

WALKING A NEW WORLD INTO BEING? HEALING AND REGENERATIVE IMAGINING
ON THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL

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Abstract

Each year, hundreds of people spend 4-6 months hiking the entire 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), which runs up and down the mountain ranges of so-called California, Oregon, and Washington. This research draws on three months of “hiking ethnography” and autoethnography, as I walked 1,500 miles on the PCT in 2024. In the Anthropocene, new ethics and ontologies of land are required, and the PCT is a space where many people envision themselves creating new worlds through the embodied practice of walking. Hikers describe their experiences as healing and transformative and as departures from modernity and capitalism. Hikers create embodied and emotional intimacy with the more-than-human environment, yet also import harmful normative and colonial understandings onto their experiences. I contextualize hikers’ experiences within the millennia-long histories of the places the PCT crosses. The places where hikers experience transformation are on stolen Native land which has been recharacterized by the U.S. government as places for recreation. Indigenous movements along the PCT work for Land Back, remembering erased Indigenous histories, and healing for Native communities. This ethnography considers land as an agential actor and resists the depoliticization of place, showing that hikers’ interactions with land perpetuate both colonial and decolonial understandings. In considering healing and regenerative imagination on the PCT, this research considers walking new worlds which embrace Land Back, multispecies flourishing, collective healing, and the dismantling of oppressive capitalist and cisheteropatriarchal normativity.

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Introduction

Background

The sun and I woke at the same time. In a world glowing soft orange, I began my ascent of His-chok-wol-as (Klamath name for a jagged glacier-flanked volcano in so-called Oregon, also known as Mount Thielsen). As I slowly began to walk myself awake, my sleepy early morning rhythms mirrored the energy of the gentle morning light. I walked upwards, each step taking me closer to the sky, and the sun and my body became gradually more energetic, awake, and attuned to the world. My surroundings transitioned incrementally from dense green forest to craggy gray expanse, and as I walked higher, the sky became more and more vast until there was nothing between me and the blazing sun. Around midday, both I and the sun began to descend, and my footsteps became slower but more assured. By late afternoon, the sun and I were getting tired, and the world was tinged in blue as I sat cross-legged, talking with a fellow hiker by an alpine stream. We sat, calm and quiet, watching birds traverse the darkening sky to roost for the night. Later, I lay in my tent watching the moon rise, and as the first stars woke up, I drifted to sleep.

This research draws on three months of “hiking ethnography” and autoethnography, conducted while I walked 1,500 miles on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) in summer 2024. Every year, hundreds of people set out to hike the entire PCT, spending 4-6 months walking up and down a spine of mountains spanning the entire length of so-called California, Oregon, and Washington. Although people have been walking long distances on foot for millennia, PCT hikers are situated within the specific culture of North American long-distance hiking, which began with the creation of the 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail up the east coast of the United States in 1937, followed by the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail on the west coast in 1968 and the 3,028-

mile Continental Divide Trail up the U.S. Rocky Mountains in 1978. Many other long-distance trails in the U.S. have since been popularized, including the Colorado Trail, Arizona Trail, Pacific Northwest Trail, and Hayduke Trail. Since these trails' inception, U.S. long-distance hiking – or “thru-hiking,” meaning hiking a long trail through from beginning to end – has been associated with a countercultural rejection of modernity. In the mid to late 20th century, multi-month hiking trips were a fringe activity enjoyed by (white male) hippie vagabonds striving to “connect with nature.” In the last ten years, however, PCT hiker numbers have skyrocketed, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (PCTA 2023). Hiker numbers have perhaps only leveled out because the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) now issues long-distancing hiking permits, limiting the number of people allowed on the increasingly-crowded trail. The recent increasing popularity of thru-hiking suggests a yearning from hikers, most of them American young adults, to develop a different type of relationship with the natural world.

Although often imagined to be an apolitical wilderness space, the PCT is located entirely on stolen Native land, and hiking is often understood as an activity for settlers, and specifically for able-bodied white men. I reveal Indigenous millennia-long histories of relationship along the Pacific Crest mountain ranges and discuss ongoing struggles for Land Back in some of the most sacred places on Turtle Island. Some of these realities were not apparent through my ethnography alone, because Indigenous presence has been systematically erased from U.S. “public” lands.

My own experiences on the PCT – of deep wonder, completeness, connection, and freedom – drew me to this research. I hiked the first 1,150 miles of the 2,650-mile PCT in 2021, until my hike ended due to injury. In the intervening three years, I could not stop thinking: what about the trail had made me feel so free? So happy, alive, and whole? Returning and hiking the

rest of the trail in 2024, I remembered again what it felt like, living outside every day in vast places, to feel intimately connected to the sun. To be synchronized with its energy, familiar with the ever-shifting colors of the sky, and at home wrapped in nights that are a deep velvet black. On the PCT, the sun, moon, stars, and sky are all important actors in everyday reality. The trail is a place where people attempt to replace capitalist rhythms with ecological ones, where people aim to get rid of a lot of things, like jobs, cars, and Wi-Fi, and also to replace these with important beings, like the sun, moon, clouds, streams, pines, marmots, and mountain chickadees.

I argue that the PCT is a space where many people envision themselves creating new worlds through the embodied practice of walking; in some ways, these hikers are successful, and in other ways they reproduce harmful normative and colonial understandings. Through bodily, sensorial, and emotional experience, long-distance hikers enact alternative ways of relating to the world, subverting a strict nature-culture dichotomy and finding healing through more-than-human relationships. However, hikers' understandings of healing are often bounded by individualism. I reconsider what truly regenerative healing, of people and land, could look like on the PCT, considering walking new worlds which embrace Land Back, collective healing, and the dismantling of oppressive capitalist and cisheteropatriarchal normativity.

This research contributes to anthropological conversations about land, nature-based healing, more-than-human entanglements, and new materialism in the Anthropocene. In a time of climate crisis, extinction, and human inequalities, ontologies are required which resist human exceptionalism and recognize ways that violence against land and bodies are deeply intertwined (Benson 2019). Long-distance hiking is an activity that can foster a sense of the “ecological self,” which, from ecofeminism, refers to knowing oneself fully as part of the natural world

(Dobscha and Ozanne 2001). I connect the specific activity of hiking to larger global conversations about overcoming the nature-culture dichotomy.

This research also contributes to conversations about decolonization and ethics. I focus on regeneration, which, alongside resurgence, is powerfully articulated in Indigenous theory. “Regeneration” refers to rekindling and creating lifeways for land, people, and land-people relationships to thrive. Regeneration can occur through an ethics of grounded normativity, which Coulthard and Simpson describe as practices of developing deep relationship to places which create place-based solidarity and decolonial forms of justice (Coulthard and Simpson 2016; Simpson 2016). Moreover, decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012), and research should take active steps towards creating decolonial futures and supporting Indigenous futurity. I focus not only on decolonial thought, but create methods of decolonial hiking. I identify the importance of finding ecological solidarity and collective belonging within a non-anthropocentric world.

At first, I was reticent to think critically about the PCT, because it can be painful to think about the ways that the most joyful, fulfilling, and healing experience of your life is problematic. However, like the trail itself, writing this thesis has been freeing for me. I take inspiration from James Baldwin, who described writing as a process of self-discovery which helps us to confront uncomfortable truths about ourselves and the world (Baldwin 1963). I approach this research acknowledging my position as an insider in the population of long-distance hikers I conducted ethnography with. I am inspired by feminist scholars who question the binary of objective scholar-observer, on the one hand, and observed subject of research on the other. Through autoethnography, I create knowledge that is “situated” (Harraway 1988) in my own direct experience.

Further, it is my kuleana (responsibility; privilege¹) to not allow my research to stop at my own experiences, ignoring and silencing other realities. My experiences of the land the PCT crosses are situated in my positionality as a white settler hiker, and I do not wish to turn Indigenous histories and encounters with that land into “othered” objects of knowledge to which I claim authority. My research approach is instead rooted in solidarity and allyship, which can result in more rich and nuanced understandings for all. Kim TallBear, an anthropologist and citizen of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, calls this allyship in research “standing with.” In contrast to a focus from anthropologists on “giving back,” “standing with” foregrounds allyship and standing shoulder to shoulder with collaborators (TallBear 2014). Sundberg’s article, published in the same year, advocates for “walking with” in research: a research process that involves walking side by side with peers, actively learning about history, actively listening to others’ lived experiences, and actively engaging in activism (Sundberg 2014).

At the time of writing, it has been five months since I finished hiking the PCT and returned to graduate school in Honolulu. It is a jarring experience, after living outside for months, to stop hiking and return to the structures of everyday life. I have spent much of the last several months resenting the florescent lights in my windowless office, groggily wading through and sometimes drowning in what is commonly known as “post-trail depression.” Hikers view the PCT as special in its radical differentness – it is a place far removed from peoples’ “real” lives. Upon returning to “civilization,” then, it is extremely difficult to maintain ways of being learned on the trail. Not all long-distance hikers are actively anti-capitalist, and hikers may develop ecological ways of existing only to fall back into capitalist rhythms when they return home, having not deeply examined the harmful structures that shape their lives off-trail. The PCT is a

¹ ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i spelling and translations from wehewehe.org dictionaries

place people escape to on a quest for something better, only to often find that they cannot escape indefinitely. As I consider healing and regenerative imagining, I am reminded that finding alternative ways of living in relation to each other and the more-than-human world is a consistent practice, which should not only happen on a hiking trail.

I. Background: The Land

This is an ethnography of both people and land. The importance of considering place, and the roles places play as agentive actors, is often overlooked in research. Failure to fully consider the importance of place also depoliticizes places, erasing the histories and presences of colonialism and environmental destruction embedded within landscapes (McKenzie and Tuck 2014). Depoliticization of place is exemplified on the PCT by the erasure of Indigenous histories from the trail and failure by many hikers, as well as by the governmental and nonprofit entities that manage the land, to consider ongoing Land Back efforts happening in many places the trail crosses.

Histories of interaction between people and the land I discuss date back at least 10,000 years. For millennia, Native Americans have lived on and traveled across the mountain ranges that run up the west coast of Turtle Island. Different Native groups, which colonial narratives describe as “isolated,” created trails for travel, trade, and cultural exchange, forging dynamic routes of connection for communities across the mountains. Native-made trails, after being well-established and frequently used for hundreds or thousands of years, began to also be used by settlers in the 19th century. Many trails were eventually paved over to create the first paved roads and highways in the area. More remote trails continued to be used by people and livestock, and

many of these eventually came to be known as hiking trails. In 1968, the PCT was created by merging many existing Native-made trails (Moor 2016).

Many specific areas and landmarks along what is now the PCT have been considered to be exceptionally sacred places for countless generations. All the places I discuss have specific stories and spiritual and emotional significances for Indigenous people. Settler hikers, including me, often feel the immense and overwhelming power of these places, but Indigenous interactions with sacred places involve an interaction not only with the place, but with ancestors, based upon intergenerational belonging and reciprocal responsibility (Cloud and Redvers 2023).

The language many hikers use when talking about the land they walk on evokes the ethos of conservation and the language used by the U.S. government during a distinct 19th century era of colonial land “protection.” As Yellowstone became the world’s first national park in 1872, hundreds of Blackfeet, Crow, Shoshone, and Bannock people were massacred as they resisted being forcibly removed from the land that had been their and their ancestors’ home for thousands of years. Similarly, the first national parks in California, Yosemite and Sequoia (both of which the PCT crosses), were created through the violent dispossession of Native people. U.S. government rhetoric surrounding the creation of national parks explicitly described all people, but especially Indigenous people, as an inherent threat to the wellbeing of the land. In this worldview, the best-protected land is always that which has no people on it. This reflects a fundamental understanding of humans as separate from, and existing in opposition to, the natural world. Shortly following the establishment of the first national parks, the Dawes Act of 1887 broke up tribal land into individual allotments, prioritizing individual property rights and aiming to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream American society. The act undermined the authority of tribal governments over land, severely limited access to communal hunting and

fishing sites, and justified the U.S. government seizing and developing 90 million acres of tribal land.

American cultural conceptions of outdoor spaces are further influenced by popular nature writers from the same 19th to early 20th century period. These writers perpetuated a view of wilderness as a pure, untouched space that is polluted and corrupted by any human interference, but especially by non-white human presence. John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911) is still popular reading material for PCT hikers as they cross the high-altitude expanse of the Sierra Nevada mountains, due to the book's vivid descriptions of the area's geology, plants, and animals. Muir was the main advocate for the creation of Yosemite National Park, he wrote deeply racist and derogatory descriptions of Native Americans, and his books contain overtly biblical language which describes the landscapes of the Sierra Nevada as holy cathedrals which are desecrated by human habitation.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 further justified the view of human presence being fundamentally incompatible with healthy landscapes. The act established the National Wilderness Preservation System, allowing Congress to set aside wilderness areas; there are now over 800 wilderness areas across the United States, which have certain protections from development and human interference. The act defines "wilderness" as places where "the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain... retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions" (Wilderness Act 1964). This language not only philosophically removes humans from the environment, with humans "a visitor who does not remain," but also, in its insistence on preserving "natural conditions" erases the reality that Indigenous people have managed, altered,

and been sustainably interwoven with these landscapes for millennia. Envisioning pre-colonial landscapes as untouched ignores a vast portion of the land's history and forecloses the possibility that positive interactions with land are possible.

The PCT is almost entirely on National Forest land, Wilderness Area designated land, and National Park land. This means that the land is under the control of U.S. government agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service and National Parks Service, who control who can be on the land and what they can do there. Conservation and management of the PCT is done by the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA), a nonprofit organization that liaisons with different U.S. government entities, as well as Tribal governments for small sections where the PCT crosses reservations. The PCTA monitors and controls how many people can be on the PCT and what they can do there, and anyone hiking more than 500 continuous miles on the PCT requires a PCTA long-distance hiking permit. Some thru-hikers, who are unable to secure an increasingly competitive to obtain long-distance permit, instead get separate permits for each individually managed section of the trail that requires one. This requires cumbersome applications for over twenty individual permits. This bureaucratization of access to land demonstrates colonial control over land where, before, Tribal governments would have had authority to regulate who is on the land.

Recently, U.S. public lands have become increasingly vulnerable to resource extraction and mining. On his first day in office in 2025, Donald Trump signed an executive order revoking some areas in Alaska of their protected wilderness status in order to allow fossil fuel companies access. Trump has since fired over 5,000 National Park Service employees across the country, inspiring widespread protest. My critique of conservation and the creation of public lands does not equate to an endorsement of free access to land by all entities, especially large corporations.

A main intention of public lands legislation over the past two hundred years has been to safeguard land from unchecked rampant extractive capitalism. Nevertheless, this legislation has been bound to a deeply rooted belief that all human actions in relation to land are necessarily extractive. I highlight ways that Indigenous people, as well as hikers in some ways, understand and interact with land in non-extractive, regenerative ways.

Land Back proposes alternative means of managing land, against colonial public land rhetoric, and against free market land exploitation. The Land Back movement to get “Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous hands” was begun by the Indigenous-run NDN Collective in South Dakota and has found resonance worldwide. The movement calls not only for the return of land, but for a resurgence of Indigenous ways of relating to and managing land. This call revolves around Native self-determination, justice, and foregrounding reciprocity and consent in people-place relationships. The NDN Collective focuses especially on public land in the United States (NDN Collective 2025). The restoration of Native sovereignty over national parks and wilderness areas would not prevent settlers from finding healing on that land; but it would open doors for reclamation and collective reimagining of radically different decolonial land relations. Continually unfolding movements for Indigenous self-determination show that current Indigenous realities are an important part of the life of the land of the PCT, even though these realities are removed from many hikers’ daily experiences.

Hereafter, I strike out the following terms when they appear in the text: ~~California~~, ~~Oregon~~, ~~Washington~~, ~~California-Mexican border~~, and ~~Washington-Canada border~~. These geographic designations are used constantly by PCT hikers as they position themselves in space. Following Heidegger and Derrida, in striking them out, I assert that although these terms are sometimes useful or even necessary for comprehension, they are problematic and should be

questioned whenever they are encountered (Derrida 1967). By continually referencing borders created by the U.S. government, hikers entrench a colonial understanding of geography. These colonial borders are real in powerfully separating Indigenous people from land, and in implying that other possibilities and living realities for this land do not exist. In *Pollution is Colonialism*, Liboiron points out that scientific research methods are most often based in colonial worldviews and assumptions. Any research that does not evaluate these assumptions inadvertently perpetuates them. Liboiron demonstrates a decolonial Métis approach to pollution science (Liboiron 2021). I, too, aim to resist colonial approaches to studying land as common-sense, standardized, or taken-for-granted.

Additionally, I use Indigenous place names when referring to specific places and geological features. Many places have multiple names used by different Native nations. Some have one Indigenous name that is most widely used, agreed on and adopted by members of different Native nations. The Indigenous names of other places have been lost, are not readily available online, or are contested or of dubious origin. When using Indigenous names, I note these things, and state as specifically as possible to which nation or Native group the name belongs. As I discuss further in Chapter 2, renaming places is one central struggle of the Land Back movement.

In January 2025, Trump signed an executive order to rename Denali, the tallest mountain on Turtle Island, to Mount McKinley, after the former U.S. president. “Denali” is a Koyukon Athabascan name meaning “the great one” or “the tall one” which has been used for 10,000 years. The name Denali was continuously used throughout that time span, even during the brief period from 1917 to 2015 when the U.S. government changed the name of the mountain on official documentation and signage to “Mount McKinley.” In 2015, the Obama administration

officially changed the name back to “Denali,” describing the change as a gesture of respect to the Athabascan people. Trump’s reinstating of the name “McKinley” is, in his words, a step towards the United States “reclaim[ing] its rightful place as the greatest, most powerful, most respected nation on earth” (Rinaldi and Linton 2025). This narrative, and the fact that Trump prioritized this name change during the first days of his administration, suggests that using Indigenous names, and remembering Indigenous histories, is a powerful threat to American empire. Using these names is an insistence that worlds are thriving outside of the logics of American exceptionalism and colonial violence. I use Indigenous names as an act of celebration, centering Indigenous relationships with the land. I also use these names as an act of resistance.

II. Background: The Hikers

The many long-distance hikers I spoke with were overwhelmingly extremely enthusiastic about sharing their experiences. Especially after completing the PCT and returning home, hikers express that it’s difficult for them to feel understood, and to fully communicate to others how powerful and personally meaningful their experiences on the trail were. Thru-hikers are proud to identify themselves as such, and many maintain this identity even when they are not on the trail. Many PCT hikers have hiked or will hike other long trails, and there is a vibrant online thru-hiking community on platforms including Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how the annual Halfway Anywhere PCT hiker survey problematically reifies ideas about what a “normal” PCT hiker looks like. Nevertheless, the survey provides a helpful broad overview of hiker demographics. The vast majority of PCT thru-hikers are white: 89.8% in 2024. This is an astonishingly high number compared to essentially any other U.S.-based metrics; for example, approximately 71% of the overall U.S. population,

and 52% of American university students, identify as white. In 2024, 55% of PCT hiker survey respondents identified as male (this is a 2.8% decrease from the year before), 77% identified as heterosexual, and 57% of all PCT hikers were under the age of 35. PCT hikers also tended to be unmarried, childless, and college-educated. The survey does not ask about income, but the ten most common professions among hikers are either high-paying (software engineer, project manager), or flexible and allowing time off (educator, student, seasonal worker) (Halfway Anywhere 2025).

These statistics obscure the realities of many hikers who do not fit into these dominant categories. In Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss Indigenous hikers and the intersectional movement for inclusivity in the outdoors. However, considering that thru-hiking is an activity overwhelmingly dominated by societally powerful groups, I take whiteness, masculinity, and privilege as objects of study, considering the ways that these fundamentally shape long-distance hiking as a cultural phenomenon. Colonial environmental rhetorics and personal lived experiences have long reinforced the idea that able-bodied white men are those most welcome and safe in outdoor recreation spaces. American outdoors culture is also inextricably intertwined with values that originate in specifically white American culture. Outdoors values include celebrations of individuality, self-sufficiency, rugged masculinity, and an implicit understanding of outdoor experiences such as hikes as achievements and, in some ways, victories over the natural environment. These normative understandings subtly and overtly undermine hikers' attempts to live decolonial human-environment relationships. Hikers often fail to consider hiking as a culturally specific activity, because part of outdoors culture is a belief in the "naturalness" of wilderness spaces, seen as significantly free from culture and politics. This understanding reinscribes the same nature-culture dichotomy that many hikers aim to break free from.

The presence of settler American cultural values on the PCT is reflected in two words hikers most commonly use to describe the significance of their thru-hiking experiences: “freedom” and “healing.” Personal freedom is a long-standing American ideal, originating in narratives of colonial exploration and tied to patriotism. Scholars, notably in the Black Radical Tradition, have pointed to the ways that American conceptions of freedom are highly individualistic, and suggest, instead, reimagined collective emancipatory forms of freedom from oppression (Kelley 2002). On the PCT, hikers describe finding freedom (from anxiety, capitalism, modernity) *through* their more-than-human relationships. However, they also describe a type of freedom that celebrates individualism: freedom from responsibility, and the freedom to focus on self-discovery since they have left their social networks back at home. Hikers speak about “healing” in remarkably similar ways. Hikers say that the PCT is a place where they find healing *through* a sense of belonging within the natural world. This healing, however, is personal and individualistic. Collective healing, and especially reciprocal healing of the land, is rarely considered by hikers.

Moreover, despite belonging to socially privileged groups and bringing those groups’ ideals to the trail, PCT hikers tend to think of themselves as countercultural and as not belonging within mainstream society. People go to the extreme measure of walking thousands of miles to find freedom and healing because they do not feel especially free or well in their everyday lives. Although not always successful, many people hike with the express intention of resisting and recreating societal norms, replacing individualism with a supportive trail community and replacing capitalist productivity with embodiment, mindfulness, and wonder. I discuss this endeavor to purposefully challenge and remake society in Chapter 1. The American thru-hiking community departs in some ways from the norms of more mainstream hiking and backpacking

circles. On the one hand, because they hike such long distances, thru-hikers rely more on a harmful normative valuation of extreme fitness, often leaving their own able-bodiedness unexamined. At the same time, prolonged and powerful immersion in so-called natural environments is especially important for thru-hikers compared to weekend backpackers; lasting months at a time, a thru-hike becomes an immersive lifestyle change and not only a lighthearted vacation.

Although rooted in settler American understandings, in recent years North American thru-hiking has also become an increasingly international phenomenon. In 2024, 38% of PCT thru-hikers were from outside of the United States (Halfway Anywhere 2025). Most international hikers are from Europe, Australia, and increasingly from East Asia, especially Japan. These are people who travel to hike. Whether hiking the Camino de Santiago in Spain, the Te Araroa in Aotearoa New Zealand, or the Great Himalaya Trail in Nepal, these hikers strive to connect with “nature,” understanding nature in a global abstract way. This “nature” is something that exists wherever they go, although some of its attributes vary from place to place. Hikers like myself connect with the sun, moon, and stars, and with rhythms of light and dark. We learn to deeply appreciate the way water cascades over rocks, the way wind makes leaves dance on trees, and the way rain makes soil more energetically alive, but without specificity – without learning from specific rivers, or from the winds, rains, and soils of specific places. Even for those hikers who live and feel deeply rooted in a specific place along the trail, hiking is characterized by constant movement across wide and varied landscapes, rather than consistent return to and constant observation of a specific ecosystem.

This draws attention back to the importance of place in research, and not depoliticizing and dehistoricizing place. Travelers define themselves as a global community specifically

through their lack of identification with one particular place. In research, “space” is often considered to be abstract and far-reaching, while “place” is specific, containing particular histories and cultural meanings (Coleman and Collins 2006; Brunson 2013). In an age of globalization, anthropologists purposefully attend to the specificities of places. Long-distance hikers are constantly involved with their physical environments, interacting with land physically, mentally, and emotionally every day. Hikers are typically people who see themselves as environmental stewards, who will advocate for protection of land. It is interesting, therefore, that hikers’ understandings may be aligned more with ideas of space than of place.

Like many PCT hikers, hiking has been important to me because, walking outside, I have experienced a sense of intimacy with the world as an alive and dynamic place that I am a part of. I have developed a relationship of respect and familiarity with many plants, animals, and weather patterns. Before I ever spent much time outdoors, I studied environmental policy as an undergraduate. In the classroom, “the environment” was a global and abstract entity, which spoke through graphs tracing atmospheric CO₂ and annual deforestation rates, and to which I had no direct connection. Hiking has helped me create that connection. Yet, this is a connection that is mediated through the logics of settler American culture, including mainstream environmentalism and conservation, which pervade outdoor recreation spaces as much as policy classrooms.

Methodology

I. Hiking Ethnography

My primary methodology is what I call hiking ethnography. Although there are some ethnographies of North American long-distance hiking, studies often focus more on hikers’

rhetorics than on their embodied experiences (Hitchner et al. 2018; Reiss 2021). In *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, Ingold and Vergunst highlight the importance of ethnographies that examine the practice of walking itself. Paying academic attention to walking resists academic prioritization of studying thought and logic over movement and practice (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). The studies on walking that in Ingold and Vergunst assemble, however, focus more on the walking of the researched than the walking of the researcher. I draw on the concept of “mobile methodologies” (Hein et al 2008; Fincham et al 2009). Mobile methodologies are used when both the researcher and objects of research are in motion. The flows of goods and labor brought on by globalization, as well as an increased attention to embodiment in research, necessitate mobile methodologies that acknowledge that field sites are never bounded. Walking interviews are one mobile method which can prompt creativity and show that experiences and understandings of places are shaped by the ways people move through them (Hein et al 2008).

