

Essay Question 1

In comparing William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* and Susan Hill's *The Clay We Are Made Of*, how can we assess the accuracy and reliability of these two very different historical accounts? Is one more "true" than the other? On what do you base your assessment? Please provide evidence from lectures, readings, discussion sections, and/or primary source documents, etc., to support your arguments.

“I take infinite pains to know all the phenomena of the spring... thinking that I have here the entire poem, and then, to my chagrin, I hear that it is but an imperfect copy that I possess and have read.”

~ Thoreau, *Journal 1856* in *Changes*, p. 15

“Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of ever learning much, yet with the longing, unresting effort that lies at the door of hope, humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power, and eager to offer self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript.”

~ Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, 1911 (1869), p. 8

If history is about telling stories, it is about telling them from particular points of view. To gain access to the “truth” of history, is to come into contact with different criteria for determining the “accuracy” and “reliability” of the historical account. Muir quite literally brought a “world-view” with himself to and of the Yosemite Valley, just as Thoreau did to and from Walden Pond. This fundamental truth is essential to contemplate when we consider whether and how an historical account should merit our trust. Like Muir’s profound analogical reflections on Shepherd Billy’s trousers in *My First Summer in the Sierra*, the historian, too, enters a “microcosm” — layers and fragmentary specimens — to sift through and make sense of their historical worlds — both human and nonhuman subjects. What is more, they, like Billy, bring *themselves* and their own world-view “trousers” to their historical accounts. Like the diverse materials adhering to Billy’s trousers, the evidence is both “thin” and “thick”: rendered “thin” by the givenness of its limitation and yet “thick” with unique epistemological possibility and veracity.

In both *Changes in the Land* and *The Clay We Are Made Of*, historians like Cronon and Hill admit to offering something “thin,” because, like Muir, they realize they can offer “little... beyond mere outlines — marks with meanings like words.” Yet, Cronon and Hill amass textual, artifactual, oral-traditional, even scientific evidence to offer *a view* of history that gives us *some* “thick” access to each’s respective places and peoples. As such, both accounts are “accurate” and “reliable” attempts to begin to see or access the “truth” of history through others’ (and their own)

eyes. They are *different* histories, yet they are both *humble* histories that give us access through many “doors of *hope*” — to know something of the truth of world.

To recognize one’s inability to gain total and complete access to the “truth” of history is to tempt despair for the historian. If, in Muir’s words, one were to attempt writing a history with “*definite* hope” of learning the *complete* story, one would rightly despair. Yet, if the historian can “settle down” into “dumb admiration” and “humbly prostrate oneself” before the “manuscript” of the world before us, we can be *liberated* to *hope* that we shall at least not remain altogether silent in the face of, to recollect Cronon’s words, the seeming *infinitude* of history before us. If we can hold these in tension, we have begun to “right size” ourselves for the task before us.

Cronon and Hill’s accounts rely on evidence that provide material for the historical imagination, even if it is limited. Yet, despite the limitations, the material invites us to consider different *ways* or *modes* of knowing (and crafting) history, and therefore, in some real way, offer us many infinite “doors of hope” for learning something true and meaningful of the world under their consideration. In Cronon’s *Changes*, he tells his story of environmental change in New England through the eyes of many — records of travels and naturalists, Euro- and Native Americans, government reports, artifacts, and even modern ecological literature and science. Each of these “doors” give the reader greater access to the truth of history.

Cronon admits to both his own limitations, and those through whose experience he is attempting to reconstruct a story of the New England land. For example, however much we give “authority” or “reliability” to such sources, Thoreau’s eyes are not enough — nor are the eyes of Puritan ministers and statesmen or even Native American hunters. Thoreau’s vision shaped the conception of “nature” through the eyes of a *19th century Romantic’s* heart, not a 17th century Puritan or a 19th century Penobscot person’s. Thoreau’s “door of hope” was to access *sublime* “nature,” yet he mourned the inaccessibility of this due to the destruction of an environment that he had *already idealized* and brought with him to Walden Pond. For him, the “wilderness” at Walden was in some way inaccessible because he felt it was taken from him by his ancestors. Inasmuch as Thoreau wanted to immerse himself *in* “nature,” it was his culturally-shaped view of nature, and he still saw *something* of a separation of the human self from that “nature.” This colored his vision as did, for example, Puritan conceptions of land having been “subdued” by God for them, or even that it is “property” whose resources eventually were commodified for a Euro-American trade economy. Like Billy’s trousers, so were colonial fences and economic concepts: they bounded the world differently and therefore made access to the “truth” of the world relative and nonetheless meaningful.

Hill’s account, much narrower in focus than Cronon’s, attempts to look at the world through the eyes of the Haudenosaunee people: through their oral and written traditions. Like Cronon, Hill admits to the limitations and even *dangers* of her enterprise — to “segment or compartmentalize” is to miss something of the *whole* of Haudenosaunee knowledge. Humbly, she admits that even access to this is difficult, as the “words” she looks to have taken on Billy’s trouser-like accretions through their preservation in English and French ethnographic records. They are “limited representations of the *original*” (16). Hill, perhaps, could despair of accessing some reliable telling of the truth, yet the historian’s “nevertheless” is a “door of hope” that spurs her on to tell a story. Like Cronon — who cautions his readers not to try and gain access to Thoreau’s “poem” or, by extension, Muir’s “divine manuscript” (15) — Hill recognizes that an

“original” is not fully or “purely” accessible. She admits that some of her evidential accounts may *seem* as “deviation(s) from the *original* philosophy about land”, but that they are really a “reaction to a new reality” and that they reify the essence of the “Original Instructions” (47). In Cronon’s words, old and new realities are too “entangled” (15).

Perhaps Cronon, Hill, and all who attempt to write environmental history are not unlike Muir who “long[ed]” with “unresting effort” and “humble prostration” before the “divine manuscript” of the Yosemite valley, or like Thoreau who strove with “infinite pains” to know the “phenomena of spring” and the “poem” of the natural world. Yet, for both Cronon and Hill, their historical accounts are — self-admittedly, *imperfect, limited attempts* to construct an historical vision with humans and nonhumans, including themselves — a *part of* that history. In his other writings, Muir imaginatively offers us a picture of the world as a *palimpsest* whose story is told “line upon line.” The historian’s task, it could be said, is to examine the world-manuscript, and offer back to its human searchers some humble rendering, some hopeful interpretation of its remnant, layered, and even lost words.