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**Re-storying wilderness and adventure therapies: healing places and selves in an era of environmental crises**

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## **Re-storying wilderness and adventure therapies: healing places and selves in an era of environmental crises**

### **1. Introduction**

Once upon a time, people believed that by acquiring and analysing data about the ecology, biology, geology, physics and chemistry of environmental problems and then passing relevant findings on to policy-makers, these issues would get resolved. However, today we find ourselves in a position where a great deal is known about the science of such potentially catastrophic problems as climate change and yet relatively little is being done. The environmental crises we are currently facing are not simply crises of science and technology, they are rooted in the human condition and as such are also crises of meaning. In order for us as individuals, as societies, and as a species to make the changes that we need to make focus must move beyond the science to look as well at how cultural and psychological contributing causes might best be addressed.

As disciplines concerned with meaning-making (Handley 1989), and as practices that often incorporate interactions in and with "natural" places (Beringer 2004), adventure and wilderness therapies<sup>i</sup> (as well as certain practices of outdoor education) have much to offer in helping people and societies transform and transcend these crises. At the same time, there is a growing body of research, including but not limited to ecopsychology, that indicates exposure to landscapes that are minimally dominated by human activities and artifacts can be healing (Beringer and Martin 2003).

The potential for outdoor practices, including adventure therapy, to contribute to social change in relation to the environment has not gone unremarked. As far back as 1991, Cooper outlined both the opportunities presented by field centres and criticized outdoor and adventure educators for not doing enough to help change students' attitudes towards the environment. In more recent years, his call has been echoed in the allied fields of adventure sport and leisure (Humberstone 1998), outdoor education (Higgins 1996, Loynes 2002, Lugg 2007, Beames 2008), psychology (Stokol et al. 2009), and adventure and wilderness therapies (Beringer and Martin 2003). And these calls are being heeded. Many adventure programs have incorporated the development of people's care for the environment into their goals (Outward Bound Trust 2009, McKenzie and Bleckinsop 2006). At the same time, environmental organizations, which have traditionally concentrated their resources on conservation and lobbying, have begun to turn their attention to effecting change at the level of individual psychology. In their efforts to inspire and motivate people, some of these groups have drawn on practices from outdoor education and adventure and wilderness therapies<sup>ii</sup>.

It is only through such interdisciplinary efforts that we have a chance of affecting the sorts of changes that environmental sustainability requires. However, in this paper I want to sound a note of caution. Through critically examining the language and practices of adventure and wilderness therapies it is possible to see that these fields share many of the same historical and cultural roots as those dominant societal discourses (such as those which separate culture from nature and which reduce all that is not human-made to the category of resource) that have led to the environmental crises we face today. Rather than reifying these old stories, what the world needs now are new stories about selves, about places, and about relationships between people and the more-than-human world. Adventure and wilderness therapies are well placed to help excavate and amplify such stories.

This paper begins by examining the therapeutic work of adventure therapy through the lens of narrative counselling and the concept of the narrative-self. The terms *wilderness* and *adventure* are unpacked and attention is drawn to the risks of working uncritically with these concepts. Illustrations of alternative understandings of people in relationship to the more-than-human world are offered. In keeping with the principles of narrative therapy (White and Epston 1990), rather than providing definitive answers, which risk foreclosing on alternative storylines, this paper seeks instead to open up new possibilities for being and acting within the field of wilderness and adventure therapies and within Western societies more broadly.

## **2. Re-storying people's lives through adventurous experiences in the wilderness**

Russell (1999), in her study of tourists watching whales, observed that simply putting people in natural places and enabling them to interact with non-human others is not enough to make them care for the environment or for wildlife. In their later meta-analysis, covering a wide-range of international research on outdoor learning, Rickinson et al. (2004) similarly concluded that, "[t]here seems to be a strong case for questioning the notion that nature experience automatically contributes to environmental awareness, commitment and action" (6). Their conclusion was specifically derived from only finding weak links between outdoor *adventure* activities and the development of environmental values and awareness.

Russell (1999) hypothesised that what was missing from analyses of relationships between experiences in nature and environmental values was the concept of stories. This paper takes her intuition further, proposing, through the concept of the "narrative self", that story is what links experience, identity and ethics. People give meaning and value to their lives, to their selves, to the places where they dwell, and ultimately to the choices that they make, through stories. One of the limitations of wilderness and adventure therapies in relation to instilling environmental values lies in some of the stories that are often unwittingly invoked. All practitioners need to ask themselves whether the stories they are drawing on and working with open up useful possibilities for selves and societies in an era of environmental crisis or merely propagate and reify ways of thinking and living that will contribute to further declines in the health of our shared ecosystems.