From May 14 to August 5, 2024, I hiked 1,500 miles of the PCT, from Olympic Valley, California to the ~~Washington-Canada border~~. The weather window to hike the PCT is from late spring to fall, and my hike coincided with when the main “bubble” of 2024 thru-hikers passed through the northern half of the trail. There were several days when I hiked alone encountering no other people, but for the vast majority of my research period I was around other hikers, who I often hiked or camped with. Thru-hikers organize themselves into informal groups called trail families; I had one main trail family that I traveled with on and off for the majority of the hike. I also developed friendships and acquaintanceships with many other hikers who I saw somewhat regularly, because we hiked at a similar pace and would often run into each other, hike or eat meals together, and spend rest days together in town. Additionally, I had one-off conversations

with a wide range of people, including many other thru-hikers, people out for shorter hiking trips, trail maintenance crews, PCTA staff, park rangers, friends and family members visiting thru-hikers, former PCT hikers revisiting the trail to say hello and reminisce, and people who lived and worked close to the trail.

Aside from small interactions when it was not relevant, I told people that I was conducting research. People were generally curious to learn what my research was about. Because the majority of PCT hikers are highly educated and around student age, the idea of academic research was fairly familiar, and my status as a researcher did not seem to be intimidating or to compromise peoples' view of me as a PCT hiker. On the contrary, many hikers were eager to talk to me about my research because they themselves had meaningful insights into the importance of long-distance hiking that they wanted to share with me, as well as suggestions for directions my research could take. These conversations were interesting in revealing to me what thru-hikers consider to be important and what they leave out. Interactions such as these also provided me with opportunities to educate hikers about facets of this research that they generally did not foreground in their imaginations of a research project about hiking. Specifically, hikers were often relatively unaware of, but interested in learning about, Land Back and decolonial histories of the land we were walking across. Several hikers became invested in my project of researching the Indigenous histories of places as we encountered them along the trail. So, my "waypoints," which I discuss below, were somewhat collaboratively created, because they incorporate things that fellow hikers found through their own online research and chose to share with me. I initiated a more formal consent process during the writing stage of this research: although not relaying sensitive personal information, I shared my writing with my ethnographic collaborators to ensure that they agreed with how they were represented.

At various points throughout the day, and every night, I typed extensive field notes on my phone, which I backed up onto a Google Drive document every four to five days when I went into a town to resupply on food. Upon completing my field research, I coded my field notes and created an outline for this thesis. My ethnography focuses on hikers' experiences while on the PCT. However, since completing the trail, I have stayed in touch with other hikers, so this research is also informed by informal conversations that have happened after the hike, in which we have reflected on our PCT experiences in hindsight.

This research also relies heavily on autoethnography. I hiked an average of twenty miles every day throughout this research, which is a necessarily difficult, intense, and emotional experience. It would be non-sensical to presume that I could ignore my own experiences and assume the position of a detached outsider researcher. I take my own and others' embodied knowledge seriously. The aspects of long-distance hiking that I and others identify as most meaningful are not intellectual, but things learned through visceral, bodily, sensorial, and emotional experiences and interactions. For me, the act of hiking – a highly immersive and physical activity – generated theory. I identify this as what feminist and Indigenous scholars call “theory in the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) and “felt theory” (Million 2008). Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes theory, particularly that situated within Indigenous worldviews, as “woven within kinetics, spiritual presence, and emotion. It is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal with individuals themselves holding the responsibilities for finding and generating meaning within their own lives” (Simpson 2017, 151). I do not decontextualize or appropriate Indigenous methodologies or theory, but I do assert the importance of taking a phenomenological approach, foregrounding subjective, multisensory, and bodily experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge.

I also consider hiking itself as methodology. Hiking to me simply means moving across land outside. The majority of my experiences, observations, reflections, and conversations on the PCT happened while in motion. Walking shaped every aspect of this research, including the context in which my interactions with other people occurred and the mindset that myself and others brought into these interactions. Notably, I have found that, while walking outside, myself and others feel more at ease to speak freely than we would in more constrained settings. Thru-hikers opened up to me easily, especially while walking. Most of the physical trail of the PCT is narrow, meaning that two people cannot easily walk side-by-side. So, most of my walking conversations happened while moving in a single-file line. Talking without looking at people may sound impersonal, but actually resulted in new conversational possibilities. Walking at the same pace one behind the other, our footsteps synchronized, our embodied rhythms mirroring each other. Rather than making eye contact, we talked while watching the surrounding environment flowing around us, absorbed in the multisensory experience of interacting with trees and rocks. Our words were directed not only linearly at each other, but rose outwards in all directions through the mountain air. Our conversations felt expansive and liberated and our minds creative, with limitless space to stretch out.

II. A Note on Names

Ethnographers often use pseudonyms. On the PCT, pseudonyms are built in, because most thru-hikers use a trail name, rather than their real name, while on a long-distance hike. On the PCT, I am not Mary, I am Squid. My trail name was given to me by other PCT hikers while I was hiking in 2021. I talked about being from Florida, identifying myself as an ocean creature who is less familiar with the mountains. The name Squid was suggested, and I found it fun and

endearing. There are no set rules concerning trail names, although many hikers say you should not pick your own name, and it should instead be given to you. A person's trail name often reflects an aspect of their personality or derives from a funny or memorable experience on the trail. This tradition originated from North American thru-hiking, although trail names are now also found on trails other places.

The assuming of an alternate identity while on the trail reinforces the idea of the PCT as a separate space where people are unconstrained by the structures of their everyday lives. The PCT may be thought of as a liminal ritual space for healing and transformation (Turner 1969). People I developed close friendships with on the PCT knew my actual name, although we often still called each other by our trail names. In most of my casual interactions with people, we only ever knew each other by our trail names. I refer to people by their trail names, with permission. The content of my ethnography is not sensitive, and everyone I reached out to for permission was eager to be represented in, and to read, this thesis.

III. Waypoints

Between each of my four chapters are four “waypoints”: decolonial histories of specific places along the PCT. The four landmarks my waypoints discuss in detail are extremely well-known and widely visited. However, these places' Indigenous histories, significances, and Land Back struggles have been systematically erased from many visitors' experiences. In *Detours: A Decolonial Guide to Hawai'i*, Aikau and Gonzalez share decolonial “detours” of places in Hawai'i, in purposeful opposition to tours for tourists. The authors subvert the idea of Hawai'i as a place *for* tourists. They write that “unless we actively work to dismantle this infrastructure and refuse the tourist imaginary, we will (wittingly or unwittingly) contribute to reproducing the

occupation and colonization of these places, people, and practices” (Aikau and Gonzalez 2019, 3). Similarly, I challenge the dominant narrative of the PCT, national parks, and wilderness areas as places exclusively *for* hiking and outdoor recreation. Even while writing about hiking, I resist focusing exclusively on settler hikers and thereby perpetuating the colonization of the places I write about. My waypoints include ethnographic descriptions of land, but I decenter myself and I decenter hiking. These ethnographic descriptions of land practice multispecies storytelling, aligned with Anna Tsing’s question: “Can I show landscape as the protagonist of an adventure in which humans are only one kind of participant?” (Tsing 2015, 155).

My waypoints can further be thought of as a project of reorientation. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed discusses what it means to be oriented, and how queerness disrupts expectations for people to travel along societally determined paths, writing that “becoming reoriented... involves the disorientation of encountering the world differently” (Ahmed 2006). Many PCT hikers imagine themselves as experts in reorientation. Literally, they read maps, get turned around, and find their way through the woods. Figuratively, hikers reorient themselves away from societal expectations onto the alternative path of a hiking trail. These reorientations are incomplete, however, when hikers continue to encounter land through colonial logics and narratives.

Waypoints are suggestions for where to go. They direct our attention down alternate paths and may inspire us to move in new directions. Waypoints are not attractions in a tourist guidebook. They are coordinates used by sailors, pilots, and wildlife trackers, who may otherwise become lost and disorientated within vast open seas, skies, or expanses of tundra. Waypoints are dots in space, but there are no rules or linear lines that determine how we need to reach them. Each person seeks direction, constantly navigating and redirecting, choosing logical

routes for their lives. My waypoints redirect readers' understandings away from what may be familiar colonial conceptions of place, towards more expansive decolonial understandings.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1, "Healing and Being Alive on the PCT," describes aspects of the PCT that are most meaningful to many hikers, including experiences of healing through relationship with other people and the more-than-human world. This chapter is organized around three values within the PCT community that reflect a desire to create new worlds: Interconnection over Isolation, Sunsets over Screens, and Clarity over Chemicals. Under "Interconnection over Isolation," I ethnographically describe the comradery and support of the PCT community, which in some way subverts common understandings of wilderness experiences as solitary and individualistic. Under "Sunsets over Screens," I discuss the importance of embodiment, mindfulness, and wonder on the PCT. PCT hikers learn to meaningfully and deeply connect to their senses, surroundings, bodies, emotions, and intuitions, thereby developing a sense belonging within the natural environment. Under "Clarity over Chemicals," I describe an anti-technology and anti-modernity ethos among PCT hikers, focusing specifically on a distrust of biomedicine and anything deemed "unnatural."

Following Chapter 1, the first waypoint is a decolonial history of Buliyum Puyuk (Winnemem Wintu name) also known as Mount Shasta. This massive volcano is the spiritual center of the universe for multiple Tribal Nations, who access the mountain for ceremony. The mountain has acted for millennia as a gathering place and point of navigation for long-distance travel. The mountain is within a federally protected wilderness area, and access is monitored by

the U.S. government. The Winnemem Wintu tribe recently purchased back over 1,080 acres of land nearby, yet their access to the mountain itself is restricted.

Chapter 2, “Land Back and Indigenous Healing,” foregrounds Indigenous realities on the PCT, pointing to the ways Land Back offers pathways to decolonial human-land relationships and collective healing of land and people. Under “Land Back on the PCT,” I provide an overview of current and past Land Back activism on the land this research discusses. I also discuss the way Land Back is represented, or more accurately not represented, to hikers on the PCT, in the form of signage and land acknowledgements. Under “The Power of Names,” I discuss reclaiming Indigenous place names, including how Indigenous names factor into the PCT hiking experience. Under “Indigenous Hiking on Indigenous Land,” I relay the experiences of Indigenous hikers, and the uniquely powerful intimacy forged through hiking on land to which Indigenous hikers have intergenerational kinship with. Lastly, under “Decolonizing Land Relations: Rematriation, Reciprocity, and Consent,” I explain epistemological underpinnings of Land Back and the philosophical and real-world relationships with land it makes possible.

The second waypoint is of Giiwas (Klamath name), also called Crater Lake. Klamath people have been interacting with this area of land since before the lake even existed. Formed through volcanic eruption 7,700 years ago, this is the second deepest lake on Turtle Island and one of the deepest lakes in the world. The lake is sacred place of dark power for Klamath people, who did not tell early settlers about the lake because its sanctity limited looking at or speaking about its existence. Giiwas is now a national park. The Klamath Tribe is currently working to purchase land close to the lake, and is pressuring the National Park Service to more substantially recognize their relationship with the lake and allow greater access.

Chapter 3, “Normativity, Failure, and Gendered Hiking” ethnographically describes some of the ways that normative understandings shape the PCT and undermine hikers’ opportunities for truly regenerative imagining and healing. Under “I Failed my Hiking Trip,” I discuss how ideals of success, failure, productivity, and speed are exported onto the trail. The PCT is imagined as something to be achieved or failed, and hikers discipline themselves to meet the norms of the ideal thru-hiker. Under “Gendered Hiking,” I describe how I and other women and nonbinary people have experienced misogyny and been made to feel unsafe on the trail, and how gender norms shape what is prioritized and valued in the PCT community. In the last section, “The Commodification of Walking,” I discuss a recent shift towards the PCT becoming increasingly intertwined with capitalist logics, and growing possibilities for hikers to monetize their experiences.

Waypoint 3 discusses Klah Klahnee (Warm Springs Tribes name), also known as the Three Sisters Wilderness. This volcanic landscape, home to three towering snowcapped mountains, is a source of obsidian for the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute Tribal Nations. Obsidian collection in the area, to create tools and ceremonial objects, dates back 4,000 years and still continues. The Klah Klahnee area became fully under federal management with the Wilderness Act of 1964, and obsidian collection is now restricted. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs’ Land Back work includes buying additional land and asserting treaty rights to access and conserve land outside their reservation (including Klah Klahnee).

The fourth and final chapter, “Feeling Climate Change” describes how colonialism is strongly present in the embodied experiences of PCT hikers, even if they do not recognize it as such. Under “A Race Against Fire,” I describe my own dramatic encounters with wildfire season on the PCT, and explain how wildfires have recently become an expected yet daunting

component of the PCT experience. Under “Emotional and Embodied Realities of Climate Change,” I describe how PCT hikers interact and grapple with the effects of climate change on a personal level, including visceral reactions to the desolate burn zones they hike through, and taking climate change into the body through the inhalation of smoke. Under “Detouring Wildfires,” I reorient the reader’s attention away from “climate change” as an apolitical scientific phenomenon, refocusing on wildfires as physical manifestations of colonialism. I explain the colonial history of fire suppression along the PCT and Indigenous understandings of fire as vital collaborator rather than an othered enemy.

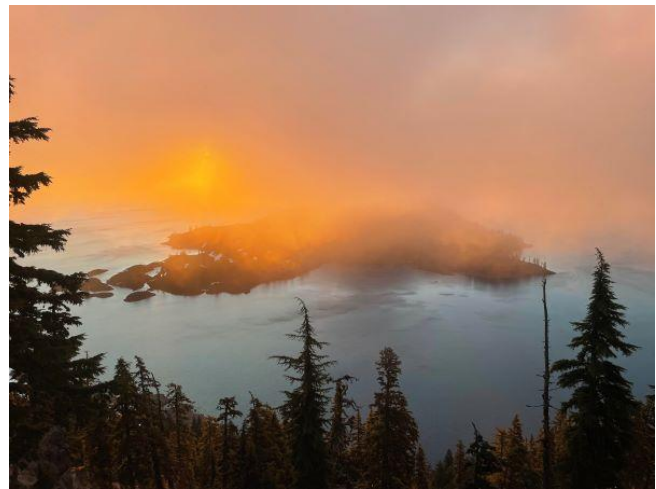
The final waypoint discusses Tahoma (Puyallup name), also known as Mount Rainier. This mountain has many Indigenous names, but a widespread movement works to restore the name “Tahoma,” meaning “the mother of waters.” This sacred mountain is the source of all water in the area, and human-land relationships and land management here date back 9,000 years. Tahoma and its surrounding land became a national park in 1899. Compared to other national parks, The Parks Service in this case acknowledges calls to establish collaborative management of this land by both the U.S. government and Tribal governments, yet resists taking concrete steps to make this a reality.

Personally and academically, this research took me down unexpected paths. I have learned many things from my ethnographic collaborators, who include hikers, nature-lovers, my body, movement, mountains, rivers, sunsets, trees, fungi, butterflies, woodpeckers, and elk. Taking steps across land, and taking steps in this research, I have gained a more expansive understanding of an activity I love deeply – hiking – and have glimpsed the forms that decolonial love for land can take.

Chapter 1: Healing and Being Alive on the PCT

“Every day on the PCT I have felt that the world is beautiful and life is worth living.” – Frog, PCT Hiker

It was 4:30 am and I was walking in the dark, in the snow, leading my yawning and grumbling little band of hikers along the Pacific Crest Trail. The first pale tints of gold and pink were just beginning to color the sky when we reached our destination to watch the sunrise: a massive rock, jutting out over the west rim of Giiwas (this is the Klamath name for an unfathomably deep lake, also known as Crater Lake, carved through fiery and catastrophic eruption thousands of years ago in so-called ~~Oregon~~). Shivering, we huddled together on the rock, wrapped in our overlapping sleeping bags. Our hands were warmed by mugs of coffee brewed on our camp stoves, the steam spiraling upwards to defrost our noses. Me, Charlie, Majee, and Altitude. The four of us had met just weeks before – or had it been years? As the sky lightened, we talked about all of the beautiful moments we had shared on the PCT. Then the sun broke over the horizon, and we stopped talking, just sitting, feeling what it was to be in that place. It was a foggy morning. When the sun crested the east rim of the lake, the tendrils of mist swirling over the water’s surface seemed to ignite from within, glowing orange and golden. As the sun rose and we sat, entranced by the colors dancing inside the fog, the sun’s warmth seeped into our bodies, and we cast aside our sleeping bags, waking up with the world.



Sunrise over Giiwas.

The day before, the four of us, Charlie (a 42-year-old man from Michigan), Majee (a 62-year-old man from South Korea), Altitude (a 25-year-old woman from California), and myself (a 27-year-old woman from Florida, currently residing in Hawai‘i) were sitting at the Mazama Village Café in Crater Lake National Park, eating nacho fries and planning out the next leg of our hike. We were intending to spend the night at the free section of the National Park campground set aside for PCT hikers, when a man walked up to our table, grinning and clearly recognizing us as thru-hikers. He asked if we planned to be at the lake for sunrise. He introduced himself as “Coach”: he had hiked the ~~Washington~~ section of the PCT the year before, and was now on a short family vacation. If we wanted, he could give us a ride back to the trail. If we hiked just a few miles, we could camp a short distance from an ideal spot to witness the sunrise. Clambering into the back of Coach’s car and jamming my backpack between my knees, I reflected on how typical this encounter is to the PCT experience: a group of strangers turned into a “trail family,” the serendipity of help arriving in unexpected ways from the wider PCT community, and the startling frequency of experiences that inspire wonder and gratitude for existing on Earth.

One of the most common stories told about thru-hiking is that it is healing. The word “healing” appears prominently in many articles, social media posts, and blogs about the PCT, and is a common word in the vocabulary of hikers on-trail. But what are hikers healing from? Some people hike as an attempt to heal from specific afflictions, such as addiction, trauma, or grief. For example, the most widely-known piece of media about the PCT is Cheryl Strayed’s 2012 memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* and the book’s 2014 movie adaptation *Wild* starring Reece Witherspoon. This book/movie is many peoples’ only exposure to the PCT. Strayed accounts how hiking on the PCT helped her heal following the death of her mother and her

subsequent divorce and heroin addiction (Strayed 2012). I enjoyed a delicious chocolate milkshake at Eastwind Drive-In, one of several PCT landmarks to proudly advertise itself as somewhere Strayed stopped on her hike. Located in the town of Cascade Locks, this diner is hikers' last stop before crossing the Bridge of the Gods from ~~Oregon~~ into Washington. Similarly, thru-hiking celebrity Heather Anderson focuses on healing in her 2019 memoir *Thirst: 2600 Miles to Home*, which documents her experience setting the speed record for hiking the PCT. In the book, Anderson describes how hiking has helped her process childhood trauma and overcome a long-term eating disorder (Anderson 2019). Another thru-hiking celebrity, Will "Akuna" Robinson was the first Black man to complete the North American hiking "triple crown." An army veteran, Robinson set out to hike the PCT in 2016 as a way to cope with PTSD, depression, and alcoholism. He now advocates for others to experience "the healing power of nature" (Robinson 2025).

Many PCT hikers are open about having experienced anxiety, depression, and other mental illness problems. PCT hikers often, however, speak about "healing" more abstractly, and imply that thru-hiking is a path to "heal" from capitalism and modernity. A crucial component of this healing, as hikers describe it, is prolonged immersion in forests, mountains, and deserts, away from roads, high-rises, jobs, and Wi-Fi. Thru-hiking is unique in that hikers spend multiple months at a time in the so-called wilderness, but the psychological and emotional benefits of spending even short amounts of time outdoors and living in close proximity to green spaces has been widely documented and intuitively understood (Williams 2017). I first became interested in hiking and backpacking when I was an undergraduate student in New York City. In New York, I felt perpetually overwhelmed and anxious, both because of the stress of college, and because I lived in a busy city. I felt suffocated by the fact that my constant surroundings were almost

entirely inert and constructed by humans: a sharp contrast from the reality of a forest, where every part of one's surroundings is alive and breathing. I joined my university's hiking club, and being in the mountains outside the city every weekend brought me mental clarity and peace. I experienced similar mental relief on the PCT, but on a larger and more transformative scale, because my body had months to relax and fall into the rhythms of my surroundings.

In addition to emphasizing the increased wellbeing that results from living outdoors in wild spaces, hikers also highlight specific aspects of North American thru-hiking culture that they find to be healing. For many, the PCT subculture represents a radical shift from everyday living in modern capitalist society. Key values within this community include support and comradery, celebrating experiences of wonder and gratitude, and mindful awareness of body and surroundings. I summarize key components of thru-hiking culture through the following three sections of this chapter: Interconnection over Isolation, Sunsets over Screens, and Clarity over Chemicals. The values I describe are not necessarily specific to hiking or the PCT; however, the PCT serves as a location where people feel relatively free to create new norms and practice ways of relating very different from those that dominate their daily lives.

I. Interconnection over Isolation

The mountain ranges that the PCT crosses have served as sites of interconnection for thousands of years. As discussed in the introduction, the PCT was constructed by joining many existing trails which had been used by Indigenous communities for millennia for trade and knowledge-sharing. Contrary to colonial narratives, Native tribes across Turtle Island were never isolated, but have consistently interacted. Today, mutual support and belonging to a community network is probably the aspect of PCT culture that thru-hikers most often celebrate and reminisce

about when remembering their PCT journeys. In the current PCT culture, who is this community for? I want to emphasize that interconnection, as highlighted by PCT hikers, is not the same as millennia-long histories of Indigenous interconnection with and on land. I discuss Indigenous healing on the PCT in Chapter 2; while some thru-hikers are Indigenous to the land where they hike, the majority are not. PCT hikers rely on a strong sense of community because they are most often not from the places where they walk. They are cut off from community networks they may have at home, and need to rely on a new PCT community for support as they attempt something that is physically and psychologically difficult. The PCT community includes PCT hikers, an extensive network of “trail angels”: people who live close to the trail and offer hikers support, and PCT hikers from past years, who very often return to the trail to aid and talk with current hikers. This community, therefore, revolves around people who are familiar with the land specifically as a place to hike, and who interact extensively with other people who are on the land for that purpose.

Nevertheless, community is extremely meaningful to PCT hikers. This comes at a time when loneliness, as a debilitating consequence of capitalist individualism, has become increasingly recognized as a reality that shapes many peoples’ lives. The normalization of isolation in neoliberal societies has manifested itself in widespread mental and physical suffering (Monbiot 2016). I, like many PCT hikers, was raised in a place where it is unusual to strike up conversations with strangers or have close relationships with neighbors. I am an introverted and socially anxious person who typically chooses to only know a small circle of people. On the PCT, however, it is entirely normal and expected to talk with every person you encounter and to support one another. A very common experience among PCT hikers is well-expressed by the following sentiment which one hiker shared with me: “I expected that this hike would be an

opportunity for me to really connect with myself and with nature. What I didn't expect was how people have actually been the most meaningful part of my experience. I've met such incredible humans who have shaped my entire time on the PCT... and PCT culture really makes you believe in the goodness of people and the kindness of strangers." For myself and others, the PCT feels like a place where we have permission to connect. This connection is facilitated by the fact that most hikers start out solo, that the community is relatively small, and that hikers feel understood by others who share their sense of adventure and value immersion in the natural world.

"Trail families," or "tramilies," play a central role in thru-hiking culture. These chosen families are made up of hikers who meet on the trail and decide to hike together. A trail family may remain together for days, weeks, or months; they may camp together every night or only run into each other every once in a while; they could be composed of any number of hikers and organize themselves in any way that best serves them. I had one main trail family on the PCT. The first member of my trail family, Altitude, was faster than me and got ahead, ultimately finishing the PCT a few weeks before I did. The second member, Charlie, got off trail several hundred miles short of the end due to an ankle stress fracture. The final member, Majee, had to get off trail and return home to Korea for non-hiking-related emergency dental care. Although we did not remain together consistently, we stayed consistently in touch and shared logistical advice, braved particularly snowy traverses and rushing river crossings together, and had deep discussions under starry skies. I also made other friends on the PCT: some I shared only one long conversation with while sitting by a stream somewhere eating lunch, others I met on rest days in town where we decided to go whitewater rafting or dance to bluegrass music together, and others I met many times over hundreds or thousands of miles.

I remember encountering a group of hikers walking towards me, just when my route was beginning to overlap with southbound hiking season (some PCT hikers opt to begin at the ~~Washington-Canada border~~ and hike south, rather than the common northbound route; their weather window for hiking is much later). Until that point, the people I had met hiking south were people out for short weekend trips. However, I knew this was a group of thru-hikers before they said a word to me. They had just begun their PCT journey, they weren't yet dirty and their clothes weren't yet tattered, but only a thru-hiking trail family would include such an unlikely assortment of people. There was an older man with a long white beard, a purple-haired woman who couldn't be older than twenty, and an assortment of other people representing a broad range of ages and styles. The PCT forges friend groups that would probably never have formed in everyday life. Moreover, these bonds may seem temporary, only lasting for the duration of a hiking trip, and to an extent, they are. Yet I received messages in my trail family group chat today while writing this chapter; we're planning a hiking trip together next summer. I was sung "Happy Birthday" this year on a mountaintop by a 2022 PCT trail family, back on the PCT for their annual reunion trip. And I met a man who hiked the PCT in 2017, who was on his way to the wedding of two people from his trail family, who had met on the PCT and hiked thousands of miles together.

