their destination was mapped inside them all along, and arrival feels like rediscovery more than a new discovery, like inward return more than

outward adventure. To what a pilgrim returns, I'm not fully sure, but I think in some way it is a return to what is deepest within a person; for me, that deep place is divine. Sacred. An image of God. I pray to walk from this project and through my life sincerely and tenderly, persevering on a pilgrimage to return to my heavenly home.

Prayer

Weary pilgrim
let your heavy steps slow.
Untie those knotted brows
the forehead wrinkled in prayer
your mud-soaked shoes—
leave them to dry outside
and thaw your bones
in a momentary home.

You seek stubbornly:
that death-grip on a printed map.
Insisting on a singular path.
This road has wound
around your back
and left you aching.
You have traveled as though
this earth is yours to take.

Have you come only
for the plans you've made?
Can you spare the whims
of a day marked only
by sun and rain?
See how the earth labors
to give you your necessary walking,
your deserved rest.

Arrival was etched
in your chest
before your feet met the ground.
Find a refuge not in spectacle
but in tender step and sound.
Consider, too, the simple joy
of arriving each day,
of settling in
and shedding blistered skin
until the calloused peels away
and only the truest things remain.

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