Over the last two decades, the concept of the "narrative self" has been gaining ground in psychology (Gergen and Gergen 1988, Bruner 1990 and 1996), sociology (Somers 1994, Maines 1993, Gubrium and Holstein 1999, Frank 2004), education (Clandinin and Connolly 2000), bioethics (Brody 2002), environmental ethics (Willis 2009 and forthcoming), philosophy (Nelson 2001), counselling (White and Epston 1990, Speedy 2008, McLeod 1997), and even in adventure therapy (Stolz 2009). In brief, the concept of the narrative self proposes that on a very fundamental level people understand their experiences, give meaning to their lives, make decisions about what to do and come to identify their very selves with the stories they and others tell about who they are. One of the most appealing aspects of this concept is that it allows for a certain degree of agency, while at the same time conceiving of individuals as fundamentally embedded in relationship and in social context. People always tell stories about their selves to an audience, even if that audience is only imaginary (embedded in relationship) and in order to render their storied-selves intelligible, people must draw on narrative resources that circulate more broadly within society (embedded in a social context).

Because the stories people tell concern their experiences, changes can be facilitated both by assisting people in finding new plotlines and by enabling people to have novel experiences. Counselling and psychotherapy can be understood as particular practices of meaning-making to which people turn when they need assistance in re-storying their lives (White and Epston 1990). While counselling and therapy in general accord primacy to the relationship between practitioner and client (audience and teller) as a medium for reflecting on experience, wilderness and adventure therapies go further, providing opportunities for people to have new experiences: to learn new, neglected or forgotten skills, to work within an inter-subjective group context, and to forge relationships with earth others--by which I mean beings profoundly other than human--in places more clearly marked by geological, biological and ecological processes than the urban locales where most people dwell. At their best, therefore, wilderness and adventure therapies intervene in people's lives through providing unique experiences that challenge the limiting stories they may hold about who they are and how they ought to live. However, the experiences wilderness and adventure therapies facilitate can only be transformative to the extent that people use them to create new stories. Evidence indicates that if experiences are not incorporated into stories, they are quickly forgotten (Bruner 1996).

Because individual lives and individual self-stories are so deeply embedded within relationships and cultures, when individual lives change, societies change.<sup>iii</sup> It is this possibility for social change through helping individuals that is the central hope of this paper. Many of the stories that bring people to therapy, stories that they have found to be limiting, are part of broader discourses that dominate societies as a whole (Nelson 2001). In so far as they enable individuals to challenge such dominant narratives, wilderness and adventure therapies may help to bring about social change. However, if wilderness and adventure therapists are not critically attentive to the stories that their language use and practices invoke, they may instead end up reproducing and reinforcing the very narratives that have generated the crises we face today.

To illuminate how wilderness and adventure therapies might unwittingly reproduce and reinforce dominant and ultimately damaging narratives, the following two sections of this paper examine some of the language and cultural geography that they often invoke. Specifically, the terms *wilderness* and *adventure* are critically unpacked, demonstrating that they are associated with very specific cultural stories and that they carry very specific concepts about places. These terms, therefore, support certain plotlines while silencing others. In this critical examination, I echo the perspective of Michael White and David Epston (1990) who advocate that the first and most crucial thing any therapist needs to do in order to contribute to social change is to ensure that his or her own practices do not inadvertently reinforce those narratives that limit people's options for meaning-making and, therefore, for living and acting in the world.

### **3. Troubling *wilderness***

If experiences outdoors are going to usefully contribute to social change in relation to environmental sustainability, then it matters which stories are told about the places where those experiences happen (Stewart 2008). In their critical history of the development of modern "nature-based" adventure sport in the U.K. and Norway, Humberstone and Pedersen (2001) point out that "[h]ow 'nature' and a specific place, a landscape or 'natural' spaces/environments are conceptualised, is...always historically and socially constructed" (22). Following on from their work, this section of the paper

briefly examines the construction of a particular category of place, "wilderness", which is often implicitly or explicitly referred to in adventure therapy literatures.

The term "wilderness" is popularly understood to refer to environments minimally modified by human activity. However, truly pristine landscapes untouched by human activities do not exist anywhere on Earth today. Air and water currents have spread toxic pollutants throughout the world, anthropogenically induced climate change affects every square inch of the globe, and most of the places that have been designated by Western societies as wilderness have been traversed by, used by and often inhabited by people for hundreds if not thousands of years. "Wilderness" is not a clearly definable geographical category, but rather a concept.