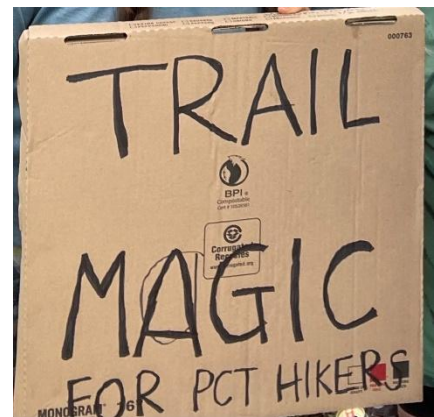
The PCT community also extends beyond hikers to include the wider community of people who live close to the trail. The PCT passes close by many small remote towns, where hikers stop to shower, rest, and resupply on food. As thru-hiking has become more popular, the economies of these towns have become increasingly intertwined with hiking, with the appearance of many gear shops, hiker hostels, campgrounds, and stores that stock hiking food. At places where the PCT crosses a road leading to town, "trail angels," who live in the town and want to

help hikers, often post physical signs or comments in the FarOut navigation app with their contact information, offering support for hikers needing rides or accommodation. Trail angels sometimes offer services for a fee or accept tips, but they more often will not accept money and instead simply insist on the thru-hiking mantra “pay it forward.” I have had many wonderful conversations with trail angels, most of whom have not hiked the entire PCT, but who are knowledgeable and invested in the trail. When a trail angel unexpectedly provides support to hikers, often when they most need it, it is called “trail magic.”



A common sight on the PCT: a sign made by trail angels offers support for hikers (names and contact info redacted).

A popular form of trail magic is when trail angels set up free food stations in remote places on the PCT. Imagine: it's been five days since you last stopped in town, and you have been subsisting off of protein bars and oatmeal. The “hiker hunger” is really starting to kick in. You've hiked twenty miles today. It was raining this morning, everything is still damp, and the blister on the back of your heel just keeps getting worse. Your only remaining food is ramen and electrolyte tabs. Suddenly, you round a bend in the trail and there, on a dirt Forest Service Road, is a table containing a full taco bar and margarita station. Hikers



A hand-drawn sign on a pizza box advertises a spread of food, offered to PCT hikers by a local couple.

and trail angels are lounging around, laughing as a movie plays on a portable projector. You put down your backpack. Trust me, it definitely feels like magic.

One exceptionally hot and dusty day stands out in my mind as particularly infused with magic. It was early in the hiking season, and a section of trail was still covered in treacherous snowdrifts. Therefore, my brand-new trail family had just assembled to work together navigating many thru-hikers' least favorite activity: road walking. In order to maintain our then-continuous northward footpath while avoiding the sketchy section of trail, we would use Google Maps to navigate a route via back roads, which we would walk before reconnecting with the PCT. The problem was, we were walking through a heatwave, in the rain shadow of Buliyum Puyuuk (Winnemem Wintu name for Mount Shasta), on exposed roads with no shade and no natural water sources. Of the limited cars that drove past, however, a remarkably high percentage stopped to chat or offer us water, snacks, or a ride. We enjoyed frequent breaks and conversations, while still stubbornly insisting on walking.

As the day grew later, I began to feel lightheaded from the harsh sun. No cars had passed for a while, and we sat resting by a bleak stretch of road, wondering if we should find a place to stop soon and set up camp. Just as we were making halfhearted plans, a car pulled up, and an older woman rolled down the window and exclaimed with delight: "PCT hikers!! What are you doing here?!" The woman, known as Honey Bear, explained that her husband was, at that very moment, hiking the PCT. As a couple, they had hosted PCT hikers at their nearby ranch for years, until he had been inspired to hike the trail himself. Honey Bear helped us all pile into her car and drove us to her ranch. There, we cooked dinner together, all crowded into Honey Bear's kitchen with Abba music blaring. We helped feed her Icelandic horses as the sky turned brilliantly pink over the surrounding mountains, and we watched barn owls rustle in the owl box,

taking flight as the night's first stars winked into life. Then we all sat in the living room, warm candlelight dancing on the walls, eating cheese and crackers and drinking wine as we talked well past "hiker midnight" (9 pm) before drifting off to sleep.

The wider context of our road walk also reveals a larger story of community support. My trail family and I did not want to attempt the snow-covered section of trail because only a week before, a PCT hiker named Jasper had been evacuated from that area by helicopter with a broken pelvis, after surviving a devastating fall off a snowy cliff. Although relatively minor overuse injuries are very common on the PCT, serious debilitating injuries are not, and the PCT community quickly rallied around supporting Jasper. Trail angels visited him at the hospital, bringing him food and comfort items. In the fall, Jasper had been separated from his backpack, which fell down the cliff; a group of local hikers with mountaineering experience and equipment journeyed out and recovered his things. An international hiker from the Czech Republic, Jasper luckily purchased emergency evacuation and medical insurance before beginning the PCT, but before this was established, trail angels had begun fundraising for his medical bills. When Jasper was finally physically able to fly home, he had multiple trail angels he was close to at that point, all offering him rides to the airport.

This community dynamic, central to PCT culture, pushes back against narratives dating back to early American exploration, in which the ideal is the solitary rugged man, proving himself by facing the elements alone. Cisheteropatriarchal individualism, competition, and achievement is still a troublingly central part of the PCT, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, the PCT's celebration of interconnection and community, which has become even more central in recent years with more people hiking and the frequency of severe weather events increasing, to an extent echoes Alison Kafer's feminist, queer, and crip critique of hegemonic narratives of

nature connection, in which she inquires: “What happens to theory when it is no longer based primarily on tales of individuals’ encounters with nature, but on experiences of interdependence and community?” (Kafer 2013, 144).

II. Sunsets over Screens

On day 23 hiking the PCT, I wrote in my field notes: “time feels vast when you’re awake to every moment of it.” A meaningful, “healing” part of long-distance hiking is that hikers often learn to be more fully present and aware of their surroundings, senses, bodies, and emotions. In modern industrial society, most peoples’ everyday lives are full of artificial stimulation and distraction, and many people are not consistently checking in on things their bodies, emotions, and intuition may be telling them. While on-trail, many things including social media, television, and alcohol are stripped away. Without phone service or Wi-Fi, thru-hikers refer to campfires as “hiker TV;” archeologists have posited that control of fire by early hominins, and a newfound ability to spend evenings gazing into flames, may have resulted in an increased capacity for imagination and dreaming. Without screens, hikers, similarly, develop the ability to be deeply fascinated while watching flames, rippling stream water, and the kaleidoscopic colors of sunsets. Regularly experiencing awe, wonder, and fascination results in increased wellbeing and eases mental stress (Williams 2017). These things are felt in abundance on the PCT.

One aspect of thru-hiking that has felt particularly profound to me is that hikers report a significant sharpening of their senses, particularly their senses of smell and hearing, after spending weeks or months living outdoors. I noticed my sense of hearing especially sharpen on the PCT, to the point where I knew right away when an animal or other person was nearby. In industrial society, vision is prioritized over the other senses, reinforced by the fact that most

modern media and technologies (computers, smartphones, movies, Instagram reels) are visually dominant (Hutmacher 2019). Even in this thesis, the majority of my descriptions are biased towards the visual. People are more accustomed to easily understanding descriptions of color and texture, compared to if I were to evoke the smell of sun-warmed pine needles, or the feeling of a clear morning breeze on my skin. If you were to google the PCT or look at the photos in this thesis, you would get some understanding of the trail – but the PCT is a full-body immersive experience within the sensual more-than-human world. In *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, David Abram demonstrates how tuning into our senses is a route to “becoming animal”: by fully connecting to our sensorial experience, we recognize that we are part of a larger web of life (Abram 2010). The power of discovering newfound connection to multiple senses while hiking is expressed by feeling that, as I reflected in my field notes, “on the PCT you really truly realize that you’re a living creature.” This embodied realization can be very meaningful for people like me, who spend a lot of time trapped in their own thoughts, disassociated from sensory realities. Moreover, connecting to my senses can foster a sense of intimacy and belonging within the world.

Through developing sensorial intimacy with their surroundings, hikers’ community ties extend beyond human relations to include kinship with a wider web of life. Awake to their surroundings, PCT hikers learn to notice the animals, plants, weather, water, rocks, mountains, and winds that are ever-present parts of their daily reality. Introducing the idea of “land-based literacy” in Hawai‘i, Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua expands the definition of “literacy” to include not only reading texts, but “reading” the stars, winds, waves, and animals (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua 2013). Anthropologist Tim Ingold similarly asks, “why do we acknowledge only our textual sources but not the ground we walk, the ever-changing skies, mountains and rivers, rocks and

trees?” (Ingold 2011, xii). Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes about “land as pedagogy,” advocating for teaching “whole-body intelligence” that is created “from the ground up” in relationship with land (Simpson 2017). Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua and Simpson write about Indigenous contexts, and I don’t want to decontextualize their ideas by applying them to settler hikers. Nonetheless, I think thru-hikers develop a certain type of environmental awareness through direct sensory experience that resists colonial understandings that knowledge is only generated from the human mind, and that our more-than-human communities have nothing to teach us.

I wrote the following reflection in my field notes:

This part of the trail is pretty muddy, so all the animal tracks have been particularly visible. I know that deer and elk walk along the trail just like I do: I’ve seen them, using this path of least resistance. I’ve also seen tracks that look like they belong to foxes and coyotes, and smaller ones, probably squirrels, chipmunks, and racoons. I’m eating lunch next to a pond right now, and I’m thinking about the animals around me because I’ve been watching this frog for the last twenty minutes. I can sometimes get caught up in the goal-orientedness of hiking. I’ve been daydreaming about getting to town and taking a shower, so I’ve been thinking about doing an especially high-mileage day today. But I’m tired. And this frog I’ve been watching has been doing absolutely nothing (as far as I can tell) for the past twenty minutes. This frog is just vibing. If they can sit around indefinitely, just being here, so can I.

This is one small example among many of a time when I found comfort learning from and emulating the life around me. I admired the frog’s ability to do “nothing.” However, upon further reflection, it’s also important to acknowledge that this interaction was not only a direct

interaction between me and the frog, but an instance when I projected my anthropocentric assumptions of what “doing something” looks like onto the frog. Conserving energy, camouflaging, regulating body temperature – these are still actions, but are examples of “doing things” largely outside capitalist productivity. Practices of reconnecting with other-than-human kin are crucial for collective wellbeing, remediating what Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “species loneliness”: “a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation” (Kimmerer 2013).

In the context of Hawai‘i, Candace Fujikane describes learning from and acting in accordance with nature as “being in alignment with the laws of the akua [the elements; Hawaiian deities].” Fujikane describes connecting with nature as a decolonial practice, and advocates for “a different politics of recognition, one that centers not on the settler state’s recognition of Indigenous peoples but on whether *the earth will recognize us*. To ask how the earth will recognize us entails a decolonization of the Anthropocene” (Fujikane 2021, 7-8). In this framework, the earth has agency and things to teach us. This thinking also recognizes that people can learn to adopt ecological rhythms, rather than acting according to frenzied capitalist timelines.

“Rhythm” is a common word on the PCT, spoken with reverence by hikers. This “rhythm” refers to both the rhythm of the human body while walking, and the ways hikers become synchronized with the rhythms of their surroundings. Without artificial light, thru-hikers typically adapt to the rhythm of sleeping and waking with the sun. They also walk further and faster in the crisp and pleasant weather of morning and afternoon, listening when high temperatures tell their bodies to rest in the heat of the day. “Rhythm” is my friend Majee’s favorite word; Majee is Buddhist (his trail name means “Buddha’s food” in Korea) and he actively meditates while hiking, becoming deeply absorbed in the rhythm of his footsteps for

hours at a time. Interestingly, Buddhist philosophy is a very popular topic of conversation and reading material among thru-hikers. Majee, like many PCT hikers, values listening to and learning from the wisdom of his own body. Walking all day every day gives hikers an embodied understanding that the rhythms of their minds are no different from the rhythms of their bodies or of the surrounding landscape. I love walking because, as I walk, I feel my steps unraveling my anxiety, waking me up. On the PCT, when I would spend multiple days resting in town, I missed the soothing, gentle rocking sensation of constant walking. I, like many thru-hikers, also became especially susceptible to car sickness after being so used to moving at the pace of my steps. Reflecting many thru-hikers' feeling that there is wisdom in the act of walking, Tim Ingold describes walking as a decolonial practice. As Ingold describes, in the Western academic tradition, intellectual rigor is associated with using only the mind, while the feet stay still. Only intellectual textual forms of knowledge are considered to be legitimate. The practice of walking across landscapes – learning from the feet and not only the head – facilitates breaking free from the Cartesian split between mind and body and nature and self (Ingold 2011).

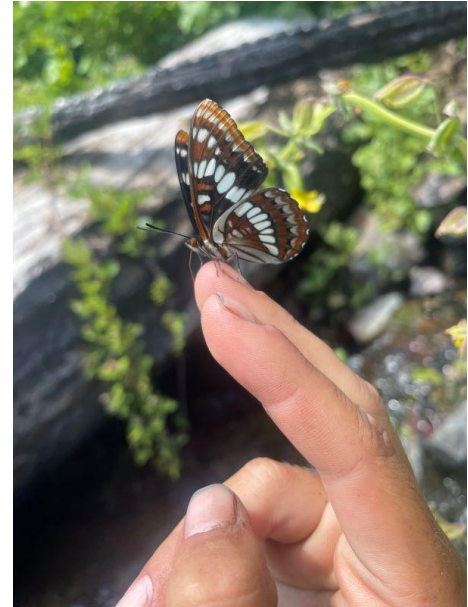
Just as thru-hikers heal through connecting to their senses and bodies, they also develop compassionate relationships with their emotions and intuition. Although cisheteropatriarchal Western nature exploration has long been imbued with values of stoicism and toughness, thru-hiking is recognized as a necessarily emotional experience, as expressed in the thru-hiking clichés “you will experience the highest highs and the lowest lows” and “don’t quit on a bad day.” Climbing up and down mountains is necessarily emotional, and processing emotions with the support of the trail community is a key part of the PCT experience. For people conditioned by colonial capitalism to master and undervalue their emotions, thru-hiking is a means through which people re-learn themselves as emotional, as well as physical, beings. Thru-hikers have a

tendency to romanticize their experiences in hindsight, but this romanticization includes fondly remembering how freely and frequently they cried while hiking, and how they learned to accept rather than shame themselves for their emotions. On day 50, I wrote in my fieldnotes,

I am feeling very grateful to myself for being able to feel things so deeply out here. This morning, I was hiking along, irritable, exasperated, and impatient, feeling every contour of those emotions. Just now, I was sitting here and a butterfly landed on me, and I just felt overwhelmed by how a creature could move with such gentleness.

Acceptance, kindness, and caring towards oneself are also cultivated on the PCT as hikers learn to trust themselves and what they need at any given time. I experienced a profound personal shift in simply learning to listen to myself and accept without question things I would tell myself, such as “I’m hungry,” “I’m tired,” “I have energy,” and “I need to rest here in the shade for a while.” Living in Hawai‘i, I have been exposed to the importance of listening to one’s na‘au (intestines; affections; mood²) as an important source of knowledge and understanding, learning based on what is deeply felt and understood in the body. The PCT is a space where the na‘au is respected and relied on on a daily basis.

Deeply feeling one’s emotions and learning to accept one’s intuition can be uncomfortable and even painful. This difficult experience is something many seek out on the PCT, and can be meaningful especially because many hikers come to the trail at major transition



Small moments can evoke large emotions.

² ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i spelling and translations from wehewehe.org dictionaries

points in their lives, such as a break-ups, divorce, retirement, or career changes. These transitional periods are often when people have the available free time for a multi-month hike; hiking the PCT also serves as an opportunity to process major life changes. For others, a thru-hike serves as a catalyst that provides them with the clarity and self-confidence necessary to initiate shifts in their lives. My friend came out as a trans woman after a long-distance hike, saying that her hiking experience provided her with the space to realize, process, and accept her identity. She felt that she belonged within the expansive rhythms and flows of nature, even if she did not fit within cisheteropatriarchal expectations about gender. I met another hiker who realized she was in an abusive relationship while hiking the PCT; after that hike she decided not to return to her relationship, instead moving to a new town and beginning life “fresh.” Some hikers describe the PCT as a place where they are reborn.

Finally, as the title of this section, “Sunsets over Screens,” suggests, thru-hikers’ descriptions of learning to meaningfully and deeply connect to their senses, surroundings, bodies, emotions, and intuitions is facilitated in large part by a rejection of technology. Many hikers label all technology as getting in the way of peoples’ connection with “the real world.” Using language that is explicitly anti-technology and anti-modernity, they complain about the very existence of cars, and moan when airplanes fly overhead. It is worth noting that this sentiment is somewhat contradictory to the fact that the PCT is constructed by humans: hikers encounter trail maintenance crews with chainsaws, and are grateful for them. Thru-hikers also rely on high-tech ultra-light backpacking gear, and most today do not carry paper maps or compasses (which are themselves technology), instead relying the FarOut navigation smartphone app and carrying a Garmin InReach satellite communication device in case of emergency. I first met one friend on the PCT after he arrived at my trail family’s campsite in a panic: his phone and

battery pack had died, he no longer had any means of navigation, and he wondered if he could join our group until we reached the next town. We happily invited him to join us, and had a fun time hiking together. But reliance on technology, and technological failure, despite overt rejection of technology, is not uncommon on the PCT.

III. Clarity over Chemicals

In this discussion of healing on the PCT, it's worth noting that thru-hikers talk explicitly about health and biomedicine, and sometimes present thru-hiking as a "natural" approach to healthcare. A common narrative among thru-hikers is that because humans evolved as nomadic foragers, long-distance hiking is what human bodies are biologically meant to do. Expressing this view, hikers describe many aspects of modern society as "unnatural": chairs are unnatural because our bodies are meant to sit on the ground, electricity is unnatural because our eyes love only sunlight, and cars are unnatural because our legs are meant to walk. Although this way of thinking does push back against capitalist glorification of technological progress, it is also a clearly ableist approach to health and what the human body "should" do, spoken about by people who are physically capable of hiking for months at a time. This understanding also entrenches the same nature-culture dichotomy that thru-hikers purportedly aim to escape from. Health, for many thru-hikers, means rejecting all that is "unnatural" and embracing what is "natural." One hiker told me that backpacking is an especially "natural" activity because foragers evolved carrying loads on their backs, so backpacking is therefore even closer to humanity's original state than day-hiking without a pack. Accompanying these primitivist understandings is some degree of rejection of biomedicine, including medication and anything believed to contain "unnatural" chemicals, including even sunscreen and insect repellent.

Most thru-hikers do wear sunscreen, although many prefer mineral sunscreens that do not absorb into the skin. My friend Charlie, however, is one PCT hiker who refused to wear any sunscreen, despite living outside 24/7, no matter how hard I tried to convince him otherwise. Charlie did wear long sleeves and long pants for sun protection, but explained that he would rather his body be damaged by the sun than damaged by “whatever artificial things” are in sunscreen. The majority of PCT thru-hikers do not use insect repellent at all. Using DEET insect repellent is seen as by many as “literally dousing yourself in poison” (and it is common knowledge that DEET can melt synthetic hiking gear). Herbal and essential oil insect repellents typically don’t work very well, so hikers simply brave mosquitos or use mosquito head nets when necessary. For most of my time on the PCT, insects were not too much of a problem. However, I did buy DEET in ~~Southern Oregon~~, where I hiked in the height of a mosquito hatch. There, I walked through clouds of mosquitos; hundreds would swarm me at a time, as I walked as quickly as possible to try and generate a breeze to prevent them landing on me. Although I originally felt highly judged by other thru-hikers for buying DEET, the number of hikers in this area who cracked and asked to borrow some bug spray from me was laughable. As I passed him the spray bottle, one hiker said “these mosquitos are just too miserable. I’d rather get cancer a hundred times than deal with this” (implying that DEET causes cancer). Many thru-hikers have similar attitudes towards painkillers, like Ibuprofen, Tylenol, and Advil, and sleeping pills, saying that these things inhibit their ability to listen to their bodies, while others, especially people aiming for very high mileage, take excessive amounts of painkillers to cope with aches and pains.

One hiker I met named Solar stands out as a particularly extreme embodiment of thru-hikers’ attitudes towards health. Solar began her PCT thru-hike at the ~~California-Mexico border~~

and hiked north until, 400 miles in, she suffered a serious injury to a tendon in her ankle. Unable to walk, she returned home to Colorado, where she spent two months in physical therapy until her ankle regained some strength and mobility. Solar's doctor told her that the injury would require at least six months of further recovery time without strenuous activity. However, I met Solar in ~~Washington~~, where she had decided to return to the PCT and hike for a month, only two months after sustaining her injury, as self-prescribed physical therapy. "My doctor thinks I'm crazy," Solar told me. Solar is recently retired, and since not needing to be in the workforce, has enjoyed investing her time learning about alternative medicine, yoga, and reiki. Hiking the first 400 miles of the PCT, she felt in the best physical and psychological shape of her life, and noticed that her scoliosis didn't bother her as it had for years. After sustaining her injury and feeling cooped up at home, therefore, she decided that hiking was the best course of action for her body's recovery. She returned to the PCT and hiked at a slow pace, walking relatively few miles per day and constantly monitoring her ankle. Wildfires ultimately interrupted Solar's route, and she was not able to complete her planned section of trail. But her insistence that thru-hiking was the best possible physical remedy for her ankle, despite the fact that thru-hiking caused her injury in the first place, speaks volumes to hikers' faith in the healing power of the trail.

The high frequency of injury on the PCT complicates thru-hikers' conception that long-distance hiking is inherently mentally, physically, and spiritually "healthy" for people. Many hikers I met ultimately got off trail due to injury or illnesses, ranging from stress fractures, sprains, and plantar fasciitis, to giardia and infections. Before returning to the PCT this year, in 2021 I hiked 1,150 miles of the trail. My thru-hike attempt ended when I stopped into a rural urgent care facility complaining of chest pain and sudden extreme fatigue. One ER visit and CT scan later, I was told that there was something mysteriously wrong with my left lung, which

appeared compressed; I needed to go home and seek medical help, and I absolutely could not continue hiking. This devastating news was followed by a frustrating year of chronic fatigue, during which time multiple pulmonologists could not tell me what was wrong with my lung, until it eventually fixed itself. Injuries are one of the most common reasons why people do not finish a thru-hike. Additionally, any thru-hiker will attest that although walking 20 miles every day up and down mountains brings great physical fitness, doing so for 4-6 months can be very destructive to bodies. Thru-hikers often lose alarming amounts of weight. Thru-hiking burns about 4,000 calories per day, which results in “hiker hunger”: thru-hikers are constantly hungry and have strange cravings. Thru-hikers commonly eat as many calories as possible, pay little attention to nutrition, and subsist off of vast quantities of ramen and Snickers bars. In addition to my lung problem, in the ER I was told that I was severely anemic.

Thru-hiking requires extreme physical effort, and the vast majority of thru-hikers are young, able-bodied, exceptionally fit people. Online forums and YouTube videos offer tips for long-distance hikers with dietary restrictions, diabetes, hearing loss, vision loss, and other disabilities. Activists in the disability-inclusive outdoors community include Trevor Thomas, a blind hiker who has hiked over 20,000 miles with guide dogs Tennille and Lulu, including the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail (Thomas 2025). There are also many online communities for retired and older hikers. In 2021, at age 83 M.J. “Nimblewill Nomad” Eberhart thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, breaking the record for oldest known person to thru-hike an American “triple crown” trail (Eberhart 2024). Nevertheless, the idea that every person in the world could complete a thru-hike is not true. The people just mentioned are exceptional cases, which falsely suggest that everyone should desire to fit into the norms of thru-hiking and that disability is something to be overcome.

Glorifying specific types of “wilderness” experiences like hiking as superior, uniquely powerful ways to connect to nature and heal also limits what nature connection is and who it is for. Alison Kafer notes that wilderness areas are socially constructed and assigned specific meanings; they are also physically constructed to accommodate some (able-bodied people) and exclude others (the disabled) (Kafer 2013). Thru-hiking, or even day-hiking many areas of the PCT, is inaccessible to many people. It is problematic to assume therefore, that people *need* to have prolonged, physically demanding wilderness experiences to feel an embodied sense of nature connection. Kafer describes how disabled people offer expansive views of what can constitute nature connection. Because many wilderness areas are inaccessible, disabled people and others find nature connection in non-normative ways. They unsettle what counts as “nature,” expanding this definition to include observations of immediate surroundings and other people. “It’s a story of recognizing ourselves in the world around us, recognizing common structures of bone, flesh, oxygen, and air” (Kafer 2013, 146).

Thru-hiking, moreover, is one limited and culturally-specific way of interacting with the more-than-human world. However, thru-hikers experiences of healing point to certain ways of being and knowing that are practiced on the PCT, which can push back against capitalist expectations, and that can have transformative impacts on peoples’ lives. I have carried lessons from the PCT, about connection with others, myself, and my surroundings, into many aspects of how I now approach the world.

