

*Reading the Book of Nature: Intersections of US American Nature Writing and Reformed Theologies*

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Reformed thinking accentuates that Christian life should happen outside of church walls out in the world, even out in the wilderness. John Calvin, one of the key figures of the Reformed or Calvinist tradition, described the whole of creation (not just the life of the church) as the “theater of God’s glory.” He taught that the divine can and should be found in nature and that the whole of creation should be shaped towards justice. From then on, US American thinkers like Jonathan Edwards and Marilynne Robinson developed this idea further and thereby invoked the old idea of the “book of nature,” according to which nature can be read like a book next to Scripture.

However, the history of the Reformed church (precisely because of its world-centeredness) actively contributed to the history of colonialism and massive extraction of the earth. The (religious) history of today’s United States of America with its genocidal violence against Indigenous peoples, transatlantic enslavement, and massive deforestation is a case in point.

In my project, however, I want to join those who tell a more complex story of the Reformed tradition and its relation to the more-than-human world. While Reformed thinking is tied to ongoing histories of domination, it also contributed to both a heightened sensitivity to the natural world and addressing issues of social justice.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the impact of Reformed thinking on the literary genre of nature writing. For example, in the writings of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Lauret Savoy, and J. Drew Lanham, the natural world becomes central for reflection about existence and justice. Nature writing thus resonates—sometimes explicitly, often implicitly—with the Reformed tradition of both meditating nature and working for a more just world.

Surprisingly, Reformed theology has rarely dealt with nature writing and the impact it had on this influential literary genre. Conversely, research on nature writing has given little attention to the “Reformed backgrounds” of nature writing. My project understands itself as a contribution to closing this research gap.