The current usage of the term "wilderness" can be traced to a very particular context: that of the rise of industrialization. Prior to this period, the label "wilderness" was the equivalent of "wastelands" and "worthless" (Cronon 1995). With industrialisation, the term came to be constructed as other to urban, while cities came to be constructed as other to wilderness.<sup>iv</sup> The two concepts are opposite sides of the same modernist dualism (Plumwood 1993). As a concept, therefore, wilderness is dependent for its construction on ideas of civilization in its industrial, urbanized form. Consequently, in order to change stories about civilization and its relationship to the more-than-human world we must also change stories about wilderness.

In his critical history of "wilderness", primarily in the context of the U.S.A., William Cronon (1995) draws attention to the role played by the Romantic movements of the eighteenth century. Through such words as the poems of William Wordsworth, the philosophizing of Immanuel Kant, and the prose of Henry David Thoreau, wilderness was rediscovered as the place of the "sublime". That is, certain landscapes came to be valued as holding the promise of revealing the face of God. The Romantics searched for the sublime "on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, [and] in the sunset" (Cronon 1995, p. 73), places that wilderness and adventure therapy programs often seek out.

Besides being sublime, wilderness also came to be understood as the other of civilization in more material form. This was reflected in the Romantic idea of primitivism from Jean-Jacques Rousseau onward, culminating in American myths of the frontier (Cronon 1995). Cronon argues that the national myth of the passing frontier led to the founding of national parks in the US: wilderness had to be preserved so that the nation's men (I will return to gender in due course) could retreat there and forge themselves anew. These places became the recreational destinations of choice for those who could afford it, marking the birth of wilderness as both boundable place and as commodity.

Cronon (1995) argues that the twin narratives of wilderness as sublime and of wilderness as frontier—narratives that are products of the urban-wilderness dualism—underpin contemporary environmentalism—and I would add wilderness and adventure therapies<sup>v</sup>. It is no coincidence that the predominant history of wilderness is also the predominant history of outdoor education (Higgins 2002) as well as nature-based sports and adventure recreation (Humberstone and Pedersen 2001).<sup>vi</sup> The following description of wilderness that Cronon (1995) ascribes to many contemporary environmentalists applies equally to much of wilderness and adventure therapy:

“[wilderness is] the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. ...Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it

is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are—or ought to be.” (80)

These are stirring words. Part of their power comes from how embedded these notions are in the narratives that circulate through Western society, narratives that we routinely draw on in giving meaning to our experiences and in storying our own lives. They resonate with us because wilderness has been produced by the same discourses that have produced our selves. But what is so problematic about this concept of wilderness?

If wilderness is where God is, then the rest of the world, those other places, the fallen ones, become nothing more than wastelands; God has turned his back on them, or been forced to leave. If wilderness is pristine, then the other places of this world are tainted. If wilderness is to be preserved then the rest of the world may be sacrificed. This is the trap of dualistic thinking, things are black or white, no room is left for mingling, for grays, and only one side can be the right side, the ascendant side, all the rest is thrown in the wastebasket of the Other.

This is not to deny that there are places where perhaps there has been less human impact on the landscape than elsewhere and which elicit strong reactions in people who encounter them. However, such encounters need to be understood as continuous with experiences in other places as Cameron (2003) writes:

“the capacity to be receptive to country and be moved out of habitual states may be easier to develop in wild places, but it can and must be brought to fruition in our everyday places. Otherwise, it becomes rather an elitist exercise, giving certain people a special experience in a special place that cannot be brought home.” (106)

To tie this back to therapeutic process, to the extent that the doctrine of wilderness stories our true selves as existing in wilderness places and not in urban ones, it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for participants to continue to perform the preferred selves they may have developed in therapeutic programs once they return home.<sup>vii</sup>

Moreover, the doctrine of wilderness as separate and special and located in specific places, allows for those places to be enrolled in the very ethos of consumption that is fuelling environmental crises. If wilderness is valuable and boundable, then monetary value can be extracted from it. A price can be put on it in terms of the costs and benefits of its preservation, the base it provides for tourist and leisure industries, and the impact on exchange-values for land, goods and services, *including therapy* (see also Loynes 2002), with which it is associated.