Waypoint 1: Buliyum Puyuuk

From one hundred miles away, the mountain is part of the clouds. Shrouded in a robe of white snow, the edges of the mountaintop blur, and there is no definite point where the water that is snow ends and the water that is cloud begins; the mountain is barely there, a specter. From fifty miles away, the mountain is a solid, steady presence. It is always there, and tracing the mountain like the needle of a compass, all life orients itself in space according to the mountaintop. Close up, to the tamarack pines and incense cedars that creep up its base, the mountain is the entire world. So unfathomably immense that it fills the sky, the mountain controls the weather,



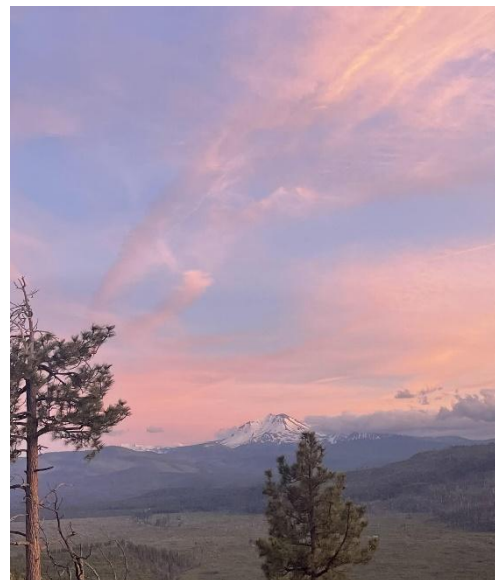
protecting all life in its rain shadow from the torrential power of blizzards and lightning. Every day, the mountain broadcasts messages of beauty to life both close and far away. The first rays of sunrise and the final rays of sunset turn the mountaintop's snow a soft baby-pink. In late afternoon the mountaintop is gilded in gold – the mountain is almost the sun itself. Often, the mountain is visible even at night. It is so vast that it blocks out the stars, its silhouette stamped on the sky. The milky way traces a path that leads from the mountain's apex up and up into forever.

The Winnemem Wintu name for this mountain is Buliyum Puyuuk. The Shasta name is Waka-nunee-Tuki-wuki. The Karok call it Úytaahkoo. The mountain is called by these names and others, but I call it Buliyum Puyuuk because I focus on the story of the Winnemem Wintu below. European settlers called the mountain Mount Shasta, scrawling this name hastily on maps without bothering to listen to the Indigenous people they named the mountain after. In fact, the

word “Shasta” was from the beginning a colonial invention: before settlers arrived, Shasta people called themselves “Kahosadi.” Buliyum Puyuuk, a massive 14,179-foot stratovolcano, is the center of the universe. The ancestors of the Wintu, Modoc, Klamath, Pit River, and Karuk Native Nations were born from the mountain, the bones of their ancestors are buried in its soil, and spirits and guardians dwell inside it.

Buliyum Puyuuk becomes visible at a distance where it would still take many days of walking to reach. Sometimes it disappears, obscured from view by closer mountains, only to rematerialize in a different place than one might

expect. Seen from all directions, the mountain has been used as a point of navigation and orientation for thousands of years. Interstate 5 runs right by Buliyum Puyuuk. As wide as twenty lanes in some places, this is a massive thoroughfare, constantly roaring with traffic. Six hundred miles of I-5, with Buliyum Puyuuk almost exactly in the middle, was



created by paving over the Siskiyou Trail, a long-distance Native-made route for trade and travel. The Siskiyou Trail made effective use of the area’s topography, winding through river valleys and around the tallest mountains. Between 1869 and 1887, a railroad was built along this route, replaced by U.S. Route 99 in the 1910s and later I-5 in the 1960s (Mackie 1997).

Just as Buliyum Puyuuk is physically immense, it possesses a staggeringly immense number of stories. It would be impossible to capture even a small fraction of all Indigenous stories about this sacred mountain, so instead I focus on one, of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe. “Winnemem Wintu” means “Middle Water People,” because the ancestors of the Winnemem

Wintu were born out of a sacred spring on Buliyum Puyuuk at the spiritual center of the universe. After emerging from the spring, the first Winnemem Wintu were not able to speak or understand the world. But the salmon, or Nur, who came from the same spring, decided to give up their voices so the humans could speak. In return, the Winnemem Wintu promised to always speak for the salmon, for the water, and for the mountain (Winnemem Wintu Tribe 2025; Women's Earth Alliance 2017). On their website "Who We Are" page, the Winnemem Wintu state that

We were born from water, we are of the water, and we fight to protect it... We are intimately connected to the Winnemem Waywaket (McCloud River), Buliyum Puyuuk (Mount Shasta), and the surrounding meadows. As Chief Caleen Sisk explains, "[O]ur beginning of life comes from Mt. Shasta, so all those stories up and down the river have meaning – from Yellow Jacket Mountain, to Fox Mountain, to the Sucker Pools, all these have stories that belong to the Winnemem people and songs that go with them."

(Winnemem Wintu Tribe 2025)

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe, who once numbered 14,000, has a current population of only approximately 150 people. After being forcibly removed from their land through the U.S. government's genocidal tactics during the gold rush era, the vast majority of the Winnemem Wintu's remaining land was flooded and made uninhabitable when the Shasta Dam was constructed in the 1940s. Creation of the dam also submerged more than 40 Winnemem sacred sites and burial grounds. In 2022, the tribe only owned 42 acres of land, and that year, those acres only narrowly avoided being destroyed by a wildfire. The Winnemem Wintu have never received compensation from the U.S. government and are not a federally recognized Tribal Nation. Following legislative changes in the 1980s, lack of U.S. federal recognition makes it

practically impossible for the Winnemem Wintu to access certain benefits, including grant opportunities to buy land and for culture and language revitalization. The Winnemem Wintu's land is also not recognized as tribal land, and is instead zoned for single-family homes. Although the tribe has tried to gain federal recognition, through many channels while relying on severely limited resources, the Winnemem Wintu have been unsuccessful (Neale-Sacks 2022). They describe themselves on their website as “Unrecognized – An Invisible People with Invisible Rights” (Winnemem Wintu Tribe 2025).

The Winnemem Wintu point out that when the Shasta Dam was built, it displaced not only them, but also the salmon who were born from Buliyum Puyuuk with them. Although severely marginalized and under-resourced, much of the Winnemem Wintu's ongoing activism centers around their commitment to always speak for the salmon. The Winnemem Wintu are a central voice in protesting the highly contentious Shasta Dam and Reservoir Enlargement Project, which would increase the size of the Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet. The Winnemem Wintu also host an annual Run4Salmon: a 300-mile “prayerful journey” by canoe, bike, horse and on foot over several weeks along Winnemem Waywaket (also known as the McCloud River). On the Run4Salmon, Winnemem Wintu and allies trace the ancestral salmon migration route upstream, ending at Buliyum Puyuuk where the water originates. Along the journey's route, participants learn about ecosystem processes and “issues threatening water, fish, and Indigenous lifeways,” while laying down prayers for the salmon's return. Genetic descendants of the disappearing salmon of Buliyum Puyuuk live in Aotearoa New Zealand, refugees of global capitalism. The Winnemem Wintu have an ongoing project in collaboration with Maori leaders to return some of these salmon to their home waters (Run4Salmon 2022).

In 2023, the Winnemem Wintu achieved a victory for the Land Back movement when they purchased 1,080 acres of land, increasing their land from 42 acres to 1,122. Because the tribe is not federally recognized and does not qualify for the federal Land Buy-Back Program, funding to buy this land was secured entirely through private donations of around \$2 million. This fundraising success was largely the result of the Winnemem Wintu's vocal activism to protect salmon, with the Run4Salmon garnering the attention of environmentalists who would have otherwise paid no attention to the Winnemem Wintu (Ramirez 2023). In 2023, the Winnemem Wintu also started Sawalmem, a non-profit with church status which is "committed to uplifting the sacredness of land, water, and the cosmogenological order of place. Formed by the Winnemem Wintu tribe, we blend traditions with innovative approaches to restore balance through Indigenous wisdom, science, and ceremony" (Sawalmem 2025).

Buliyum Puyuuk itself is a National Natural Landmark and is within the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. In January 2025, Joe Biden in his final days in office established the Sáttítla National Monument directly next to Buliyum Puyuuk, thereby designating 206,000 additional acres as protected federal land. The Winnemem Wintu and other tribes practice ceremony on the mountain, but their access is severely limited by its "public" status, and Land Back of Buliyum Puyuuk itself would be much more complicated than simply purchasing land.

Support the Winnemem Wintu: <http://www.winnememwintu.us/>

Support the Run4Salmon: <http://run4salmon.org/>

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Chapter 2: Land Back and Indigenous Healing

“When you’re hiking that far on your own land it’s as if your body takes over because your cells, skin and muscles are made of thousands of years of inherent endurance. Your body adapts to altitude because it’s your ancestors’ breath in your lungs, you drink the water straight from the flowing creeks because it’s the original life source, and you trust your internal navigation because your spirit knows where it’s going.” – Tazbah, PCT hiker (Chavez 2020)

A strict dichotomy between “hikers” and “Indigenous people” does not exist. Many Indigenous people hike as a means of connecting to land. However, I did not personally meet anyone while hiking the PCT who introduced themselves as Native or Indigenous, and Native history has long been systematically erased from and overlooked in National Parks and along trails like the PCT. As discussed in the Introduction, the PCT was formed by connecting many existing trails that were made and used by Indigenous communities for hundreds or thousands of years. The history of the public federally protected lands the PCT crosses is the history of the forced dispossession of Native people who called those lands home. If areas are “protected,” then no one can live on them or use them for anything except accepted forms of recreation. In light of this history and ongoing erasure, Native people and allies are working for Land Back (“getting Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous hands”), renaming stolen lands, and promoting Indigenous access to land (NDN Collective 2025).

Like many other PCT hikers, Indigenous hikers tend to speak about “healing.” The language used by Indigenous hikers, however, differs from that of settler hikers, highlighting specifically the healing importance of hiking to fortify genealogical relationships, connect to ancestral land, and remember ways of living and relating impacted by colonialism. In this chapter, I discuss the powerful regenerative imagining that occurs through Land Back and Indigenous healing on the PCT. This chapter is less ethnographic than the others, because the

realities I discuss were mostly absent from my direct experience on-trail. Focusing on these realities, I counteract centuries of colonial dispossession and erasure.

I. Land Back on the PCT

Land Back is a broad social movement to restore Indigenous sovereignty over land. Diverse land reclamation efforts around the world are connected online by the social media hashtag #Landback. Land Back (landback.org) is a campaign of the NDN Collective, an Indigenous-led organization based in South Dakota whose mission statement is to “build the collective power of Indigenous Peoples, communities, and Nations to exercise our inherent right to self-determination, while fostering a world that is built on a foundation of justice and equity for all people and the planet”; their work is based in efforts to “break free from the oppressive systems that disconnect us from achieving the healing growth and connection to spirit that is integral for us as Indigenous people.” The Land Back movement uses language evoking the healing that results from reconnection with ancestral lands. The Land Back manifesto states that “only when Mother Earth is well, can we, her children, be well. It is our belonging to the land – because – we are the land” (NDN Collective 2025).

Many of the Land Back movement’s recent successes, including along the PCT, have involved federally recognized or unrecognized Tribal Nations buying back privately owned land. This has involved outright purchasing of land, fundraising to buy land, and donations of land held by private individuals or land conservancies. Limited financial support to buy back land is provided by programs including the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Fee-to-trust Acquisition Program, the USDA's federal land acquisition loans for tribes, and grants from organizations such as the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. In the past twenty years, an estimated 420,000 acres of land in

the United States have been returned to Native control (Goodluck 2023). In my Waypoints, I highlight some success stories of Tribal Nations increasing their sovereignty over land through purchasing private land that is for sale. The problem, however, is that most land along the PCT, and many areas that are most significant for Native people, is public land controlled by the U.S. Government.

The NDN Collective's Land Back movement originated in calls to return public lands to Native control. The organization considers the closure of Mount Rushmore (located only 25 miles from the NDN Collective's headquarters) and the return of all public lands of the Black Hills, South Dakota to be its cornerstone battle. More broadly, the NDN Collective calls for all federal public lands – an estimated 640 million acres – to be returned to Native control (NDN Collective 2025). In 2021, this call gained wide recognition when Ojibwe writer David Treuer wrote an article in *The Atlantic* proposing a plan for all National Park land to be turned over to the control of a consortium of federally recognized tribes from across the United States. Treuer notes that the Dawes Act of 1887 stole 90 million acres of land from tribes; There are 85 million acres of National Park land in the United States, and this is some of the most culturally and spiritually significant land for Native communities: the return of this land would begin to rectify past wrongs. Treuer points out that, recently, the National Park Service has already made it easier for Native people to hunt and gather plants on park land, has hired historic-preservation officers, and has changed some signage to acknowledge Indigenous histories. He notes that the precedent for the next step of restoring Indigenous sovereignty has been set in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, where some National Park land is under Indigenous control, and in the United States where, for example, the Havasupai own and manage a section of Grand Canyon National Park. Treuer's plan envisions the national parks continuing to be open to visitors, with the U.S. federal

government providing funding to support Native management and conservation of the land (Treuer 2021). Notably, however, the Trump Administration's 2025 National Park Service budget and staffing cuts make the very limited existing Parks Service initiatives to co-manage land with Tribal governments increasingly precarious.

Some reclamation of public lands by Tribal Nations has already been achieved. In their comprehensive article, Glendenning et al summarize the 44 different statutes that were enacted by Congress between 1970 and 2020 which transferred federal public land to federally-recognized Tribal Nations (Glendenning et al. 2023). The authors show that these transfers from the government are possible and have precedent, but that they are also complicated and each case is dependent on specific complex factors. Most of these cases took the form of the U.S. government transferring land into trust ownership for the benefit of a particular tribe. One case the authors highlight, close to the PCT, is the Western Oregon Tribal Fairness Act of 2018. The act returned 5,400 acres of federal public BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land to the Coquille Tribe after a centuries-long history of dispossession. The 2018 agreement included the stipulation that the Coquille maintain certain conservation standards in managing the land, including limiting logging, "remaining in line with the ideals of the Forest Service" (Glendenning et al. 2023, 240). Additionally, in 2023 two bills were introduced to increase Indigenous access and stewardship over public lands in the U.S. The Advancing Tribal Parity on Public Land Act makes it easier for Tribal governments to acquire public lands for "public purposes," adds Tribal representatives to public land advisory boards, and increases Tribal decision-making power in public land use planning. The Tribal Cultural Areas Protection Act establishes a national Tribal Cultural Areas System, designating places as protected tribal cultural areas under the management of Tribal nations. Designating areas of public land as Tribal cultural

areas allows for increased autonomy over and use of these areas by Indigenous communities (Segnini 2023).

In my experience, most PCT hikers are either somewhat aware of or interested in learning about Land Back. Allyship regarding Land Back is only very minimally present in the PCT community, both online and on-trail, but I enjoyed having conversations about this topic with hikers, and all of those I talked with were open and eager to learn. Hikers' lack of knowledge concerning Land Back is facilitated by the fact that the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) continuously erases Indigenous history and fails to acknowledge Land Back in their online presence and signage on-trail. Land acknowledgements are the bare minimum, yet I only encountered two land acknowledgements while hiking the PCT; both came from arts institutions, not entities connected to hiking or outdoor recreation. The first land acknowledgement I saw was from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, whose play I watched while taking a rest day in Ashland, ~~Oregon~~. The festival's land acknowledgement specifically acknowledges colonization and genocide against Native communities, and asks the reader to "advocate for the inherent sovereignty of Indigenous people." I saw the second land acknowledgement while taking an architecture tour of Timberline Lodge, a hotel and architectural landmark next to Wy'east (this is one Indigenous name used for Mount Hood; due to centuries of erasure, the origin and validity of this Indigenous name are widely contested). The lodge's acknowledgement is much less detailed, simply listing the many tribal communities of the region and stating that the lodge "acknowledges and honors" them.

Although these land acknowledgements are not particularly impressive, they were a welcome sight to me after encountering barely any meaningful mention of current Native presence, and no mention of Land Back, on any of the numerous educational signs and trail

markers posted along the PCT by the PCTA and various U.S. government agencies. I did encounter signage in several places along the trail identifying sites as sacred to Native communities. For example, as I stood by the rushing spray of a stunning and powerful waterfall, I read signage posted by California State Parks stating “The falls area is a sacred site to indigenous people” and “To the people known today as the Pit River Indians, Burney Falls, or *'uts' i mi' wa*, is a sacred place.” The official conversation acknowledges these sites as sacred while ignoring histories of land seizure and failing to consider how the state’s control over sacred places is problematic.

II. The Power of Names

In 2021, my PCT thru-hike attempt ended due to injury, and I got off-trail at a small ski resort town called Squaw Valley. In 2024, I resumed hiking the PCT from the exact same town, but by then it was known as Olympic Valley. This town is within the ancestral homeland of the Washoe/Wašičiw, who have used the valley for thousands of years, yet I have been unable to find an Indigenous name for Olympic Valley. The word “squaw” (hereafter, s****) is a derogatory slur for Native women. The town was supposedly named “s**** Valley” after European settlers arrived there and found only women and children because the men were away hunting. The



A derogatory name removed by a hiker or hikers unknown.

town hosted the Winter Olympics in 1960, and since has also been referred to as Olympic Valley. In 2021, the Washoe Tribe successfully advocated for the name to be changed (Hall 2024). There are still many places on Turtle Island with this slur in their names. I encountered one such place on the PCT (a completely different “s**** Valley”) where, far from the nearest town or road, an unknown hiker or hikers had scratched out the word on all trail signage.

Another place on the PCT, Nüümü Hu Hupi Lake in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, used to be called s**** Lake, and officially reclaimed its Nüümü (Owens Valley Paiute) name in 2022. The organization Indigenous Women Hike posted on Instagram (@indigenouswomenhike) regarding this name change in August, 2024, with the words “History does not begin at colonization. Honor Indigenous place names and Indigenous histories.” The Instagram post’s caption reads, in part,

We were surprised to learn that the new @natgeo trail map acknowledges her as Nüümü Hu Hupi Lake and s**** Lake no more. This is POWERFUL. @garmin should update their map now... History does not begin at colonization. That is only a small and violent piece in time. There is a vibrant Indigenous history that existed long before – one that continues today.

Throughout this thesis, I strike out the words ~~California~~, ~~Oregon~~, and ~~Washington~~, because these names entrench colonial histories and erase other realities. In a similar spirit, renaming land to reflect Indigenous histories is a part of Land Back. This includes names that contain overt slurs, but also places named after racist white men. For example, the most high-altitude, well-known, and heavily trafficked section of the PCT in ~~California~~, the John Muir Wilderness, is named after nature writer and conservationist John Muir, who is considered a father of America’s national parks, and who wrote extremely racist things about Native

Americans. Indigenous Women Hike's most-liked Instagram post, posted in August 2020 and pinned to the top of their page, features a "John Muir Wilderness" sign crossed out, with the words "Because Wilderness isn't real and old racist white men need to go." The photo's caption reads, in part, "Public lands were created by racist white men with racist ideals. Our Lakes, Mountains and trails now bear their names. Those names serve as reminders of who belongs. This is why we reclaim land, why we reclaim names, why we reclaim our ancestral homelands." A widely celebrated recent example of renaming outdoor spaces is Mount Blue Sky in the Colorado Rockies. Previously called Mount Evans, the mountain was named after John Evans, a governor of Colorado who helped orchestrate a massacre of Indigenous people in the 1864. The new name was chosen through advocacy from the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes and Mestaa'êhehe coalition, who chose a name that holds significance for them and succeeded in having the name be officially adopted in 2023.

When speaking with PCT hikers, I found them to be more aware of renaming efforts than of Land Back overall. In a few places on the PCT, even if colonial names are still government-recognized, hikers have adopted the use of Indigenous names. The most obvious example is Tahoma. This is the Puyallup name for a sacred 14,400-foot stratovolcano, reaching into the sky and visible for hundreds of miles, also known as Mount Rainier. I was surprised when a PCT hiker, a 60-something-year-old white man who did not strike me as being particularly critical of his own positionality, told me unprompted, "Oh yeah, the name Mount Rainier just comes from some random white guy who never even saw the mountain." As I discuss in Waypoint 4, indeed, British Royal Navy officer and explorer George Vancouver named the mountain "Rainier" after his friend Peter Rainier back in England. Although labeling the area "Mount Rainier National Park," the FarOut navigation app states in its place description: "the name was given in 1792 by

George Vancouver after Peter Rainier of the English Navy. There has been a movement over the years to rename the mountain ‘Tacoma’ or ‘Tahoma’ as many believe this to be the original Native American name.” Many PCT hikers posting comments about various things in the area on FarOut use the name “Tahoma,” encouraged by comments like the following, which received many likes: “Proposition to call this mountain by its original (indigenous) name of Tahoma.”

Other places along the PCT have retained their Indigenous names, yet the origins and meanings of these names are often not known or considered by hikers. Most PCT hikers’ last stop before reaching the trail’s northern terminus is the tiny town of Stehekin (permanent population 100), which is only accessible via ferry or via the PCT. “Stehekin” is a Salishan name meaning “the way through.” The town is located on Lake Chelan (named after the Chelan people), a long, narrow lake running from east to west through the Cascade Mountain Range. This lake has served as a thoroughfare, connecting Native tribes on either side of the mountains for at least 9,000 years. Tribes including the Chelan and Skagit used the lake and town of Stehekin as an important canoe route and vital site of connection and exchange. European settlers didn’t occupy Stehekin until the 1890s, when mining began there. Today, Stehekin’s economy is based on outdoor tourism and its Native history is all but invisible to the hundreds of PCT hikers passing through the town (Stehekin Heritage 2025).

The PCT also passes directly through the ski resort of Snoqualmie Pass. “Snoqualmie” is a name referring to the Snoqualmie Tribe. Although probably not the original name of the pass, the name “Snoqualmie” recalls the history of Snoqualmie presence; these people have been extremely prolific travelers and trail builders for thousands of years. This pass is the oldest of many routes the Snoqualmie established over the area’s high mountain passes. The Snoqualmie Tribe also established many trade routes connecting the vast networks of the Puget Sound

peoples, on the west side of the Cascade mountains, with interior tribes on the east side, such as the Yakama, Wenatchi, and Klickitat. Many of these routes have now been paved over to become sections of Interstate 90 (Snoqualmie Tribe 2025). Although exhausted by the incredibly steep terrain getting to Snoqualmie pass, I was happy upon arriving at the ski resort area when I found what I consider to be the best pizza on the whole PCT. Enjoying their pizza, PCT hikers don't often consider the millennia of travel and connection evoked by the name "Snoqualmie."

III. Indigenous Hiking on Indigenous Land

Along the PCT, Land Back activism is connected to efforts by Indigenous hikers and Indigenous-run organizations to get Indigenous people out hiking or otherwise exploring ancestral lands. Walking can help facilitate an embodied and personal relationship to place. The organization Indigenous Women Hike is based near the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and their Instagram bio reads "Healing through our inherent connection to the land." The organization plans hikes for Indigenous people (especially women) on land their ancestors had been displaced from. On their Instagram page, Indigenous Women Hike posts about Land Back. For example, in February 2023, the organization shared a GoFundMe page which raised \$900,000 for the Nüümü (Paiute) and Newe (Shoshone) to buy back land in Payahuunadü (Owens Valley). Indigenous Women Hike educated their followers about these Native groups' efforts to regain land and water rights in the valley.

In 2018, Indigenous Women Hike gained recognition when seven Indigenous women hiked the 210-mile Nüümü Poyo on a "journey of reclamation." Nüümü Poyo, or "The People's Trail," is the original name for the section of the PCT that traverses the Sierra Nevada mountains, now commonly known as the John Muir Trail within the John Muir Wilderness. Nüümü Poyo

connected Indigenous communities up and down what is now ~~California~~, traveled by groups including the Ahwahnechee, Paiute, Miwok, and Mono Native Americans. In 2018, the seven Indigenous women did not apply for permits to hike, using the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 to assert their sovereignty in accessing ancestral lands. They researched ancestral place-names and used these on their hike, “envisioning ancestors who walked before them.” Tazbah Chavez, who is Nüümü, Diné (Navajo), and San Carlos Apache, wrote about her experiences hiking the Nüümü Poyo with Indigenous Women Hike, saying “I wanted to heal, and I wanted to take part in regenerating our relationship with our land, our women, and our strength when we connect women and land together.” Chavez shares the words of another hiker on the trip, Anna, who said,

We were reminded that we were right where we were supposed to be, walking in our ancestors’ footsteps and speaking our Nüümü language. We all knew and felt the presence of our ancestors out there at some point in the journey. This experience humanized Mother Earth daily. We relied on her, prayed to her, and thanked her. And now, even more than ever before, I feel the immense responsibility to do whatever we can to protect her.
(Chavez 2020)

Feminist geographer Juanita Sundberg proposes “walking” as a decolonizing practice, stating “I posit walking as key to decolonizing in order to highlight the importance of taking steps – moving, engaging, reflecting – to enact decolonizing practices, understanding that decolonization is something to be... enacted rather than a state of being.” Walking doesn’t happen in a straight line, and there is always the opportunity to walk with others, on trails that “meander, intersect, circle around, fade away, and begin again” (Sundberg 2014, 39). I see the

hikes organized by Indigenous Women Hike, on the Nüümü Poyo and elsewhere along the PCT, as a literal example of walking as a practice in enacting healing, connecting, and decolonizing.

Additionally, my overwhelmingly positive experience speaking with PCT hikers about Land Back is reflected by Indigenous Women Hike; Chavez writes:

Along the trail these women were often teachers to hikers. They said the interactions were surprisingly and overwhelmingly positive. They would bring up the Nüümü place names and used every opportunity as a learning opportunity when meeting someone. Some groups even recognized them, asking, “Are you Indigenous Women Hike?” How powerful to be recognized on your land by visitors! They had strangers speaking Paiute words and phrases they had taught them. They even spent hours walking with other women they met on the trail, sharing lunch and teaching them about the history. (Chavez 2020)

Physical journeys across land, like that on the Nüümü Poyo, take on special meaning when enacted by Indigenous peoples seeking connections to ancestors. In the context of Hawai‘i, Candace Fujikane discusses the embodied practice of “huaka‘i” (journey; voyage³) in her book *Mapping Abundance for a Planetary Future: Kānaka Maoli and Critical Settler Cartographies in Hawai‘i*. Fujikane describes huaka‘i as a practice of ea (sovereignty; life; breath), connecting the voyager with kūpuna (ancestors) and the laws of the akua (gods; deities). Fujikane quotes Kukauakahi (Clarence Ching), a Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) cultural practitioner who organizes hikes on Mauna a Wākea:

We go up there to learn about the mountain and how we can learn to live with its most intimate moods and attributes. We go up there to discover who we are and to learn about

³Ōlelo Hawai‘i spelling and translations from wehewehe.org dictionaries

our special inner workings – and each other. The lines of sight and the land formations you see will become mapped in your na‘au [intestines; affections; mood]. Being able to experience the intangibles, to experience the experiences of the ancients, brings the kind of special intimacy of real feelings and identification. It’s all beautiful. (Fujikane 2021, 109)

Ching’s hiking trips are open to both Kānaka Maoli and allies, but Ching emphasizes the importance of Kānaka Maoli connecting to ancestors, highlighting how profound it is to “experience the experiences of the ancients.”

The PCT crosses through an astonishingly large number of places that are sacred to Native communities. The sacredness of these places adds to the potentially meaningful experiences Indigenous people have when physically present within them. Although settler hikers may feel the power of places, their understanding of sacredness is not the same. As Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. writes, “Sacred places are the foundation of all other beliefs and practices because they represent the presence of the sacred in our lives. They properly inform us that we are not larger than nature and that we have responsibilities to the rest of the natural world that transcend our own personal desires and wishes” (Deloria 1973, cited in Peralto 2014, 239). Although all land carries cultural and spiritual significance for Native communities, relationships with sacred places in particular are seen as an integral part of Indigenous health and holistic physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing (Cooper et al. 2019). Sacred places impart a certain sense of responsibility towards land and towards past and future generations. Sacred places are healing in reminding Indigenous communities that “we *are* our sacred spaces, *they are always a part of us*, and we are forever bonded to our Mother Earth” (ibid, 22).

Due to their stunning beauty, many of the most sacred places on Turtle Island are under the control of the U.S. government, which limits who can access them and what they can do there. Some of the most sacred sites are also those that are most heavily trafficked and treated with irreverence by hikers. While hiking, I encountered some PCT hikers calling the PCT community to task for not respecting such places. For example, a comment posted on the FarOut app at the entrance point to the Obsidian Zone of Klah Klahnee (Warm Springs Tribes name, also known as the Three Sisters Wilderness) reads “Omg, please don’t camp in the Obsidian Zone as I saw multiple people doing when walking through early in the morning. Such a sacred place for PNW native tribes. There are so many other chances to camp before and after.” This comment received the most likes of any posted in this area. Unfortunately, these heavily trafficked sacred sites are also those where Land Back may be most difficult because they are large sources of tourism revenue. The Obsidian Zone is an example of a highly sacred place that is heavily controlled by the U.S. government, as I discuss in Waypoint 3.

IV. Decolonizing Land Relations: Rematriation, Reciprocity, and Consent

Land Back is liberatory for everyone, not only Indigenous people, because Land Back involves a fundamental reimagining of how to relate to land and other people. A centrally important component of Land Back is that the movement does not work for land to be returned to Indigenous management and then be governed according to the same colonial and capitalist logics as before. Instead, Land Back involves an epistemological shift as well as a political and economic one. In other words,

When we say “Land Back” we aren’t asking for just the ground, or for a piece of paper that allows us to tear up and pollute the earth. We want the system that is land to be alive

so that it can perpetuate itself, and perpetuate us as an extension of itself. That's what we want back: our place in keeping land alive and spiritually connected. (Longman et al. 2020, cited in Barker 2021, 120-121)

In Indigenous futurity, even if settlers continue to walk across the land, settler colonialism and settler epistemologies need not remain. As Kanaka Maoli scholar Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua writes, “Indigenous futurity does not foreclose the inhabitation of Indigenous land by non-Indigenous peoples, but does foreclose settler colonialism and settler epistemologies... Indigenous futurity does not require the erasure of now-settlers in the ways that settler futurity requires of Indigenous peoples” (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua 2017, 185).

The importance of Land Back for imagining free, decolonial futures is recognized by the intersectional movement for inclusivity in the outdoors. This movement, happening largely through social media, advocates for decolonization, anti-racism, anti-ableism, and the elimination of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy in outdoor communities. Unlikely Hikers is one example of an organization in this space that advocates for Land Back as part of their efforts to counter colonial narratives of belonging in the outdoors. The Unlikely Hikers “About Us” page reads “Unlikely Hikers is for adventurers who are plus-size & fat, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, queer, trans and non-binary, disabled, neurodivergent and beyond. We don't conflate these experiences, we explore and build community at their intersections” (Unlikely Hikers 2025). Hiker, environmental activist, and drag queen Pattie Gonia (@pattiegonia), while organizing hiking trips for LGBTQ2+ people and allies, similarly advocates for Land Back. Both Pattie Gonia and Unlikely Hikers post on Instagram about Land Back, Black Lives Matter, and Free Palestine, emphasizing the interconnections of these liberation movements. For example, in

June 2024 Pattie Gonia posted a reel headlined “what is Land Back?” in which they are in conversation with Lingít skier and scientist Ellen Bradley.

Many of the organizations in the inclusive outdoors community show not only allyship, but are led by Indigenous individuals with intersectional identities working for a decolonized outdoors. Queer Nature is an organization co-led by Pinar Sinopoulos-Lloyd (they/them), a Quechua Indigenous person. Jolie Varela, founder of Indigenous Women Hike, is a queer Nüümü and Yokuts woman, who in an @indigenouswomenhike Instagram post from April 19, 2023 is hiking while wearing a Queer Nature t-shirt. The organization strives to

Enter into a relationship of awareness and respect for the ancestral lifeways of First Nations people and current, living lifeways present in the land. In that vein, we strive to understand further how this work can support Indigenous communities in Turtle Island who continue to be harmed by processes of colonization. (Queer Nature 2025)

Indigenous land governance that the Land Back movement advocates for is place-specific rather than monolithic. Indigenous governance “is as diverse as those beings, that land, the rivers, lakes, and seas to which it is responsible” (Barker 2021, 116). However, certain underlying values unite Land Back efforts; Land Back decolonizes nature relations through its insistence on rematriation, reciprocity, and consent. Rematriation acknowledges that the history of Indigenous dispossession from land has been inextricably interwoven with the history of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy, and envisions Land Back that foregrounds Indigenous feminisms. The Haudenosaunee-women run organization Rematriation, which engages in activism and organizes gatherings for Indigenous women, states that “As Haudenosaunee women, we are connected to our celestial roots and the inheritance of our future generations. This obligates us to our Mother Earth, our bodies and those yet unborn. We stand for the right for

clean flowing water, clean air and foods as our Mother intended” (Rematriation 2023). The vocabulary of rematriation is prominent in the Land Back movement at large, and Indigenous Women Hike founder Jolie Varela, for example, spoke in the Indigenous women-organized panel “Rematriate the Land: And Indigenous Perspective” in 2021.

Rematriation dismantles cisheteropatriarchal domination that structures colonial power over land and people. As Lenape scholar Joanne Barker writes in *Red Scare: The State’s Indigenous Terrorist*,

Rematriation is the return of land to Indigenous governance... [Rematriation] reflects a genuine equity between genders and sexualities and across generations. It accounts for the most vulnerable and advances mutual aid and community care. It assumes that women and other-than-heterosexually-defined individuals center structures of governance and cultural practice. Indigenous governance would abolish state prisons, the military, and intelligence, not because there would be an absence of law but because the law would not be driven by capitalism. It would not be invested in protecting capitalist valuations of the land, property, and bodies. It would provide reparations and allow for migration. (Barker 2021, 116)

Land Back, therefore, facilitates a decolonial societal reimagining, allowing also for the abolishment of the prison and military industrial complexes.

Land Back also centers ideals of reciprocity and consent, which reject extractive attitudes towards land, instead acknowledging land and more-than-human life as alive and agentic. Land Back rejects conceptions of land as a set of natural resources to be owned and used by people. Instead, relationships to land under Indigenous governance foreground relationship, resulting in the mutual revitalization of both human and more-than-human life. In *As We Have Always Done*:

Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes the Nishnaabeg nation as an “ecology of intimacy” which includes human and non-human agents in “an ecology of relationships in the absence of coercion, hierarchy, or authoritarian power” (Simpson 2017, 8). Consent is a necessary component of all relationships within this nation. Land governance rooted in consent overturns colonial relationships to land, which exploit land just as they exploit bodies. As Simpson writes, state logics “build pipelines across my body, clear-cut my forests, contaminate my lakes with toxic cottages and chemicals, and make my body a site of continual sexualized violence” (ibid, 185). Similarly, the Women’s Earth Alliance and Native Young Sexual Health Network’s community-based report and toolkit titled “Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies: Building an Indigenous Response to Environmental Violence” outlines the connections between violence against land and violence against Indigenous women, with action centered around the hashtag #LandBodyDefense (Women’s Earth Alliance 2016). As Land Back frees land, it frees bodies from structures of domination.

PCT hikers continually speak about “freedom.” Land Back offers a vision for a more expansive and radical freedom than that which many hikers imagine. Long-distance hikers often learn to see themselves as part of a vast more-than-human community, and gain an embodied sense of relationship to land. At the same time, when hikers fail to acknowledge Land Back, they participate in the ongoing erasure of Indigenous people from land, and they stand in the way of collective freedom as they ignore the reciprocal and emancipatory ways of thinking and living that Land Back offers.

Waypoint 2: Giiwas

Limitless blue in all directions. “Up” and “down” lose meaning. In many directions is endless deep blue sky. In many other directions is fathomless deep blue water. The water reflects the sky, and the sky seems to melt into the water, so that the two are never entirely distinct. At high elevation, perched in the air, this lake is actually part of the sky. It is a mountaintop, formed in the space that opened up when the peak of a volcano exploded. Clouds appear, and their shapes are not just above, but below, their reflections dancing on the surface of the lake. Clouds, fog, and mist frequently visit the lake’s surface. They physically descend to accumulate within the crater, and create an ever-shifting gradient, from water, dissolving to water vapor, dissolving into sky.



This lake is called Giiwas, a Klamath name which means “a most sacred place.” Located in the crater of Tum-sum-ne, a volcano whose name means “mountain with top cut off,” the lake has an average diameter of over five miles, and is nearly 2,000 feet deep at its deepest point. This land has been the ancestral home of the Klamath Tribes (the Klamath, Modoc, and Yahooskin) since before the lake existed, dating back more than 7,700 years to before the mountain’s head was cut off – when Tum-sum-ne was called Moy-Yaina, meaning simply “big mountain.” The colonial name for Giiwas is Crater Lake, and Tum-sum-ne is known as Mount Mazama. There are several different versions of the Klamath story for how Giiwas was created, an event that Klamath ancestors witnessed. The one below is documented by Klamath historian and Tribal

elder Barbara Alatorre. I summarize only for the sake of brevity, but stay faithful to the language of Alatorre's telling:

Before time began, giant Spirit Beings came down from a hole in the sky and created the mountains. They created Moy-Yaina, the big mountain, and Mlaiksi (Klamath name for Buliyum Puyuuk, or Mount Shasta). Gmok'am'c, the Creator, created the first people, before going to live inside Mlaiksi. Monadalkni, the Spirit Chief of the below-world, lived inside Moy-Yaina. Over time, Monadalkni became curious about the people who lived on the surface of the Earth, and he noticed a maiden of exceptional beauty named Loha. Loha was the daughter of the Klamath Chief, and she had many suiters, but refused to marry anyone. One day, Monadalkni sent his most trusted emissary, Skooks, to ask Loha for her hand in marriage. Skooks gave Loha many gifts, and told her that she would be immortal if she came to live inside Moy-Yaina and be Monadalkni's wife. Loha was scared and refused, saying that she did not want to leave the world behind to live underground inside a mountain. Skooks left to report back to Monadalkni, but Loha's father, knowing that this would not be the end of it, sent Loha away to hide in the forest.

When Skooks returned, he demanded to know Loha's whereabouts, but no one in the village would say a word. Monadalkni, seeing this from inside Moy-Yaina, became angry and began to rage. He threw giant fireballs and bolts of lightning, until they shot out of the top of Moy-Yaina. His rage became so powerful that the top of the mountain blew off, and lava flowed out to devour the beautiful forests. The people ran in fear, until the Tribe's two oldest and most respected Medicine Men stepped forward, offering to sacrifice themselves to stop the destruction. Gmok'am'c, the Creator, was watching from on top of Mlaiksi. When he saw this selfless deed from the Medicine Men, he intervened. Gmok'am'c flew over to face Monadalkni in battle. The two spirit chiefs had an epic battle, until Gmok'am'c forced Monadalkni

underground, collapsing volcanic debris on top of him and sealing off the entrance to the underworld, creating a giant crater where the mountain top used to be. The Medicine Men sang sacred songs of thanks, and rain began to fall, until the entire crater was filled with water. Moy-Yaina became known as Tum-sum-ne, “mountain with top cut off,” and the lake was Giiwas, “a most sacred place” (Alatorre 2002).

For Klamath people, Giiwas is the most sacred place, and they kept it a secret for over 7,000 years. The lake is regarded as spiritually powerful and dangerous, the home of dark spirits. The first European settlers in the area did not know about the lake’s existence, because its sanctity limited Klamath people talking about or looking at the lake without facing spiritual danger. Activities at Giiwas were mostly limited to ceremony and ritual. Medicine Men would come to sit at the shore of the lake and fast for several weeks at a time. Some would run down the lake’s treacherously steep crater walls or dive deep into the lake, the bottom of which was believed by some to be a portal between the human and spirit worlds. In 1853, a group of gold prospectors accidentally stumbled across Giiwas, and word spread among settlers about the astonishingly huge lake on a mountaintop. Shortly after, the Klamath Tribes signed the Treaty of 1864, limiting their land. Giiwas was included within the treaty boundaries. Ever since, however, Klamath treaty rights have been ignored, and Giiwas became Crater Lake National Park in 1902 (Crater Lake Institute 2025).

The United States government aimed to systematically transform Giiwas from a place of dark power, where only those who are spiritually prepared should journey, to a place of recreation. This process has had lasting repercussions for both Giiwas’ human and more-than-human inhabitants. Mazama newts are endemic to Giiwas, living nowhere else in the world. These amphibians seem to embody the dark energy of Giiwas – they are poisonous, and with

orange and dark brown rough, bumpy skin, they resemble the bumbling lava that Monadalkni sent across the landscape in Giiwas' creation. In October, 2024, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the mazama newt may qualify as endangered (Center for Biological Diversity 2024). Mazama newts were once the lake's top predators, but are now being hunted to extinction by invasive crayfish. Crayfish were introduced to the lake by humans in 1915 as food for the lake's fish. There are no fish native to Giiwas. Fish were introduced to the lake on and off between 1896 and 1941. The National Park Service brought fish to the lake, including three species of trout and two species of salmon, for fishing, to "improve the lake's recreational value."

However, Giiwas is exceptionally deep and cold with little nutrients, so the fish kept dying. After the Parks Service eventually stopped restocking fish in 1941, most of the fish died off, but the



introduced crayfish thrived. Without fish to eat them, crayfish have no predators in Giiwas, and their populations have skyrocketed, up thirty percent in the last ten years (National Park Service 2025). This example shows how colonial processes displace not only Indigenous people, but also entire non-human species.

Today, the Klamath Tribes, incorporating the Klamath, Modoc, and Yahooskin people, are a federally recognized Tribal Nation with a reservation of 2,013 acres (pre-colonization this was over one million acres) and 5,700 enrolled members. The Tribal Nation only owned 308 acres of

land before 2021, when they bought an additional 1,705 acres of undeveloped land through private purchase. The Klamath Tribes have an ongoing effort to buy back as much land as possible throughout their ancestral territory (Golden 2021). Regarding Giiwas itself, the National Parks Service does not honor Klamath treaty rights, which rightfully grant Tribal sovereignty over this land. Crater Lake National Park allows Klamath people some access to Giiwas for ceremony. However, the Parks Service's language about Klamath people is largely performative, broadcasting their support with little concrete action. For example, in 2016 the Park held a concert on the lake's crater rim and invited the Steiger Butte Drum and Singers, a Klamath drumming group, to perform alongside a (non-Indigenous) orchestra. The concert itself does not appear problematic, except that it was advertised as proof that the Parks Services recognizes and honors the lake's Indigenous history (National Park Service 2016).

Support the Klamath Tribes: <https://klamathtribes.org/history/>

Chapter 3: Normativity, Failure, and Gendered Hiking

“Nice lake but they let day hikers go here? Not one of them bowed to me or told me I was better at enjoying nature than them so I panicked and left. Would not recommend.” – River Rat, PCT hiker, comment on FarOut navigation app

Ten miles from the northern terminus of the PCT. In ten miles I would be done. In ten miles I would have hiked 2,650 miles. The entire Pacific Crest Trail. It didn't feel real. My brain couldn't grasp the enormity of it, that it was all coming to an end, that I had nearly done what had seemed so impossible, so vast and insurmountable. Five miles from the northern terminus of the PCT. I started to feel anxious. How was I supposed to feel? I had been walking towards this goal for months. When it was all over, would I feel how I wanted to feel? Would it feel real? Would it feel worth it? I felt both sad and relieved that I would no longer be sleeping in a tent every night. I would no longer live every day under boundless skies, drink from icy streams, be constantly lulled by the meditative rhythm of my footsteps. One mile from the northern terminus of the PCT. The distance stretched on forever. I expected to see the monument marking the end of the PCT come into view around every tree, every bend in the trail. I tried to give up my expectations, to stop worrying about the end, to just walk. Just when I had stopped expecting to see it, I reached the northern terminus. I finished the Pacific Crest Trail. Ten minutes later, my friend Patches walked up, touched the monument marking the end of the trail, and turned to look at me where I sat on the ground, tears on my cheeks. As tears formed in his own eyes, Patches said, in a dramatic whisper, “We. Freaking. Did. It.” We grinned at each other.

Finishing the PCT lived up to everything anyone had told me it would be like. The moment I reached the end, I felt overwhelmed with pride and gratitude towards myself, the world, and everyone I had met along the trail. I felt like, if I could finish the PCT, then I could do anything, and my life was brimming with adventure and possibility. In a box next to the northern

terminus monument, there is a log book. Like many similar ones along the trail, this book is full of hikers' thoughts. The messages of the hikers who finished before me were filled with expressions of wonder, happiness, and love: "I'm proud of myself and I'm proud of you..."

"to friendship and the adventure of a lifetime..."

"overwhelmed with gratitude that I get to bear witness to this world..." Patches and I caught a ride from the end of the trail to the tiny town of Mazama, ~~Washington~~ in the back of a park ranger's pickup truck. We stopped at the Mazama bakery for the obligatory celebratory sea

salt baguette, smiling at locals who cried "congratulations!" to us, before heading over to The Lion's Den, a donation-based PCT hiker hostel. In the hostel backyard, next to the paint-a-rock station and jigsaw puzzle tables, hikers shared their northern terminus photos. They compared them to their photos from the southern terminus. We studied the photos, noticing our faces, the ease of our postures. How had we changed from the first photo taken of us on the PCT to the last? What had happened over the course of 2,650 miles? We knew we were stronger. We were freer. We were more alive. We were proud of ourselves. We were so sad it was over.

I. I Failed My Hiking Trip

The PCT has a starting point and a finish line, and completing the PCT is considered a great accomplishment. You either finish a thru-hike or you don't – you either succeed or you fail.



The iconic celebratory photo on the monument at the PCT northern terminus.

On average each year, about 20% of people issued PCT long-distance hiking permits successfully complete the entire trail (PCTA 2025). At 80%, therefore, the PCT's rate of "failure" is very high. Patches and I were both among the 80% of people who don't complete the trail on their first attempt. In 2021, I was forced to stop hiking almost halfway through the PCT due to a lung injury. In 2022, Patches stopped hiking several hundred miles short of the northern terminus, halted by multiple wildfire trail closures. We both returned in 2024 and completed the miles of trail we had been unable to hike. We both felt a great sense of achievement upon completing the trail, but also wondered if we were missing out on part of the trail experience, having not completed it in a single trip. While hiking the PCT, I met many people who did not ultimately finish the trail, whether due to injury or a decision not to continue. Some decide that thru-hiking is not for them, and realize that shorter hiking trips better fulfill what they're looking for. Some feel homesick and decide the hike is not worth being away from their friends and families for months. Many who do not finish the PCT, whatever the reason, are linked by feelings of failure, shame, and inadequacy.

My friend and trail family member Charlie hiked the first 1,000 miles of the PCT with his friend from home, Mountain Goat. I met Mountain Goat on his last day on the PCT. When I walked into the hiker oasis Burney Mountain Guest Ranch, Mountain Goat was on the lodge patio putting his backpack into a box to ship home to Michigan, and the ranch owner Christine was on the phone organizing him a ride with a trail angel to the Reno airport. Mountain Goat explained to me that his daughter was having health problems. She had been having these health problems since before he left home, and his family was in full support of him hiking the PCT, but the further he walked, the more he thought about his daughter, constant thoughts of her spiraling around in the still mountain air, and he felt racked with guilt that he wasn't with her. As Charlie

and I walked north from the ranch together, I received sporadic updates from Charlie over the next month about Mountain Goat. Upon returning home, Mountain Goat's feelings alternated between happiness and despair. His happiness at being reunited with his daughter and the rest of his family was often eclipsed with feelings of restlessness and anger towards himself for "quitting" the PCT. Mountain Goat asked for updates from Charlie about how the trail was going, sharing in response that he had been drinking more than usual. He wondered why he hadn't been mentally capable of continuing the trail when Charlie had been. Over five hundred miles later, Charlie also flew home to Michigan, his hike ended by an ankle stress fracture. At home with Mountain Goat, his texts to me were melancholy. Charlie felt that in some ways his body had failed him, and he had failed himself. I distinctly related to this feeling, having experienced similar feelings of failure when my hike ended due to injury in 2021. I had wondered then: Why couldn't I finish the PCT, when others could? Why wasn't I strong enough?

Along the trail, I often felt that the PCT is overly goal-oriented and based on success quantified in number of miles walked. People capable of walking the furthest and fastest are glorified as the "best" hikers. I had a wonderful conversation, eating huckleberries from bushes by a brook, with a PCT hiker named Smiles Before Miles. She told me the story of how she received her trail name. A young man (it's always them) passed her on the trail and immediately asked "how many more miles are you aiming for today?" She responded, "oh I'm not sure, I'll just go until I see a nice place to camp." The other hiker, somewhat derisively, said "oh, you're one of those 'smiles before miles' people." She smiled and said "that's right!" I had this conversation with Smiles Before Miles towards the very end of the PCT. Many hikers around us were in a rush to be done. It was the height of huckleberry season, and the lush green forest was filled with bushes overflowing with the sweet blue-purple berries. As we sat, each berry popping

in our mouths with a delightful miniature explosion of flavor, as we saved some berries to add to our morning oatmeal the next day, I wondered aloud why the bushes were so full, why so few hikers ahead of us seemed to have picked any. “I guess people just don’t have time for that,” Smiles Before Miles said. From then on, I consciously tried to stop and enjoy as many huckleberries as I could.

Many hikers I spoke with expressed that PCT hikers’ obsession with hiking “big miles” and finishing the entire PCT is problematic, and may interfere with other aspects of the trail experience. As my friend Majee liked to say on-trail, “I don’t need to finish the PCT, I just need to be happy.” At the same time, we felt proud and accomplished when we completed particularly high-mileage days of hiking, and spoke with reverence about those hikers who had passed us, who were so fast and so “impressive.” At one point on the trail, us PCT hikers were all impressed by a hiker we had seen only in passing, as he raced past us, who was attempting to set the calendar year triple crown fastest known time (FKT). The “triple crown,” a name borrowed from horse-racing which denotes glory and victory, refers to the three longest hiking trails in the so-called United States: the Pacific Crest Trail, Appalachian Trail, and Continental Divide Trail. Each trail typically takes about five months to hike, and someone who has hiked all three of them has achieved the triple crown. A calendar year triple crown means hiking all three trails within one calendar year (essentially hiking for an entire year straight). The hiker we met this year was attempting to set the FKT, meaning hiking the 7,900 miles of the triple crown, back-to-back, faster than anyone had ever done it before. No one knew this year’s “fastest known time” hiker’s trail name, because his conversations with people were too brief to reveal it. My entire interaction with him went as follows. A very tall thin young white man walked up behind me on the PCT. Letting him pass, I said “Hi! Are you a thru-hiker?” “Yes. I started a month ago. I’m

trying to set the calendar year triple crown fastest known time,” he said curtly. He then looked at me like talking to me was slowing him down, and practically ran ahead down the trail, never to be seen again.