If wilderness and adventure therapies are going to play a role in helping individuals and societies move towards greater sustainability, they will need to ensure that the discourses they invoke and the practices they engage in do not reinforce those dominant cultural geographies that foreclose on stories of relationship, interpenetration and hybridity between humans and the rest of the more-than-human world, but instead open up new possibilities for being and acting.<sup>viii</sup>

#### **4. Troubling *adventure***

If there ever was a word that demanded a story, “adventure” is it. The word cannot be uttered without conjuring up a plotline, and more often than not that plotline takes people to the wilderness. Indeed, practitioners themselves have reflected that

wilderness and adventure therapies, particularly when structured around an expedition, seem particularly well suited to stories (Loynes 1999) and to storytelling (Gray and Stewart 2009). The critical question is, what stories are being propagated through these discourses and practices and what stories are being silenced?

Historically, Europeans went on adventures to discover and conquer other parts of the world, which were retrospectively constructed as pristine wilderness. These sets of stories about the places of adventure were exercises of power that denied the presence of and inhabitation by non-European peoples (Stewart 2008). Subsequently, Romantic artists, writers and poets, such as Wordsworth and Thoreau, also went on adventures into the wilderness, this time bringing back art and ideas. Cronon (1995) argues that although these two groups were motivated by different goals, they were both drawing on the same discourses which put culture over nature and which justify colonialism and the commodification of the more-than-human world. Today's dominant representations of adventure in the fields of wilderness and adventure therapies continue on from these historical roots (Humberstone and Pedersen 2001), emphasizing physical risk, uncertainty, remote locations and overcoming challenges posed by nature (Little 2002). They also generally involve masculine protagonists (Humberstone and Pedersen 2001 and Little 2002) and often draw on masculine military traditions (Loynes 2002).<sup>ix</sup>

In these dominant cultural understandings, adventures involve traveling across space and overcoming obstacles, and are usually undertaken by people who, while they might start out as ordinary, end up becoming heroes, at least of their own lives. It is a storyline whose mythical status has been famously outlined by Joseph Campbell as the Hero's Journey (1973 [1949]). In this "monomyth" an ordinary person receives an invitation to leave the everyday world and embark on a journey or quest. On this journey the hero-in-the-making meets and must overcome many trials. If he or she is successful, a boon of some sort is granted, often to do with self-awareness. If the hero manages to bring this boon back home, it may be bestowed on the society he or she came from and enrich or restore it in some way.

Joseph Campbell's impact on contemporary storytelling has been enormous. George Lucas famously used the Hero's Journey to structure his original Star Wars movie. Subsequently, Hollywood producer Christopher Vogler published a book (now in its third edition, 2007), which outlines the monomyth and advocates its use in movie-making and fiction writing. The Hero's Journey has also made its way into adventure therapy (Gray and Stuart 2009) adventure education (Loynes 1999) and adventure coaching (Gray 2004). Part of the popularity of the Hero's Journey is that it provides a template for a story that is already deeply embedded within the narratives that dominate Western societies, including wilderness and adventure therapies (see for example, Walsh and Golins 1976).<sup>x</sup>

At first glance, enabling disempowered people to have experiences that allow them to story their selves with heroic plotlines may appear to be a good thing. It might seem to equalize opportunities between genders, classes, races, ages etc., and it might seem to provide motivation to disaffected members of society. Mary Gergen's (1992) analysis of biographies of prominent Americans at first appears to support such a use of the Hero's Journey. Her research finds that men tend to structure their stories along the lines of the Hero's Journey, while women's biographies tend to emphasize relationship and connection and to be more diverse, more complex and less straightforward. She argues that part of the reason women are under-represented in positions of power is because of the gendering of the hero story. However, while Gergen acknowledges that enabling women to story themselves along the lines of the Hero's Journey may help give them access to positions of power, it does so at the cost of reinforcing the dominance of



the monomyth and of further marginalizing other stories of what it is to be human. Men also suffer by not being able to access plotlines about connection and relationship in storying their lives.<sup>xi</sup>

From a narrative therapy perspective, what is particularly troubling about the Hero's Journey is its "mono" moniker. In its aspiration to be the one true pathway of human development, it reduces people's options for being and living. The introduction of the Hero's Journey to adventure therapy participants is useful when it provides them with a *new* option in storying their lives and thereby opens up a *new* possibility for being and acting in the world. However, it becomes problematic to the extent that its use becomes dogmatic, dominant, and reduces the range of plotlines available for people to use in giving meaning to their experiences and to their lives.