The hierarchy of speed and distance hiked also applies to the ways long-distance hikers talk about day-hikers and people on short backpacking trips. In comments on the FarOut navigation app, people out on the trail who are not long-distance hikers are referred to as “muggles.” For example, “you don’t want to camp here, lots of muggles around.” The word “muggles,” from Harry Potter, is in contrast to long-distance hikers, who are the inherently superior wizards. The quote that opened this chapter calls attention in a joking way to how thru-hikers feel superior to everyone else: “...they let day hikers go here? Not one of them bowed to me or told me I was better at enjoying nature than them so I panicked and left.”

Valuing achievement and speed is tied up with capitalist and colonial values of progress and productivity. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam outlines how ideals of success are rooted in cisheteropatriarchal values, and how failure to meet societal expectations can result in more creative ways of imagining and being. Failure can foster anticolonial ways of knowing by saving us from hegemonic structures and norms (Halberstam 2011). Mountain Goat felt like a failure because he “quit” the PCT to go be with his ill daughter. We PCT hikers felt inferior to the FKT hiker who could hike so fast that he never needed to have a conversation with any of us. Maybe Mountain Goat “failing” to finish the PCT meant that he had been in touch with his emotions enough that he could not set missing his daughter aside. Maybe he realized his priorities were different than what thru-hiking culture told him they should be. Maybe he didn’t want to succeed if it meant not thinking about his family. Maybe hikers who choose “smiles over miles” don’t buy into the idea that fitter, stronger, and faster always means better. Maybe we

decided we didn't want to be that fast if it meant not connecting to each other and not eating wild huckleberries.

Despite claiming to be completely and utterly free, PCT hikers discipline themselves to fit into the expectations of thru-hiking. From Foucault, "discipline" is the act of people monitoring and adapting their behavior to align themselves with societal rules and norms (Foucault 1975). PCT hikers discipline themselves by being physically and economically model citizens. Long-distance hiking requires a high level of physical fitness and able-bodiedness that only a limited and privileged segment of the population could achieve. Although not especially expensive on a daily basis, thru-hikers also require enough disposable income to not work for months at a time, and to leave family and community networks for an experience that brings personal gain.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed discusses the meaning of being "oriented," and how queerness disrupts expectations for people to travel along societally determined paths (Ahmed 2006). Thru-hikers imagine themselves as reorientating themselves away from capitalism and modernity, onto the alternative path of a hiking trail. By walking on a meandering trail rather than driving on an asphalt road, hikers help create new ways of being. Ahmed notes that unofficial side-paths are called "desire lines." These are places where "deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways" (ibid). Hikers see the PCT as a desire line, deviant in its rejection of modernity. At the same time, however, hikers are expected to make progress along the set established path of the hiking trail. Some, mostly physically fit young white people, are oriented onto the hiking trail, while others, including Indigenous people and those who do not fit the mold of the model hiker, are oriented away from it. Those whose bodies and brains do

not live up to long-distance hiking's demands, who "quit" or "fail," are similarly oriented further away from the trail and from the ideal of "the thru-hiker." In some ways, the PCT may be a desire line, but in others it is not. Failing to live up to the capitalist achievement narrative of the PCT may lead to the forging of new desire lines alongside and apart from the trail. Moreover, the PCT is only linear to hikers who approach it that way, but hiking with a more expansive frame of reference, hikers learn from the non-linear ecosystems surrounding the trail, which subvert human narratives of achievement and competition.

The valuation of speed in long-distance hiking also directly relates to the idea of time as something that disciplines. In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer writes about queer and crip time, which subvert normative narratives of time based on linear progress. Disabled people often do things more slowly. "Time," as efficiently moving ever-forward towards a superior future, is a political idea that has been naturalized. Both disabled and queer people resist the story of progress from dependent child to independent adult, with adulthood characterized by marriage and children (Kafer 2013). On the PCT, hikers are always making progress towards a goal, ideally as quickly as possible. Refusing to prioritize speed over everything else, however, redirects focus to other things that make hiking meaningful, such as stopping for deep conversations, swimming under waterfalls, and observing mountain chickadees flitting among trees. Interestingly, however, time also works in non-normative ways on-trail. PCT hikers rarely know the date or day of the week, and many choose not to check the time regularly. Standard time measurement has little authority in the reality of a thru-hike, with the amount of sunlight having more bearing on everyday life. Hikers are able to align themselves with cyclical ecological time rather than linear capitalist time. The time in a day also seems to stretch while on

a long-distance hike. Each day is so wrapped in immersive sensory experience that minutes and hours seem longer and fuller than they would in other contexts.

Further, hikers not only discipline themselves to meet their own self-imposed norms, but are also disciplined by the set standards and expectations of the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA). People planning to hike five hundred



Front and back of tag issued by the PCTA for hikers to attach to their backpacks.

or more continuous miles on the PCT compete for a limited number of long-distance hiking permits issued by the PCTA, a non-profit organization that liaisons with U.S. government entities including the National Parks Service and Forest Service. The existence of permits shows the authority and presence of the settler state government on the land. PCT permits include a specified start date and location, and planned end date and location. To receive a permit, hikers must agree that they will abide by certain guidelines, including “leave no trace” principles that are printed on a tag bearing the PCT logo that hikers (voluntarily) attach to their backpacks to identify themselves as long-distance hikers. Moreover, the Halfway Anywhere annual thru-hiker survey, used and cited by the PCTA, tracks the experiences of PCT hikers. The survey exerts biopower by creating the standardized image of the “normal,” “average” PCT hiker (Foucault 1978). The survey is open for all PCT hikers to fill out, whether they completed the trail or not. According to the 2024 thru-hiker survey, the average PCT thru-hiker is a 30-year-old straight white single American man with no children. He has a bachelor’s degree and quit his job to hike.

He felt confident in his backpacking skills before beginning the PCT, started the trail alone but ended up hiking with other people, and completed the trail in five months (Halfway Anywhere 2025). Averages like these create expectations regarding who will hike the trail, who is welcome there, and how fast they will hike. Summarizing statements that accompany the survey graphs don't discuss, for example, the 1.1% of 2024 PCT thru-hikers who didn't identify as either male or female, the 10.2% of hikers who weren't white (a dismally low percentage), or the 37.8% of hikers who weren't from the United States (a surprisingly high percentage).

II. Gendered Hiking

In 2024, 43.7% of PCT thru-hikers were women, according to the annual PCT hiker survey. This is a distinctly lower number than the 55.2% of hikers who were men, but it is inarguable that women very commonly hike the PCT. However, I had many experiences on the trail that demonstrate that the normative idea of who a hiker is is overwhelmingly masculine. The day after I finished hiking the PCT, a trail angel drove me and three other hikers from Mazama to Seattle, where we would all catch flights home. Along the drive, we stopped at a gas station and went inside for road trip snacks. Two of us, Patches and Fern, perfectly matched the average thru-hiker description: 30-year-old, white, fit, straight men. Then there was me and Baloo, a petite 40-something woman. We were all wearing our hiking clothes and looked appropriately scruffy, all having just hiked for months. As we perused the chip aisle together, a man walked up and, addressing himself only to Patches and Fern, said "did you two just finish the PCT?? You look like you just finished the PCT!" Baloo looked at the man and pointedly said "Yes, we *all* did!" As the man continued to address only the two men, Baloo looked at me and we shared knowing smiles.

While hiking, on the PCT and elsewhere, men often talk to me as though I don't know what I'm doing, because I'm a relatively young woman and don't look particularly fit. I've had frustrating experiences even with men who are good friends of mine, when they treat me like I need to be monitored or helped more than them while hiking. On the other hand, hikers who are not men often share a wonderful sense of solidarity in outdoor communities, because there are fewer of us and because we are forced to think about safety in ways that male thru-hikers often do not. As I gazed transfixed at waterfalls cascading from the rocky crags of Wy'east (a disputed Indigenous name of unknown origin for a mountain also known as Mount Hood), a middle-aged woman walked up to me with an oddly triumphant cry. As her husband approached behind her, she explained that on their three-day hike along this popular section of trail, they were having a competition in which she counted all the women hikers she saw, and her husband counted the men. So far, the women weren't doing well. She was happy to see me, only one of a handful of women they had come across. She hoped they would see more women, and added optimistically "we haven't seen many women, but hey, we don't know what these peoples' gender identities are! They seem to be a lot of men, but we don't know!" A few weeks later, as I approached the epic, rocky, and exposed "knife's edge" of La-Con-Nie (disputed Yakima name for a grand and visually stunning volcanic landscape also known as Goat Rocks Wilderness), I was again met with a cry of delight from a woman on-trail. The young woman who walked towards me was solo-hiking the PCT heading southbound, meaning she was just beginning her hike of the entire PCT, heading in the opposite direction, whereas I was almost finished. "Are you a thru-hiker!? You're the first solo woman northbound thru-hiker I've run into! We've got this!!" We shared immediate smiles and words of encouragement, chatting as we stared starry-eyed at the surrounding views that stretched into forever.

On the PCT, I felt the most instant ease and connection when meeting women hikers, especially solo women who had begun hiking without a partner or friends. I formed connections with many immensely inspiring women on-trail, including Altitude, Sprite, Coral, Baloo, Diamondback, Solar, and Pippi Longstocking, and we were bonded unfortunately through shared negative experiences as well as shared wonder and joy. One night, my trail family and I were pitching our tents when Sprite walked up to our campsite saying, “Thank God I ran into you guys! Can I camp with you??” We had been running into Sprite on and off over the last several weeks, and appreciated her dry humor and love for Finnish heavy metal music. Immediately agreeing to have her join us, Altitude and I sat with Sprite, who looked visibly shaken, and offered her chocolate-covered almonds while she explained that she had been stuck hiking with a man for the last few days. She had come across him on-trail and they had talked while walking together for a while, but then he would not leave her alone, no matter how many times she hinted and eventually firmly stated that she preferred to hike alone. The man made Sprite uncomfortable, making off-hand comments about how she shouldn’t be out in the mountains alone as a young woman. He stayed closer to Sprite than she wanted, and he walked faster than her, so she couldn’t easily shake him off and leave him behind. Sprite said generously that the man was probably just lonely, judging by how much he felt the need to talk about himself, but Sprite ultimately got up very early, packed up quietly, and hiked away as fast as she could while the man was still sleeping, nervously looking back over her shoulder all day until she eventually ran into my group. I saw Sprite on-trail many times after that, and she successfully avoided running into the man again, but encounters like this are not uncommon. My friend Bank Robber told me the story of how he had hiked through the entire night one night earlier on the trail with a woman who ran up to him in a panic, explaining how a man had been following her and making

creepy, threatening comments about serial killers. She seriously feared for her safety, and Bank Robber (a vaguely intimidating-looking man with tattoos and piercings) offered to walk with her through the night as she put as much distance between herself and the serial killer enthusiast as possible. My own experiences were not as overtly scary, but I was forced to consider my own safety, and it was never bears, lightning, or snowy traverses that worried me. As my friend Coral put it, “as women, it’s annoying that we always have to worry. Every time I contact a trail angel for a ride, I have to worry – who is going to be in this car when it arrives to pick me up? What’s really going to happen? Where are they going to take me?”

The role of “trail angel” on the PCT is also gendered, because trail angels – residents of towns along the trail who offer assistance to hikers – are overwhelmingly women while the majority of hikers are men. In my experience, the most typical trail angel is an older woman, who has adult children who have moved out and who finds fulfillment in offering food, shelter, and assistance to grateful hikers. Not too needy or threatening, most thru-hikers come from the same white middle-class background as the trail angel, and the trail angel who’s hosting them or giving them a ride reminds them of their own mom back at home. In the hero’s journey narrative common on the PCT, the heroes or protagonists of the story are most often young men, and the trail angels, relegated to a supporting background role, are older women. I met one trail angel who, after ten years of hosting hikers every hiking season and loving the sense of vicarious adventure she got through them, decided to hike the PCT herself. However, the experience was not what she expected, and she returned home after a few hundred miles of hiking through intense pain. From her description and wistful tone, she seemed disappointed to have “failed,” and to have not been able to be the protagonist in a journey she had loved for many years. “But I

think being a trail angel suits me more,” she told me, “I’m a 60-year-old woman, I don’t need to be putting myself through all of that.”

Similarly to trail angels, PCT hikers sometimes have family members who support their hikes, and being a helper in this way is also gendered. I met one woman hiker, named Minnie, whose husband and two young kids were not hiking, but following along her hiking route in a camper van, meeting up with her every few days when the PCT crossed a road to provide her with food and emotional support. I saw the same situation several other times, but in every other scenario the hiker was a man, and it was his wife or mother following along and supporting him. On a few different occasions, I ran into the same middle-aged woman at road crossings, who insisted on providing me with fruit and soda while she asked me when I had last seen her husband, fretting about his whereabouts and impatiently waiting for him to appear. I met another woman at a hiker hostel who was retired and now acts as a “full-time trail angel” for her 25-year-old son. The son hikes several long-distance trails every year and aspires to a career as a hiking influencer. His mother follows along, supplying him with nutritious food and managing his online presence. Many other hikers have partners who are left at home to care for kids and family members while also being available to listen to hiking stories on the phone, help with logistics, send care packages, and sometimes visit, meeting their hiker partner at a national park or quaint town along the trail.

It is also not uncommon for people to complete a long-distance hike with their romantic partner. Because long-distance hiking is so taxing, it’s my perception that these relationships tend to be relatively supportive and egalitarian, otherwise the couple won’t hike together for very long. I met a solo woman hiker who had started the trail with her fiancé, but broke up with him mid-hike because the hiking environment highlighted his disparaging and critical attitude

towards her. The relationship dynamics I saw on-trail that seemed the most overtly misogynistic came more from straight couples out for shorter backpacking trips of only a few days. Men would see me and my friends, recognize us as thru-hikers, and feel the need to prove that they too were “hardcore” outdoors people. If it weren’t for their girlfriends or wives, they too would be like us. For example, I was just beginning a climb up to an alpine area that I had heard was incredibly beautiful, when I ran into a couple coming down the trail in the opposite direction. Letting them pass, I said “Hey! How is it up there? Good views?” The man replied, “Oh, we didn’t make it all the way up. My girlfriend’s having ankle problems, so we have to go back down to the car.” He gave me a weird knowing smile and eye roll, like I should be judging his girlfriend for being so weak that she has ankle problems. Men out for short hikes on the PCT sometimes seemed to idolize thru-hikers, would leave their partners behind to prove to us that they were fast, and would disparage their partners to prove to us that it’s not them, the men, who are weak and slow. I felt that my status as a long-distance hiker implicated me in the patriarchy. I tried to show that I actually wasn’t looking down on people for failing to meet the hiker standards of white masculinity, yet the very environment of the hiking trail seemed to shame women. Interestingly, this gender dynamic most appeared in younger straight couples, whereas in older couples, women did more of the talking.

Finally, “toughness,” as the defining characteristic of the ideal thru-hiker, is a way that hikers demonstrate their embodiment of the values of rugged masculinity. I met several hikers, all of them white men, who were hiking the PCT without tents, instead sleeping outside every night, with or without a sleeping pad and with or without a tarp in case of rain. Hikers compare the size of their backpacks, and the standard is, the smaller and lighter the pack the better, because it means you need less. Carrying an unnecessarily heavy pack can be uncomfortable and

place strain on the body, but as Indigenous Women Hike (@indigenouswomenhike) point out in an Instagram post from August 2024 captioned “Mind your own pack weight!” women don’t need unsolicited advice on lightening their packs. Different people need to carry different things to feel happy, comfortable, and safe. Different sized bodies require different sized clothing and gear. People with disabilities and medical needs need to carry additional items. And the most lightweight, compact gear is typically the most prohibitively expensive. Being as austere, minimalist, and fit as possible is not only a form of disciplining, but also a form of masculine self-punishment. In *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism*, Robert Fletcher describes how white culture is based on self-control and self-punishment to the extent that white men in particular have a hard time enjoying leisure time without turning it into an exercise in controlled suffering and being “the best” (Fletcher 2014). Queer and ecofeminist approaches to nature connection resist ideas of “toughness” which imply mastery and individualist domination over a separate “othered” environment.

III. The Commodification of Walking

The concept of modern North American thru-hiking was introduced in 1921 when Benton MacKaye proposed the creation of the Appalachian Trail. MacKaye was a socialist and anti-urbanist from New York City, who envisioned the Appalachian Trail as an intrinsically anti-capitalist space. He planned for the trail to connect a series of socialist work camps where people would live off-grid and intentionally reject technology and capitalist labor (Moor 2017). Although MacKaye’s vision for socialist work camps was never realized, his ideals shaped the culture of the Appalachian Trail, and of the PCT when it was created thirty years later. One of the appealing things about hiking the PCT is that it is a purposeful refusal to contribute to the economy. During

the months of a thru-hike, hikers aren't working, are not providing labor – in other words, they are intentionally useless. Until very recently, PCT hikers were a fringe group. Starting with the first PCT thru-hikers in the 1960s, hikers were (white male) hippie countercultural vagabonds, whose primary goal seems to have been to “connect with nature.” This connection is based in purposefully uprooting capitalist thinking and replacing it with ecological thinking, and learning from surrounding ecosystems that resist capitalist narratives of productivity. This ethos is still very much present in thru-hiking culture, but in the last ten years thru-hiking has moved much more into the mainstream. This suggests a recent widespread societal yearning for and interest in the natural world. It is also both the result and cause of a widespread proliferation of professional hikers, hiking social media influencers, youtubers, bloggers, and writers, and the rise of “fastest known time” hikes and popularization of speed goals such as hiking the PCT in under one hundred days.

Two common thru-hiker clichés are “don't make it your job” and “last one to Canada wins.” People who stop going to work every day and instead hike every day often bring capitalist workplace attitudes into their hikes, even as they claim that hiking is total “freedom”; it's comforting to get up early, stay on schedule, walk a certain number of miles before lunch, walk a certain number of miles before dinner, and set long-term and short-term goals. The phrase “don't make it your job” reminds hikers to not get stuck in overly rigid routines while on a thru-hike, but also takes on new meaning when considering that for an increasing number of people, hiking is literally their job. I first became very interested in hiking the PCT from watching the YouTube channel “Homemade Wanderlust.” On the channel, Jessica, a full-time hiking vlogger and “triple crowner,” has posted over seven hundred videos showing her on-trail experiences, and offering advice with the intention of making backpacking accessible to a wider range of people. Jessica

hiked the PCT in 2016, and I found her videos in 2019. She is one of the original and most popular thru-hiking youtubers, but even in the six years since I was introduced to the PCT, there seems to have been an explosion in the number of people making content about long-distance hiking on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, including those who have been able to turn their content into money-making opportunities or a full-time job. A lot of hikers around me on-trail were making photo and video content, although not necessarily for profit, and people asked me why I wasn't interested in creating a YouTube channel or other online presence. Turning hiking into a job frees a small privileged segment of people from needing to work a 9-5, yet it also exports capitalist logic into outdoor spaces. The increasing association of long-distance hiking with online influencers also seems to have amplified the elitism associated with hiking gear. Hiking influencers make money through brand deals with outdoor companies, and therefore use very expensive tents, backpacks, and sleeping bags. As they market these products to their audiences, they reinforce the notion that people need to have the best and newest equipment to fully qualify as competent hikers.

From its origins, thru-hiking culture has taken pride in the fact that hikers cannot financially benefit from long-distance hiking. Thru-hiking pushes back against commodification as a pernicious and powerful part of American culture in general. When the PCT was something that no one in mainstream society knew about, no one cared if you hiked for months, and because no one cared, there were also zero stakes involved in failing to complete the trail. Today, there is a conception that impressive adventurous achievements are things that employers want to see, and that people should put onto their CVs (Fletcher 2014). The other day, I saw a suggested post on Instagram from a British outdoor adventure influencer titled "My Adventure CV," which listed his outdoor achievements, including cycling 2,800 miles across Europe and walking the

length of England. The post was an advertisement, aimed to impress people so they'd buy his new hiking guidebook. Even for people not looking to turn their outdoor recreation into a career, I have been told by hikers that the PCT teaches marketable skills such as hard work, planning, and perseverance, and the accomplishment of successfully finishing the PCT is a deliverable outcome of the trail.

Additionally, as “wilderness” experiences like long-distance hiking are increasingly recognized as positively contributing to peoples’ health and wellbeing, lucrative industries have appeared offering these experiences at very high price points. It is now possible to join guided hiking trips for self-empowerment, including trips specifically for women, BIPOC, or LGBTQIA2+ people. An entire industry has also arisen around wilderness and adventure therapy, and nature retreats and “forest bathing” excursions are offered to companies and individuals. Forest bathing, or “Shinrin-yoku” in Japanese, simply means being in a forest, with the knowledge that being immersed in a natural environment and using one’s senses is beneficial for mental and physical health. Forest bathing guides in the U.S. are certified by the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, and numerous studies and popular articles outline the benefits of the practice, from reducing stress and boosting the immune system, to lowering blood pressure, treating PTSD, and reducing risk for certain cancers (Cleveland Clinic 2023). Mental health is big business, and this includes “wilderness” cures modeled after outdoor recreation, which is modeled after pilgrimage. Some wilderness therapy programs are also modeled in appropriative ways after Indigenous practices. For example, Oregon-based non-profit Rites of Passage Inc. offers “wilderness quests”, which the organization called “vision quests” until 2019 when backlash pushed them to change the name. Rites of Passage Inc. states that their quests are “pan-cultural ceremonies” and are “not affiliated with or derived from any Native American

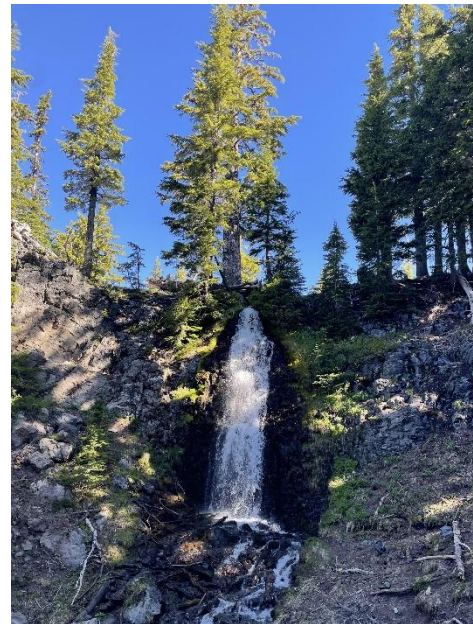
ceremony”, yet their program descriptions also state that their techniques are “age-old” and use “ancient tools” (Rites of Passage 2025). It is also worth noting that forest bathing is often marketed towards companies, so that well-resourced workplaces can provide their employees with soothing time outdoors with the express purpose of making them more productive and creative workers when they return.

A popular online meme reads “To all the type A perfectionists who are no longer getting validation from good grades in school... how’s marathon training going?” When I saw an iteration of this meme, with the phrase “gifted student to marathon runner pipeline” in its caption, I felt personally called out. The perfectionist marathoner idea resonates with many PCT hikers, who take it to the extreme, pointing out that hiking the PCT is essentially doing almost a full marathon every day. When I hiked the first half of the PCT in 2021, it was incredibly soothing to feel that I was working towards a goal, and had direction to my life (on the PCT, the literal direction was “north”). I had graduated from college almost two years before, had been working random jobs while quarantining through the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. Hiking the PCT gave me a sense of purpose to help make up for my lack of career goals, and therefore ultimately failing to complete the trail that year and returning to my parents’ house was a more severe blow than it would have been otherwise. In my case, I first approached the PCT as something that would provide me with a sense of achievement, and I am now literally making the trail contribute to my career by writing my MA thesis about it. A proliferation of research about outdoor tourism, and the availability of funding for this research, is one additional way that walking is commodified.

Waypoint 3: Klah Klahnee

The gleaming shards of black obsidian that cover the landscape seem to ignite, resembling the glowing dancing lava flows that they once were. The rocks refract the bright, hot sunlight out in infinite directions. The ground sparkles. Each large glossy boulder, small pebble, and asymmetrical stone turret plays with the sunlight differently, joyfully throwing sparks into the air, bouncing light back and forth to each other. A waterfall plummets fifteen feet down a rocky cliff face. Each water droplet, as it falls and catches the light, adds motion. The sun, the rocks, and the water are chaotic, alive, ever-shifting, dancing. After falling, water droplets ricochet off the glistening obsidian at the base of the waterfall, moving the sunlight around in ever-more new and creative directions.

The sound of the water and rocks interacting is the sound of friction – of light bouncing off of water as it crashes into rock, in constant kaleidoscopic motion. The waterfall roars. As rivulets of water coalesce at its base, in mid-transformation from waterfall to stream, the sound becomes smooth, before the water makes its way to glide with newfound ease downhill, over and around black rocks. Beads of water cling diamond-bright to tendrils of moss, a fuzz of bright astonishing green that stands out vividly against the black rock face of the waterfall. Each water droplet swells until finally falling, shining, with a “plunk” drowned out by the insistent waterfall. Every instant, the individual drops of water that make up the waterfall are new. The water never stops moving, hurtling away, racing downstream at an alarming rate. The waterfall itself remains, in a



never-ending state of transformation. The rocks also remain, yet every instant they reflect and move sunlight and water in new ways, and although born from lava, are constantly reshaped by the movement of water.