From the perspective of environmental issues, the Hero's Journey is problematic for other reasons. The Hero's Journey emphasises movement across space and separation from home and from others as necessary and desirable. In this monomyth, in order for a hero to make a journey, wilderness must be clearly separate from and at a distance from home. It therefore reifies the dualism created between urban industrial society and wilderness. It also reifies a worldview in which the more-than-human world (including other people) may be judged according to whether they help or hinder the achievement of personal, individualized goals.

As evidenced by the current crises, the exploitation of people and earth others in the pursuit of personal goals does not necessarily bring about happy endings for all. For just these reasons, author and literary critic Ursula K. LeGuin has re-named the hero story the "killer story" writing,

"It is the story that hid my humanity from me, the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero... The killer story. It sometimes seems that that story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished." (LeGuin 1989: 168).

In such hero stories the hero requires an other to be superior to, whether that be woman or nature. In Caroline Merchant's (1980) classic work, *The Death of Nature*, she traces the links made between women and nature throughout history<sup>xii</sup>. In this history men are the heroes, they are the explorers, the scientists and the adventurers who manage through cunning, through violence and through leaving home, to cajole, seduce and sometimes even rape nature, forcing her to give up her secrets and treasures. This is the old story of man versus nature and ultimately of man as superior to nature (Plumwood 1993). It is also the story of the objectification of nature, which brings us back to the currently dominant story of the commodification of the more-than-human world and the reduction of earth others and places to resources and to their value in terms of monetary exchange. As Humberstone and Pederson (2001) demonstrate, this gendered story of man overcoming nature, and later of man exploiting the resources of nature, runs through the history of outdoor education and adventure sports as well.

While the Hero's Journey is a story of obstacles overcome, as Gergen (1992) demonstrates, alternative and equally compelling stories may be constructed around individuals' desires and struggles to connect with and relate to others (see also Burroway 2000). Boniface (2006), in her study of gender in relation to adventurous activities, found that women tend to emphasise relationships rather than separation or accomplishments in the stories they tell about their adventures. More broadly, research

into wilderness and adventure therapies has shown that for many participants it is not risky activities or physical achievements—activities that might be associated with adventure narratives—that they perceived to be most beneficial, but rather the relationships they formed with other participants, with facilitators, with landscapes and with earth others (Berman and Berman 2008).<sup>xiii</sup> Indeed, this central role of relationship may be a crucial aspect of wilderness and adventure therapies' affinity with other kinds of therapies.

The Hero's Journey requires an elsewhere to journey to. Being at a distance from home and being associated with nature and the feminine, wilderness is that place of the other and, therefore, the place of adventure. It is no coincidence that wilderness and adventure therapies are often elided: in the logic of dominant narratives we cannot have one without the other. In this way, wilderness and adventure therapies are incorporated into dominant narratives of wilderness as separate and opposite to cities, of landscapes and earth others as resources and commodities, and of healthy self-stories as involving gendered adventures of physical journeying in which ties are severed, obstacles are overcome and opponents (including nature) are defeated. If wilderness and adventure therapies wish merely to aid the status quo by disciplining disruptive bodies into docile, well-behaved citizen-consumers, then this argument need go no further.<sup>xiv</sup> However, if these therapies wish to contribute to the re-storying of societies in relation to the more-than-human world, then more work needs to be done.

While the Hero's Journey dominates Western stories about adventure, it is not the only plotline that people use. Participants in adventurous activities, particularly women, are often already actively engaged in contesting dominant narratives about what adventure is, where it happens and who might undertake it (Little 2002). In the final sections, I offer further inspiration for opening up a range of plotlines for re-storying lives in relation to place, in relation to adventure, in relation to therapy and in relation to the more-than-human world.

## 5. Excavating, amplifying and mobilising alternative narratives

Thus far, this paper has focused on unraveling old stories in order to examine the historical and discursive roots that wilderness and adventure therapies inadvertently draw on. This is in keeping with one of narrative therapy's most important tenets: that therapists must "be constantly vigilant in their ongoing critical examination of their practices" so that they do not end up reproducing those same universalizing discourses that dominate modern societies and their citizens (White and Epston 1990, p. 29). However, critical examination alone cannot point us towards the sorts of alternative plotlines that would reconnect us to the rest of the more-than-human world and help us transition to more environmentally sustainable ways of living. Attention must also be paid to excavating, amplifying and mobilising alternative "life stories".

The plural on "stories" is crucial here. Given White and Epston's warning about unitary universalizing discourses, and the dangers associated with the currently favoured monomyth of the Hero's Journey, we must beware of replacing one "correct" story with another. Rather than reductively analysing narratives to find key elements for a monomythic Life Story, we should instead seek out the moral impulses in a diversity of stories (Frank 2002) and through openness and resonance, thicken our understandings (White 2000) of how to relate to the more-than-human world. These two contrasting orientations of reductive analysis and thickening are often portrayed in terms of thinking *about* stories versus thinking *with* them (Frank 2004).