Vast fields of black rock, the remnants of ancient lava flows, are often referred to as moonscapes. But this, deeply and unmistakably, is Earth. Klah Klahnee, a name used by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs meaning “three points,” is a sweeping volcanic landscape also referred to as the Three Sisters Wilderness. Characterized by stone, the horizon dominated by three massive snow-capped volcanoes, the movement embedded in this landscape, and the shine of its obsidian, is not apparent in photos. The various lava flows left by Klah Klahnee’s volcanoes have been cooling for 2,000 to 120,000 years. This is the ancestral home of the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute people (together officially the Confederated Tribes of the Warm

Springs Reservation), who not only appreciate the lava rocks here for their aesthetics, but gather obsidian to craft weapons and ceremonial objects – a practice that dates back 4,000 years. Moving, searching, visually scouring



every rock for its unique shape and attributes, obsidian gatherers have embodied interactions with this landscape-in-motion. They flake and sharpen chunks of obsidian to create tools including arrowheads, knives, and scrapers, used for various purposes including hunting, food processing, and for ceremonial and decorative purposes. Crafting obsidian tools is identified by

the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs as a culturally important practice, and is taught at summer “culture camps” in the area for tribal youth (Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs 2025).

Native-made trails stretch up and over Klah Klahnee’s high mountain passes and wind through vast lava beds, facilitating travel and obsidian collection. Due to its remoteness, settlers did not become interested in this area until the late nineteenth century, when a small population of fur trappers and sheep herders arrived, sharing the use of existing trails with the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute people. It wasn’t until the 1930s that the area around Klah Klahnee became a focus of commercial interest, when the nearby lumber-producing town of Sisters was created. Notably, however, Klah Klahnee itself has been strongly associated with an ethos of conservation since the beginning of its settler history. In 1937, the U.S. Forest Service designated nearly 200,000 acres as the “Three Sisters Primitive Area,” adding 50,000 additional acres the following year. Over the following three decades, encroaching logging was met with outcry by local conservationists, and the Friends of the Three Sisters Wilderness, formed in 1954, became the first wilderness activist group in the Pacific Northwest. In 1964, the Wilderness Act was passed, and Klah Klahnee became one of the first protected wilderness areas. 50,000 acres of additional land were added to the wilderness area over the two decades that followed (Hatton 2025; Joslin 2021; Marsh 2024).

The so-called Obsidian Zone, or Obsidian Limited Entry Area, which this Waypoint began by describing, is the area of Klah Klahnee most heavily monitored by the U.S. government in the name of conservation. According to the ~~Oregon~~ Oregon Tourism Commission, “The Obsidian Limited Entry Area... requires additional protection in an effort to preserve the natural beauty and wilderness experience.” Therefore, everyone entering this area is required to apply for both a

“limited entry wilderness permit” and a “National Forest recreation pass” issued by the U.S. Forest Service. For this particular area, Indigenous people are required to obtain the same permits, and their freedom to gather obsidian is very unclear from online government rhetoric; all permit holders are required to abide by “Leave No Trace” principles. The state government’s use of the past tense in reference to Indigenous obsidian collection is also telling, as they write that “The cliffs

were an important source of naturally occurring volcanic glass used by Native Americans to craft tools”



(Travel Oregon 2025 [emphasis added]). Some public sentiment reflects an understanding that permits are required here because the Obsidian Zone is a particularly sacred place for Native people and therefore shouldn’t be overcrowded with recreationalists. However, official government rhetoric does not support this idea that Klah Klahnee is “protected” in partnership with or for Native communities. Rather, its protection precludes Native access.

The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs are well-organized and active in their land-restoration work. In 1855, when the Warm Springs Reservation was created, the Warm Springs and Wasco tribes were forced to relinquish ten million acres of land, including Klah Klahnee; the reservation is now 640,000 acres. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs was officially recognized as a sovereign Tribal Nation in 1937. Now, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs works to regain land mainly through purchasing. Notably, in 2018, they sent offers to 700

surrounding private landowners with offers to purchase land (Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs 2025).

The Tribal government's desire to purchase more land was reaffirmed in 2023, when the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs unsuccessfully challenged a luxury resort development as a violation of their treaty rights. The planned resort includes an artificial lake and golf course, and will place strain on the area's severely limited water resources. The planned area of land for the resort is just outside what are typically considered to be the official borders of the Warm Springs Reservation, but well within Warm Springs ancestral lands. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs cite an 1855 federal treaty, which accords certain rights over these ancestral lands. They also note how severely the resort will threaten their water rights. Deschutes County and the state of Oregon rejected this argument and approved resort development to continue, in what is widely considered to be a violation of treaty rights. In statements that appear largely performative, the county spun the case in a positive light, stating that it brought U.S. government officials greater awareness of the need for a future of more cooperative partnership with the Tribal government. This case reinforced a commitment by the reservation to regain more land and to expand its severely limited "official" borders (Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission 2025; Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs 2025; Cook 2023).

Support the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs: <https://warmsprings-nsn.gov/contact/>

Chapter 4: Feeling Climate Change

“I’ve never *felt* climate change like I do on the PCT” – Coral, PCT Hiker

I. A Race Against Fire

News of the northern ~~Washington~~ wildfires came to me in fragments. As I neared camp around sunset, without enough phone service to respond or google anything, my phone managed to show me a text message from my friend Charlie, who had gotten off trail a few weeks before due to injury: “the PCT is closed from Rainy Pass to Harts Pass. At least we can finish the trail together next year.” With no more information to go off of, I set up camp and cooked dinner, pacing around, repeating the message to myself again and again. This couldn’t be real. Why was the trail closed? Would my hike be cut short? As I walked north over the next three days, I pieced together a picture, as each successive south-bound hiker I encountered had been in town with phone service a bit more recently. They told me there was a fire. Was it the same wildfire, raging near Stehekin, that I had been hearing about for a month? No one was sure. They told me there were two fires. They told me there were many different fires, all too remote for anyone to possibly put out. By the time I reached the tiny town of Trout Lake, ~~Washington~~, I was mentally preparing to end my hike 300 miles short.

In the free PCT hiker campground behind the Trout Lake general store, I lay sprawled on the grass with several other hikers. Together, we ate local cherries and scrolled through news articles and Reddit threads on our phones, making plans. Yes, a section of the trail was closed, due to a series of small remote fires started from lightning strikes (I later met a south-bound hiker named Monk who saw one of the fires start; he described to me with disquieted reverence how lightning split the sky and suddenly a tree was consumed in flames, and he was running, putting as much distance between himself and the inferno as possible). But we learned that there

was a way around the fires. We could get a ride, skip the closed section of trail, and still continue, making it to that arbitrary finish line on the ~~Washington-Canada border~~ we had been dreaming of.

The next day was the first day I hiked with smoke in my throat, in my lungs, making my head throb and my eyes water. As I followed the PCT around the perimeter of Pahto (this

Yakama name means “big sloping mountain”; the mountain, also known as Mount Adams, is sacred to Yakama and Klickitat people), the mountain air that had felt so fresh, clean, and energizing began to taste like ash. The remainder of my PCT hike became a race against fire. Fire after fire sprang up in ~~Washington~~, and many sections of trail, including the area around



Walking above a thick layer of combined smoke and fog.

Pahto where the air burned my throat, closed just days after I walked through them. By the time I reached Snoqualmie Pass, a second hundred-mile stretch of the PCT ahead of me was closed. By car, van, and bus, me and my fellow 2024 PCT hikers navigated around the fire closures, relying on the kindness of strangers to get us where we needed to go, as the sun shone apocalyptic scarlet in the smoke-filled sky.

Of the hikers in the PCT class of 2024, I was one of the luckiest when it came to fires. Because I started my hike in ~~Northern California~~, rather than all the way at the ~~California-Mexico border~~, I was able to hike early in the hiking season, and made it through all of ~~Oregon~~-before wildfires closed many sections of the PCT there. In early September of 2024, as many thru-hikers walked through ~~Washington~~, hiking magazine



What appears to be normal clouds is a mushroom cloud of smoke from a nearby fire.

The Trek posted a photo on Instagram with the following caption:

On the Pacific Crest Trail, wildfire closures are no longer the rarity they once were – they’ve become part of the thru-hiking experience. With many current closures on the trail, several sections only recently reopened, and the threat of more fires burning nearby, this year’s thru-hiking class is facing an especially tough test. Fire and smoke are the defining challenges of the 2024 PCT experience, with a surge in wildfires across Washington’s most remote sections resulting in a fractured footpath and complicated logistics.

Wildfires were so widely discussed among PCT hikers this year, that the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) was prompted to send out an email to their mailing list in August entitled “Finding Uplift While Navigating Fire Season.” The first paragraph of the email reads,

As we navigate the challenges of fire season, with its trail closures and uncertainties, let’s not lose sight of the beauty and spirit of adventure that the Pacific Crest Trail continues to offer. This past July, amidst the backdrop of nature’s trials, we’ve also witnessed

remarkable moments of camaraderie, conservation efforts, and personal achievements that remind us why we love the trail.

Referring to wildfires as “nature’s trials” obscures the unnaturalness of the wildfires of recent years, which are the result of climate change, drought, and poor land management from government and conservation entities including the PCTA.

While taking a rest day Ashland, Oregon, I picked up a magazine from the hiker hostel bookshelf: the Spring 2022 edition of the *Pacific Crest Trail Communicator*, a publication produced by the PCTA. On the cover of this edition of the communicator is a photo, taken from behind a hiker walking resolutely into a blazing yellow sun, the surrounding mountaintop shrouded in smoke. The magazine title reads, “Climate Change and the PCT.” Inside, the magazine discusses how climate change has been a major topic of conversation among hikers in recent years. It quotes hikers, one of whom writes, “My time on trail has emphasized that nature is at great risk. I am so grateful to have health and stayed ahead of all the fires. I fear that future generations, maybe even next year’s thru-hikers, might not be so lucky. Let’s be responsible and preserve our planet for the future.” Wildfires were not a major part of the PCT experience until less than ten years ago. 2016 is generally considered to be the cutoff year – before then, hikers could expect to hike the entire PCT during hiking season without encountering fires. In every year since, that has become nearly impossible. Hikers who begin the PCT too early in the season encounter snow, which can sometimes be dangerous or impassible. But the later hikers start, the more likely that they will be halted by wildfires. As one hiker summarized to me, “you start early and you get snow, you start late and you get fire.” Moreover, 2024 has been an exceptional year because wildfires, although common since 2016, have before mostly been in Northern California

and ~~Oregon~~, and have not extended further north. Many ~~Washington~~-residents on the PCT expressed to me that the ~~Washington~~ fires of 2024 are not “normal.”

The increasing popularity of the PCT also makes wildfires difficult to avoid, because PCTA long-distance hiking permits are competitive to obtain, and many hikers are unsuccessful at snagging permit start-dates that would allow them to complete the trail before peak wildfire season. I met a hiker named One Step who had started the PCT on March 7, an incredibly early start date. He ended up trudging through so much knee and thigh-deep snow, that he decided to take six weeks off hiking before skipping ahead to where he would have been if he continued on the trail. One Step shared, “I knew the snow would be a problem, but March 7 was the only start date I could get a permit for. More and more people are competing for permits, just as conditions on the PCT are getting more and more treacherous.” Similarly, many hikers expressed to me that continuous northbound or southbound PCT hikes are not truly possible anymore, since nearly every hiker ends up needing to skip sections due to the hazards of climate change. Exceptionally fast hikers are the most exempt from this, such as a hiker I met named Fern who hiked the entire PCT in only 84 days. He hiked so fast that his hike fell within an ideal weather window. Even he, however, did need to skip one fire closure, which is how we met: riding in the back of a trail angel named Meander’s self-proclaimed “hiker trash van” around the fire closure together, we ate chocolate chip cookies and discussed bears, equipment failures, and life.

A good friend of mine, a hiker from Finland named Sprite, is one of many PCT hikers who have opted for a “flip-flop” hike in an attempt to avoid snow and wildfires. Rather than hiking continuously north or south, flip-floppers hike the PCT out of order, choosing the best times of year for each section of the trail. The first half of Sprite’s thru-hike was essentially the same as mine: she began in ~~Northern California~~ and hiked north to the ~~Washington-Canada~~

~~border~~. I first met her in southern ~~Oregon~~, on a particularly memorable rest day at the remote Shelter Cove Resort, which involved smores, collaging, boat rides on the lake, and a polar plunge. We continued seeing each other, hiking together occasionally, until the very last day of my PCT hike. After reaching the ~~Canadian border~~, however, Sprite went back down to where she started by lake da ow aga (Washoe name for Lake Tahoe, who consider the lake to be the center of the world), and started walking south, all the way to the ~~Mexican border~~. PCT hikers are increasingly deciding to plan their hikes in this way: skipping around rather than hiking continuously north, even though the idea of a continuous northward journey holds a powerful sway over the thru-hiking imagination. It is worth noting the increased carbon emissions that result from hikers riding in cars, trains, buses, and planes to new sections of trail and around fire closures.

II. Emotional and Embodied Realities of Climate Change

PCT hikers are impacted not only by the smoke and flames of ongoing wildfires, but also walk through many “burn zones”: areas left charred black and often devoid of life because of the wildfires of previous years. It is emotionally and physically jarring to be walking through a lush, deep, and shady forest and experience it suddenly transition to a vast expanse of black



The PCT crossing an area severely burned by a past wildfire.

burned tree stumps. Burn zones feel like desert moonscapes, with little to no living trees to provide shade, and a layer of soft dark ash covering the earth, crunching underfoot and eerily muffling sound. When I walked unexpectedly into my first burn zone this year on the PCT, my body had a visceral reaction. I hadn't been fully aware of the constant soundscape of bird song, rustling leaves, and scurrying creatures in underbrush which had been my enveloping environment for weeks. When I entered the burn zone, those sounds suddenly ceased, and I felt the loss deeply. I knew what the forest had looked like, felt like, and sounded like before it burned, having walked through a similar landscape for over a hundred miles, and as I walked on, the sun beating down on me, I started to cry, mourning what had been lost.

I would walk through many different burn zones after this first encounter, and each one struck me deeply and emotionally. Sometimes the burned areas provoked grief, other times anger; on day 52 of my hike, I wrote the following in my field notes: “this burn zone is making me really ANGRY!! I was in the most beautiful alpine meadow earlier. I laid down and looked up at these huge towering pine trees. I thought I'd be walking through gorgeous landscape all day. But then I entered another freaking burn area! I'm so mad!!! Why have we done this to this beautiful place!??” There are many burn zones on the PCT, the



A trail sign made largely unreadable by fire.

scars of many different fires that burned in different years. Although no burn zone is exactly enjoyable to experience, different burned areas are in differing stages of regrowth, and while it is

deeply depressing to be surrounded by the skeletons of dead trees, it also inspires a subtle sense of hope to notice new saplings in various stages of growth, splashes of color from wildflowers popping through the ash, and the most intrepid birds reinhabiting the area, their lonely songs animating the hot, still air. As I cried walking through my first burn zone, I was soothed slightly when I noticed the small white mushrooms that covered the forest floor and the sides of scorched trees. I envisioned the mycelial networks that I knew spread through the soil beneath my feet, intertwining with the tree roots and retaining nutrients, meaning that the forest was not dead after all. A cycle was occurring, and the forest would return. Wildflowers are also one of the first forms of life that can return to a burned forest.



An older burn zone in the process of regrowth.

After walking through a particularly long burn zone early in my hike, I wrote, “this area feels so hot and desolate, but if there’s an upside to today, it’s the wildflowers and the butterflies. I’ve discovered that wildflowers are one of the things that make me the happiest. Especially the purple ones. And it feels ethereal to walk along and have clouds of butterflies rise up and flutter around you, or float ahead, leading you down the trail.” The many different stages of regrowth and regeneration that the burn zones represent meant that my emotional reaction to the burns came to be more complicated than a binary notion of “burned = bad and dead” and “not burned = good, natural, and alive.” Ecosystems do not contain binaries like this; yet I still grieved the obvious loss of life.

As we walked through a burn zone together, my friend and occasional hiking partner, a 62-year-old man named Bank Robber, reflected on his experience feeling environmental change over the course of his lifetime. Bank Robber was born and raised in Bend, Oregon, where, growing up, he could frequently be found in the woods, racing through aspen groves and jumping from rock to rock down creeks, the water laughing and jumping around him. Over the course of a lifetime, Bank Robber has experienced this landscape be developed, dried out, and burned. He misses what the land was, saying “I wish I would have hiked the PCT twenty years ago, when there were no burn areas and the forest was more alive. But then, I’m glad I am hiking now, rather than twenty years from now when it will probably be completely unrecognizable.” Other hikers are similarly nostalgic for a past in which the forest was more abundant and brimming with life, when peoples’ minds were free from the threat of destructive flames. I met a recent high-school graduate, who was out hiking a section of the PCT for a week of his summer break. He had spent the day in a burn zone – an unexpectedly heavy and unpleasant start to his hiking experience. He shared that he had been dreaming of hiking the entire PCT, but expressed with frustration that “I don’t think I will have the time or money for a thru-hike until after I’m done with college and make some money. By the time I’m able to hike the PCT, I’m afraid the that whole PCT will be gone [transformed into burn zones].”

Many PCT hikers I spoke with described having similarly strong emotional reactions to being in areas impacted by fire. This emotional experience of climate change recalls the recently popularized terms “ecological grief,” “climate grief,” and “eco-anxiety.” Climate grief, in particular, refers to a sense of grief and loss that can result from experiencing or learning about climate change (Currie 2023). This sentiment is well-expressed by the quote I began this chapter with, from a hiker named Coral: “I’ve never *felt* climate change like I do on the PCT.”

Philosopher Timothy Morton describes climate change as a “hyperobject”: something imagined to occur on such a vast planetary scale, so much in the abstract, that our brains are not fully equipped to comprehend and deeply *feel* it (Morton 2013). Hikers’ experiences turn climate change, for them, from an abstract concept to something they are emotionally tethered to. Of course, for many people climate change is already an emotional reality every day. For someone whose house is swallowed by rising seas, or whose only source of food is withered by drought, for someone with an intimate kinship with non-human species that goes extinct, the personal grief that comes with climate change is a familiar reality. However, for many PCT hikers, most of whom are educated well-off Americans from urban and suburban areas, climate change is mostly an intellectual idea that they encounter in the context of policy and data, rather than personal emotion. On the PCT, climate change transforms from something thought about to something felt.

For PCT hikers, climate change is also not only experienced emotionally, but also in a physical, embodied way. Walking from a lush forest to a burn zone, the temperature change is obvious; the resulting sweat and sunburn are traces of climate change left on the body. Navigating around wildfires and walking in smoky conditions, hikers’ bodies are similarly intertwined with the realities of environmental destruction, as particles of burned trees enter their lungs and turn their eyes red. In Ashland, ~~Oregon~~, a trail angel affectionately named Big Mama, an exuberant and tiny older woman, volunteered to drive me and some other hikers to nearby Medford to get some supplies from REI and Trader Joes. As she drove, she explained that the part of southern ~~Oregon~~ where she lives has become an epicenter for wildfires, and that a main part of what she does for PCT hikers is to drive them around fire closures and distribute N-95 masks, which she buys in bulk. Fortunately, I didn’t encounter trail conditions smoky enough for

me to feel I needed a mask for my safety, but Big Mama explained that the masks are sometimes very necessary, and she encourages hikers in smoky areas to at least sleep in masks to protect their lungs.

Embodiment theory in anthropology is concerned with the ways that experiences are made to be living, tangible parts of the world when they are embedded and situated in the body (Csordas 1994). The breath is an important part of hiking. For me, developing a relationship with my own breathing while hiking has been incredibly soothing. When my body is moving in synch with the internal rhythm of my expanding and deflating lungs, I feel most alive in my body and aligned with my surroundings. Because hikers are constantly physically exerting themselves, their bodies require maximum quantities of oxygen, and they often meditate on the in-breath and out-breath to help them climb steep mountain slopes. Hikers are frequently focused on their breathing, and become attuned to small shifts in the quality, texture, and taste of air. The familiar easy and calming rhythm of breathing is disrupted by fire. When the air is alive with smoke, each lungful of air brings climate change into the body, as the air quality of the surrounding environment enters the lungs, before moving on to the bloodstream, diffusing to every organ and tissue. While hiking, even relatively small amounts of smoke in the air, and therefore in my body, would change my everyday reality: if I breathed smoke in my tent all night, I would wake up with a headache, which made me irritable and grumpy, which resulted in a decreased ability to feel good in my body, to wonder at my surroundings, and to be fully present in my experience. Realities of environmental destruction came to live inside my body and dictate how I interacted with the world.

III. Detouring Wildfires

No one hikes the entire PCT without having conversations about climate change. Even climate change deniers (I didn't meet any but I'm sure there are some on the trail) must inadvertently discuss climate change through the language of fires and heatwaves. Yet, "climate change" is a Western construct, the understanding of which is rooted in scientific data and discovery. Hikers' experiences may lead them to feel that they are physically and emotionally interacting directly with the ecological realities of climate change. These experiences, however, are still mediated by all of hikers' preexisting knowledge and conceptions of what climate change is, how it operates, and who (human or non-human) it harms.

As I walked through my first burn zone this year, I felt hope alongside grief when I saw mushrooms alive on the burned husks of trees. I felt happy about the mushrooms not because I had a long personal history of observing and learning from mushrooms, but because I had read about mycelial networks in ecology textbooks. I immediately recalled my knowledge, which lives in my brain encoded in the language of science, and which is full of jargony terms like "mycorrhizal network," "nutrient transfer," and "electrical signals." The relationship between fungi and trees is even often described in science textbooks as an "economy," because these beings are constantly exchanging resources for mutual benefit. Use of economic terminology represents a translation of more-than-human fungal realities into the explicit language of Western capitalism.

When hikers discuss wildfires, they use the rhetoric of climate change, and bring to mind familiar scientific graphs with bold upward arrows, depicting ever-rising temperatures and natural disaster frequencies. Discussing fires, hikers also talk about the wildland firefighters, who risk their lives fighting flames in the hearts of forests, hundreds of miles from the nearest

human settlement. Thinking about these firefighters recalls news stories, which tell clichéd tales of the heroism of small vulnerable humans facing off against the all-consuming wrath of nature. Hikers' personal experiences with fire are, therefore, influenced by common stories, which have been continually recirculated in the climate apocalypse language of the 21st century Anthropocene. The story of climate change, which shapes hikers' understandings, goes as follows: humans (as a homogenous collective whole) have caused climate change and are destroying the Earth. We, like wildland firefighters, now must save the world. This is a large-scale, planetary effort. Solutions can be found if climate scientists and politicians work together.

The problem with this narrative is that it obscures a much longer history of fires and fire management. This history reveals that when hikers breathe smoke, they inhale not only climate change into their bodies, but also settler colonialism, and that those two things are inextricably interwoven. In the effort to “detour fires” that follows, I present an alternative, decolonial history of what wildfires mean on the PCT. PCT hikers are aware of this detoured history to an extent: I encountered some comments posted in burn areas on the FarOut navigation app, expressing frustration about poor fire management and misinformed policy. However, I did not see this understanding centered in most hikers' conversations.

Indigenous communities on Turtle Island have had healthy and reciprocal relationships with fire for thousands of years. Fire is a vital ecological process. Fire is a necessary part of the life cycle of multiple plants, it clears the ground of excessive underbrush to make way for new plant life, and it results in a greater diversity of animal species living in and using forest areas. Native tribes have historically had a myriad of land management practices, including prescribed burns. In addition to allowing natural wildfires to run their course, Native communities have, for thousands of years, intentionally started small wildfires. These fires have been used to support

the lifecycles of important plants that Native communities rely on, to return vital nutrients to the soil for agriculture, and to open up areas to be inhabited by large animals that are hunted for food, like elk and deer (Avitt 2021). Amy Cardinal Christianson, a Métis fire research scientist and board member of the International Association of Wildland fire says, “We coexist with fire, we need fire and fire needs us. It’s a different way of looking at the forest.” Kuruk forest scientist Frank Lake says “I’m trying to spread the idea that fire is medicine... We have to question the narrative of history that has demonized fire, coming from a colonial perspective” (Kuhn 2021).

Knowing how and where to start fires requires a vast amount of place-specific ecological knowledge. People must have an intimate relationship with the forest and the fire to understand what plant and animal species the fire will help, and to ensure that the fire provides life and not just destruction. Settler colonialism undermined this relationship with place and fire, as European colonizers seized land from Native communities for the sake of extraction and profit, and banned land management practices including burning. Colonialism has resulted in the loss of a lot of knowledge, as well loss of practices of relating to land, food, and fire. Banning fires is a form colonial ecological violence, undermining eco-social relationships through domination (Ricketts 2023). The colonial mindset approaches fire in a very different philosophical way, viewing fire not as medicine, but only as destruction: something to be feared and controlled. In the 17th century, fire was used as a weapon of genocide, as colonists set fires to drive Native people off of land, destroying their homes and food sources. Regarding forest management, colonial policy to this day has centered on suppressing all fires, putting them out immediately in order to protect forests.

In 1850, the year ~~California~~ became a state, ~~California~~ mandated “fire suppression” as the appropriate response to all wildfires. In 1911, the Weeks Act made all “cultural uses of fire”

illegal. This approach to fire policy was largely rooted in fear: in 1871, the Peshtigo Fire burned in Wisconsin, which to this day is the deadliest (to humans) wildfire in recorded history.

The Great Fire of 1910 in Idaho burned three million acres and resulted in large-scale loss of life and property. These enormous fires, which followed centuries of deliberate suppression of Indigenous fire management, evoked widespread fear of fire, and resulted in practices such as a 1935 U.S. Forest Service policy dictating that every wildfire should be completely put out by 10 am the morning after it is spotted (Donovan and Brown 2005).

Fire management in the U.S. is also overtly militaristic. When Yellowstone became the world's first national park in 1872, the U.S. Army was assigned to patrol the park, tasked with keeping Indigenous and other people from using the land (harvesting plants, grazing livestock, logging etc.), and also with putting out wildfires. If the army was engaged in warfare “for” the national park, Native people and fires were the enemy. The National Park Service was established in 1916, and park rangers replaced the Army; however, the responsibilities of rangers remained essentially the same as the soldiers, and fire suppression remained the only fire management tactic of the National Park Service for the next 50 years (Donovan and Brown 2005). Hikers often refer to park rangers as “forest cops,” and usually PCT hikers’ only interactions with Park Service personnel are when rangers are patrolling, verifying peoples’ hiking permits. An antagonistic approach to fire is still expressed within the word “firefighter,” and in the continued use of military technology engaged to fight fires. For example, since 1940, “smokejumpers,” employed by the U.S. Forest Service, have parachuted out of military-style airplanes into burning forests, acting as front-line experts in “initial-attack firefighting” (National Interagency Fire Center 2025).

U.S. fire policies have also relied on a skewed perception from the general public that all wildfires are started by people and are not a natural part of forests' existence. This is exemplified by the U.S. Forest Service "Smokey Bear" campaign, which was created in 1944 and is the longest-running public service announcement campaign in U.S. history. The widely recognized black bear, wearing a Forest Service hat, says "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires." Smokey Bear appears on signage in outdoor recreation areas reminding people that campfires aren't allowed, or to fully extinguish campfires. News coverage also often relays stories of campfires, fireworks, or gender reveal party pyrotechnics gone wrong. The public perception doesn't reflect that most wildfires, including those that impacted my time on the PCT, are started not by people, but by lightning strikes. The problem, however, lies in the fact that colonial extraction and fire management policies have created the perfect storm of conditions to allow for what would be normal, ecologically beneficial fires to spiral out of control.



A wooden cutout of Smokey Bear, located at the point where the PCT enters the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation.

Forests rely on small wildfires to regularly burn away excess plant matter. Because of over a hundred years of hardcore fire suppression policy, these small wildfires haven't happened. As a result, when lightning strikes now, the flames have centuries worth of accumulated debris to consume. Fires today are hotter and more destructive, capable of turning ecosystems entirely to ash. Fires are also able to grow to massive sizes, spreading across vast areas of land (Donovan and Brown 2005). Extractive colonialism and the burning of fossil fuels have also caused warmer and dryer climates, particularly pronounced on sections of the PCT, making it easier for

fires to ignite and stay alive. When we first learned about the fire closing one of the northernmost sections of the PCT, my friend Bank Robber took to excessively checking the weather on his Garmin inReach satellite communication device, hoping for rain. One day, we woke up to raindrops pattering against our tents, and we celebrated, naively hoping that it meant the fire would soon go out. Before European colonialism, it's likely that that rainy day would have extinguished the fire. Now, however, conditions had aligned so that the fire was much too powerful to be impacted by a day of rain. Settler colonialism has transformed fire into an enemy to be fought, but has also created conditions that make that fight impossible to win.

In the 1960s, U.S. fire management shifted, after American scientists “discovered” (Native people already knew this), that no new giant sequoia trees had been growing in ~~California~~ because fire is an integral component of the sequoia life cycle. Scientists and policymakers were forced to recognize that fire does not only mean destruction, but is a part of the life of ecosystems. In 1968, the National Park Service recognized fire as an ecological process, and beginning in 1974, the Forest Service started allowing small lightning-started fires to burn (Donovan and Brown 2005). In the wake of increasingly large, frequent, and devastating fires, U.S. policy has increasingly attempted to diversify its approach to fire, including the implementation of prescribed burns in partnership with Native communities. The U.S. Forest Service now practices prescribed burning in ~~California~~ and elsewhere. However, the agency's resources are stretched thin putting out the many large fires that rage every year, leaving them with limited resources or personnel to implement preventative measures and create healthy ecological conditions.

Today, Indigenous people across Turtle Island are reclaiming their relationships with fire and are increasingly involved in shaping the future of fire management. Some tribes, such as the

Apache in Arizona, have their own fire management agencies, expressing sovereignty over fires on their own land (Kuhn 2021). Organizations including the Indigenous Peoples Burning Network (IPBN) unite efforts to revitalize “fire cultures” and support solutions for wildfire management that honors reciprocal relationships with fire (IPBN 2025). Indigenous activists have also worked to more directly involve Indigenous knowledge and practice within colonial structures; for example, Indigenous organizer Jackie Fielder ran for Senate in 2020 with a proposal for an Indigenous wildfire task force for the state of ~~California~~ as a part of her campaign (Kuhn 2021). Globally, Indigenous people also find solidarity through shared encounters with fire. The 2023 Maui wildfires and 2025 LA wildfires brought increasing attention to climate change as colonial violence.

Once I learned this history and familiarized myself with ongoing Indigenous struggles, the smoke in my lungs took on new meaning. Most significantly, fire and smoke did not need to mean destruction – fire could also mean life. Fires, like people, are not only one thing: not good or bad, or resulting in only chaos or harmony. But my surroundings, the sun shrouded in smoke and the distant mountains eerily blurred, were rooted in the destruction of settler colonialism and violence waged against Indigenous people, against the world, and against fire. I inhaled and exhaled and thought about how new worlds could be created, in partnership rather than competition with fire.

Waypoint 4: Tahoma

The landscape is a dizzying whirl of vibrant color, the green of the grass and trees so astonishingly bright that it screams of energy and life. Wildflowers pop up in joyful abundance: scarlet paintbrushes peek out through the grass; royal-purple lupines stretch proudly into the air; yellow and white glacier lilies rest on the grass like pale butterflies. Water accumulates in this glacially-carved alpine meadow, and the marshy ground is home to frogs, who sing loudly, their throaty voices carrying through the air. In small pools of muddy water, tadpoles swim in circles, hiding behind the stems of wildflowers and stalks of grass, safe and sheltered until they are ready to transform. To the frogs, this meadow is the universe. An elk steps gracefully out from between the silver pines that frame the edges of the meadow. The elk has traveled far – through deep forests and across other meadows similar to this one, but with different specific frogs, and different



specific wildflowers. The elk bends down to eat the vibrant green grass. The clouds that frequently crowd the horizon briefly part, revealing a sliver of a colossal snow-capped mountain watching over the scene.

The water that makes the meadow green – that the grass, trees, wildflowers, frogs, tadpoles, and elk drink – originates in the mountain's glaciers. Water is life. The mountain is the source of life. The mountain itself is not green, but blue and gray, ice and stone, often hiding

behind a shroud of dark cloud. On occasions when the sun banishes the clouds away, the mountain materializes, a massive presence, its many glaciers replacing the clouds to shine white in the sky. The mountain is formidable and austere: the green, lush life in the mountain's shadow never ventures up its highest flanks. Elk never stand on its summit, and only birds see the



highest glaciers close-up. But the mountain is connected to all the life that surrounds it. It is the source of all water for a watershed stretching 2,800 square miles.

This is Tahoma, a Puyallup name meaning “snow-covered mountain” or alternatively, “mother of waters.” Compared to the other Indigenous names included here, “Tahoma” is a widely agreed-upon name used by multiple Tribal Nations, and is also a name commonly known and used by settlers. In recent years, a movement to restore the name Tahoma, replacing the name Mount Rainier, has gained traction. The name “Rainier” seems to evoke the gray skies and patter of raindrops that frequently characterize this area. However, the name originates not from the rain, but from the name of British Admiral Peter Rainier. British Captain George Vancouver was surveying the Pacific coast in 1792, when he saw the mountain and decided to name it after his friend. Rainier himself never set eyes on Tahoma; the closest he ever came was traveling to the east coast of Turtle Island to fight for the British in the Revolutionary War. The name “Rainier” represents only colonialism. The name “Tahoma,” meanwhile, has been used by

Indigenous people for at least 10,000 years. In 2009, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names rejected a petition to officially restore the name Tahoma, claiming that “the overwhelming support and the predominate use of the locals was for Mount Rainier.” “Rainier” has become familiar. However, in the sixteen years since, settler support for the name Tahoma has risen exponentially (Weissman 2017).

Standing 14,410 feet tall, this massive sacred glaciated volcano is the ancestral land of the Puyallup, Cowlitz, Muckleshoot, Nisqually, Squaxin Island, Yakama, and Coast Salish people. These Tribal Nations consider Tahoma to be spiritually powerful, and have also historically engaged in extensive plant gathering in its low-lying meadows, relying on plants fed by the mountain’s water for food and medicine. For example, the bright red paintbrush flower that grows wild through the meadows is concentrated into medicine used by Pacific Northwest tribes to treat lung, eye, and back problems. The dried roots of wild ginger are ground and used to treat indigestion, and its leaves are steeped in water and drank to reduce fever. Pipsissewa, a small pink flowering plant, is boiled and used to treat infection (Burtchard et al. 2024).

Tahoma, and 236,000 acres of meadow and forest that surround it, became Mount Rainier National Park in 1899. The park’s creation severely limited Indigenous access to live and gather plants on the land. Interestingly, the National Parks Service acknowledges this colonial history at Tahoma, more so than is apparent at other national parks. On its website, the Park features the following land acknowledgement:

The land administered as Mount Rainier National Park has been since time immemorial the Ancestral homeland of the Cowlitz, Muckleshoot, Nisqually, Puyallup, Squaxin Island, Yakama, and Coast Salish people. By following Elders’ instructions passed through generations, these Indigenous Peoples remain dedicated caretakers of this

landscape. Their Traditional Knowledge and Management of this Sacred Land will endure in perpetuity, and we honor each nation’s traditions of landscape stewardship in our endeavors to care for, protect, and preserve the features and values of the mountain. (National Park Service 2025)

The National Park Service, however, does not specify how the park is supporting Indigenous land management in any concrete way, or how this management will “endure in perpetuity” in the face of strict control over the land by the U.S. government.

The park is currently collaborating with the Nisqually Tribe on a project about traditional medicinal plant harvesting and the impact of climate change on native plants. One aim of the project is to promote Native plant gathering within the park. The Park Service also recently created new exhibitions in their visitor center, in partnership with the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and Yakama Nation, which



provides historical and contemporary context on Indigenous realities surrounding Tahoma (National Park Service 2022). These projects, of course, do not provide Land Back, and the park has also not expressed any plans to change its name to Tahoma.

The Puyallup Tribe created the name “Tahoma” 10,000 years ago. They are a federally recognized Tribal Nation who live on one of the most urban Native reservations – 18,000 acres located mostly within the city of Tacoma (the name of the city has the same origin as the name of

the mountain). Situated around the Puyallup River, which flows from Tahoma, through the city, and out into the bay to the sea, the Puyallup Tribe is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and pollution. Tahoma's glaciers, the source of life, are melting. The mountain has lost more than half of its ice over the past one hundred years. The melting ice has resulted in rippling repercussions throughout the mountain's watershed, including seasonal droughts, flooding, and changes to the natural flow of water. The Puyallup River in particular has experienced more erratic flow levels and increased sedimentation. Located in an urban area, the Puyallup reservation has also had to deal with the effects of upstream pollution. As the Puyallup aim to regain more of their ancestral land, they face complicated financial and logistical barriers to managing it. In 2023, the Tribal Nation overcame some of these barriers by transferring 17 acres of waterfront land into trust, meaning that the U.S. government intervenes to help pay for costs associated with the land – in particular, cleaning up pollution (Puyallup Tribe 2024).

Sign the change.org petition to restore the name Tahoma: <https://www.change.org/p/united-states-department-of-the-interior-rename-mt-rainier-national-park-to-tahoma-national-park-to-honor-its-original-peoples>

Support the Puyallup Tribe: <https://www.puyalluptribe-nsn.gov/about-our-tribe/>

Conclusion

Three days after finishing the Pacific Crest Trail, I sat in an over-airconditioned room at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, staring glazed-eyed at a PowerPoint presentation. I fidgeted in my plastic chair, which felt unnecessarily hard and unyielding. As I zoned out, my gaze drifted out the window, my eyes following the movements of sun-dappled leaves waving from the tree branches outside. I had rushed back from the trail to attend a mandatory scholarship orientation. A few days later, classes would begin. In the weeks that followed, everything seemed strange to me: indoor lighting seemed garishly bright, its artificial white shine pounding on my skull and giving me a headache; clothes that weren’t my accustomed hiking outfit felt scratchy and restrictive; the city smells of Honolulu, and of my friends’ scented lotions, shampoos, and perfumes, were sickening and overwhelming. My seven-by-fourteen-foot graduate student dorm room felt preposterously small. I bought star-shaped yellow lanterns and hung them from my dorm ceiling so that I wouldn’t need to turn on the glaring overhead light. The lanterns were a pale imitation of the starry skies I was used to, so I sat by my window at night, trying to pick out stars above the lights of the city skyline. I printed out PCT photos and hung them in my office alongside snippets of poetry that resonated with things I had felt on the trail, which I read to myself again and again, trying to remember (“everyone knows we are made of stardust. they don’t remember what it means. what does it mean? it means if we can walk all over each other, we can also walk the sky” - Alexis Pauline Gumbs).

I swam in the ocean, which I had missed so much during my three months walking across inland mountains. I watched the white birds, manu-o-Kū, that circle in pairs through the sky outside my sixth-floor window. I felt the Ka Haukani wind of Mānoa Valley play with my hair, as it ruffled the leaves on the surrounding trees. But I felt strangely disconnected from all of it. I

stumbled through the semester in a bleary haze of post-trail depression. I barely walked anywhere, and running up stairs went from being easy to feeling arduous and unnecessary. My trail family group chat became filled with messages such as, “Why am I tired all the time?” “My job is a trap,” and “I miss the sky.” We talked about how our nervous systems were out of whack – PCT hikers seem to talk a lot about the nervous system, but I’m still not sure exactly what that means. What we did know was that our bodies had adjusted to walking outside all day every day, and now here we were, thrown back into a world of cars, florescent lighting, and desk jobs.

Even while still hiking the PCT, thru-hikers talk about a certain anxiety and disquiet they experience during rest days in town. For me, the existence of cars became particularly unsettling. Towards the end of my hike, I sat in the back of a trail angel’s car with some other hikers, hurtling along a perfectly normal highway. I began to feel extremely queasy. I rarely get car sick, and as my fellow hikers soothed me, the trail angel called back from the front seat, “oh yeah, you PCT hikers are always getting car sick. Your bodies just aren’t used to moving like this anymore – it’s unnatural. Last year I drove hikers around the wildfires, and I had to keep stopping even though the air was so smoky so that people could throw up.” My body physically rejected the trappings of modernity, including cars, chairs, and my iPhone.

Back in Hawai‘i, I spent hours poring over my field notes. Sometimes it felt like someone else had written them. As time wore on, I began to doubt whether my experience on the PCT had been so profound after all. I almost forgot what it felt like to look up at a giant mountain and feel extremely incredibly small. At times I thought that maybe my deep love of early evening sunlight isn’t really so important. But other times, I read my field notes and felt incredibly happy, remembering what it was like to be on that mountain, by that waterfall, under the endless sky. After angrily complaining to a friend one day about the stress of grad school, I texted her

later in the evening, saying “I feel better now. I was just working on my thesis and it actually made me really happy?? I remembered that wow, I was really thriving while hiking.” My friend responded, “you should write about that in your thesis! Not only is hiking the trail healing, but writing your thesis is healing for you.” Writing this thesis, I attempt to pin down feelings and bodily experiences that are ephemeral, and which seem almost unreal inside artificially bright air-conditioned rooms.

Not every lesson from the PCT sticks. Hikers shift back to going to work, commuting, and paying rent. Unable to imagine how ways of living from the PCT can fit into their everyday lives, many hikers’ only recourse is to dream of their next escape – their next thru-hike or grand adventure. Some aspects of the PCT, however, do stick. My entire outlook on life is shaped by my long-distance hiking experiences. I believe I am capable of more deeply appreciating, understanding, and caring for land because of the PCT. I have learned to be more present in my body, senses, and emotions, and more capable of resisting the pull of endless capitalist productivity. Because of the PCT, I am more receptive to listening to and learning from the winds, rains, ocean, plants, and animals that surround me in Hawai‘i. The PCT taught me things that do not sound so profound when written down: I am alive; I breathe; the world is alive; the world breathes; there are rhythms in everything; my body is part of these rhythms; I am alive in the same realm of experience as the sun. These are things that everyone can realize, and these are the things that I realized while hiking.

Despite its problematic normative and colonial baggage, thru-hiking has also led me to solidarity. The organization Queer Nature calls for “ecological solidarity,” which I think long-distance hikers are well-positioned to deeply understand and contribute to the world. Queer Nature writes:

In these times of rapid habitat and biodiversity loss, continued displacement of Indigenous peoples, and extreme political antagonism, it is clear to us that an even larger “ecological” notion of solidarity is called for that defies easy political categorization. We don't pretend to have ultimate answers about what that looks like, but we do believe that the more we discover about our ecosystems and our place within them, the more we can grow our definitions of solidarity, allyship, humanity, and animality, while also growing our inner resources for personal resiliency. (Queer Nature 2025)

It felt inexpressibly profound when, on the PCT, I recognized myself as a living creature alive in the world. My attunement to my breath and footsteps, and feeling of deep presence, was a striking contrast to my frequent disassociation and rumination. Feeling embodied connection to the sun, light, air, and sky forged in me what felt like an ecological notion of solidarity. I felt fully alive and awake within the world, and therefore more in relationship and solidarity with everyone else, human and more-than-human. We are all breathing within the same world, and therefore our struggles for freedom must be connected too. This includes Indigenous struggles for Land Back, which bring decolonial care to the land thru-hikers love so much.

A lot has changed since I hiked the PCT. In January 2025, eight catastrophic wildfires burned through Los Angeles and San Diego County. Tens of thousands of people were displaced, multimillionaires hired private firefighters to protect their Pacific Palisades mansions, and more widespread conversations were ignited regarding wildfires, climate change, inequality, and colonialism. In January and February 2025, the newly-elected Trump administration changed Indigenous place names in wilderness settings, fired 5,000 National Park Service employees and 3,400 Forest Service employees (10% of their workforce), and announced plans to open up public lands for oil drilling. The executive order “Unleashing American Energy” requires a

review of public federal lands across the U.S. to assess their suitability for “energy exploration and production”; the aim is to sell off areas to private energy corporations (Jackson 2025). The executive order “Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production” expands access to national forests for reckless logging, masquerading a massive expansion in timber production as a wildfire solution (Rose 2025).

These recent developments have driven PCT hikers and outdoor enthusiasts, who have long talked about “wilderness” areas as apolitical, to now speak about them in overtly political terms. Many hiking social media influencers are trying their first hand at activism, sharing petitions from the National Parks Conservation Association (<https://rb.gy/oj0fcv>) and the Outdoor Alliance (<https://action.outdooralliance.org/a/agency-staffing>). On March 1, 2025, 433 protests took place across 433 park sites to resist staffing cuts and resource extraction on public land. Protesters and park rangers flew upside-down American flags, representing the idea that undermining national parks is quintessentially un-American. PCT hikers point out that staffing and funding cuts on public lands will impact long-distance trails like the PCT directly. With reduced park staff, the PCT will become more dangerous, with fewer people working on trail maintenance and wilderness emergency response. Wildland firefighting will also be jeopardized, with fewer personnel in remote areas to monitor and put out fires, and fewer workers to implement controlled burn programs (including those in partnership with Tribal Nations), vegetation management, and public outreach about fire safety. In the long term, privatizing public lands for drilling is not only extreme violence against the land, but may result in the Pacific Crest Trail, as a publicly accessible continuous footpath, to cease to exist (Jackson 2025). Widespread public outcry has had some impact on policy. The Trump administration announced that, in 2025, it would not hire the usual 8,000 seasonal workers who supplement full-time park

staff in the summer months. Following protests, however, it was announced that the seasonal employment program would continue, although thousands of illegally-terminated Park Service employees continue to be out of work.

World-ending catastrophe may be opportunity for new ecological solidarities and possibilities. In the impassioned outrage of hikers and outdoors organizations against the privatization of public land lie assertions that land is not a commodity that can be bought and sold. The environment never has been and never will be a set of resources that exist to fuel human consumption and endless capitalist greed. “This is our land!” the petitions and Instagram posts shout, “fossil fuel companies can’t have it!” Who is the “our” that these pleas refer to? Land Back is not mentioned, although Indigenous people know all too well how it feels to be removed from land. Stealing land to satiate greed is not a new phenomenon in the United States. In resisting privatization, the institution of public land is upheld as the ultimate democratizing good – National Parks are spoken of as “America’s best idea,” which is now under threat. How might recent catastrophe find solidarity with ongoing catastrophes, which Native communities have been experiencing on this land for hundreds of years of colonization? How might hikers’ newly-realized outrage against American capitalist greed be translated into allyship? Sharing petitions, writing to representatives, spreading the word: these are things that hikers say we must do to “protect” the land we love. Beyond these actions, what forms can decolonial protection, or care for land, take?

I have offered glimpses of healing and regenerative imagining, for people and land, on the Pacific Crest Trail. Fruitful imaginings include embodied and emotional connections with the more-than-human world, collective healing of people and land, and decolonialization and support for Land Back. Although colonial and normative understandings limit hikers’

experiences of expansive healing and transformation, the PCT is still a place where new worlds are dreamed and walked into existence. This research joins interdisciplinary conversations about the Anthropocene, more-than-human entanglements, and healing. Moreover, through these pages I imagine paths towards more ethical, decolonial hiking and living in allyship and solidarity with Indigenous communities on Turtle Island and beyond. Like many stories, this research does not arrive at one fixed and final destination. Hikers finish the Pacific Crest Trail, but their lives continue, and they carry lessons from the trail with them on new meandering life paths. This research, too, creates possibilities for branching unexplored paths of further inquiry. With hiking tourism becoming increasingly international, what forms do global hiking ethics, and understandings of the natural world, take? How are these shaped not only by settler colonialism, but global imperialism? What forms can decolonial ecofeminist environmental ethics take? How can we reimagine ecological care and relationship?

I end with one final story. The forest was deep and lush. Towering ponderosas and lodgepole pines allowed only infrequent shafts of sunlight to slant down between their closely entangled limbs. Hard-packed snowdrifts stayed resolutely unmelting, icy on the slanting mountain slopes. The ground was a briar of thick shrubbery poking through the snow, scratchy bearberry bushes growing closely around the trail. There had been a storm here, and every ten meters I had to clamber over and around trees that had fallen across the path. I scraped my knees on the rough bark, only to skid across hard-packed snow on the other side. To make matters worse, I kept getting lost. With the trail covered in bushes, snow, and fallen trees, I frequently veered off onto side-paths made by animals, either thinking they were the PCT, or finding them useful routes for navigating around the trunks of large fallen trees. At some points I gave up on trails altogether, struggling through the underbrush up and down slopes, moving in the general

direction of my destination and finding paths of least resistance. I occasionally stumbled across a stretch of trail free from snow, overgrowth, or tree trucks. To walk along freely, unencumbered, felt like a small blessing.

Experiences like this one make it abundantly clear that the PCT was constructed by humans. When the trail disappears, it is much more difficult to navigate through the forest. Hikers accumulate scars, and trekking poles break after being driven hard into the ground to stop a fall. Humans in the forest are humbled as they watch their daily companions – deer, mountain goats, chipmunks – navigate the treacherous terrain with apparent ease. Animals use the trail too, but only sometimes, when it leads to places they want to go. Anna Tsing writes that when she hikes with a walking stick, she is “an encounter in motion. Woman and stick” (Tsing 2015, 29). Individualism on the Pacific Crest Trail makes no sense. It is all encounters in motion. Walking on a trail, I have indirect encounters with the Indigenous people who created that trail as a site of connection and who have been using it for ten thousand years. I encounter U.S.-government employed trail maintenance crews who work to clear fallen debris and create a smooth path. I encounter the animals who share the trail with me, whose gracefulness makes me laugh at my own ungainly stumbling. I am never one person, but a collaboration between human, backpack, hiking shoes, trekking poles, and tent. I am reliant on these technologies, on alpine streams and my water filtration system, and on the sun and air. With every footstep, I create the Pacific Crest Trail. It begins to fade away, but I leave my footprints, remaking it. Me, my trail family, and the wider PCT community are an encounter in motion: we navigate each other around obstacles and apply antibiotic ointment to each other’s worst scratches, mutually shaping the ways we all move through the woods. We imagine regenerative worlds collaboratively: with each other, with lichen, with black bears, with pine trees, and with mountains.

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