Narrative therapy--with its focus on deconstructing, co-creating and thickening people's self-stories--offers useful insights for those wilderness and adventure therapists concerned with reconnecting people with the more-than-human world. In narrative therapy, the first task of the therapist is to help their client separate their sense of self from the problematic dominant narratives that are told about who they are, and to show them that there are other possible stories to tell. This is done through helping them to identify "sparkling moments" that contradict limiting stories and point towards new ones (White 2000). Because wilderness and adventure therapies provide clients with new experiences, thought should be given to creating opportunities that increase the chances that clients will experience "sparkling moments" of reconnection, care and relationship with the-more-than-human world. These opportunities might be facilitated in a range of places from the wild to the urban in order to challenge those dualistic stories that separate culture from nature.

However, "sparkling moments" on their own will not be enough to facilitate change. Attention must also be given to helping people integrate these experiences into new stories. Examples of themes for such stories include the comedic (Griffiths 2008, Hickory 2003), focussing on relationships with earth others (Bleckinsop 2005, Willis forthcoming), stressing the feelings of being for another (Jones 2000), or even caring for those elements of the more-than-human world that provide challenges (Warren 1990).

People do not tell stories in a vacuum. They learn what types of plots can be told in particular contexts by being exposed to other stories (Bruner 1990, Nelson 2001). The plotlines available in any culture or institutional context can be understood as *narrative resources*. Diversity is as useful in storytelling as it is in ecosystems and the Hero's Journey is just one possible narrative resource, there are many other resources that programme leaders and clients can draw on. There are other traditions within folklore that emphasise relationship. These are often associated with indigenous traditions in specific places (Cameron 2003; Stewart 2008; Hickory 2003).<sup>xv</sup> Programme leaders can also cue participants as to what constitutes an intelligible story through the ways in which they story their own experiences. It is therefore critical that leaders cultivate their own self-stories in ways that are compatible with an ethic of reconnection and care in relation to the more-than-human world. One easily accessible way leaders might begin to do this is to explore their lives and experiences *with* the published life stories of those who have already come to provisional answers to the question: how ought I to live in relation to the more-than-human world (Willis in press).<sup>xvi</sup>

Since the early 1980s, there has been a noticeable re-focusing in the way many published writers story their selves in relation to nature (Sauer 1989). As Shauffler (2003) explains, this new type of writing is profoundly relational:

“Because nature writers have traditionally focused primarily on the external environment, those who describe the dynamic interplay between inner and outer ecology are more accurately termed *ecological writers*, which suggests an integration of human and natural realms and helps dissolve the traditional divide between them...The reflective personal accounts of ecological writers can best be seen as a form of natural autobiography, a memoir of their evolving relation to the more-than-human world” (11-13).

This new "ecological writing" (Shauffler 2003) provides a useful narrative resource to the rewriting of selves in relationship to the-more-than-human world. Such writing fundamentally challenges dominant narratives about the separation of culture and

nature, urban and wilderness, and self and earth other. Ecological memoirs offer alternative plotlines by which to re-story the selves of wilderness and adventure therapy leaders and participants.

In the last section of this paper, I offer brief summaries of two memoirs in which authors tell stories of healing their selves through healing their relationships with the more-than-human world (see also Willis 2009). Following practices of narrative therapy (Polkinghorne 2001), as you read these and other stories of being in relationship with the more-than-human world I invite you to ask yourself the following questions:

1. What captures my attention and imagination?
2. To which areas of my life, identity, relationships and practice as a wilderness and adventure therapist do these captivating elements relate?
3. Are there any experiences in my past that resonate with these elements?
4. What new possibilities for being, relating and acting in my life and in my practice of wilderness and adventure therapy are opened up through engaging with these stories?

## **6. Thinking with memoirs about healing in place**

The two memoirs I have chosen to introduce concern people in crisis who achieve some degree of healing through their interactions with specific places and with the earth others whom they encounter there. Their personal narratives challenge both dualistic representations of culture as separate from and ascendant over nature and the cultural geography that results.

### **6.1 The Hopes of Snakes, Lisa Couturier (2005)**

Lisa Couturier's collection of autobiographical essays is largely set in New York City. In her opening chapter, she writes that she moved to Manhattan to become a magazine writer, believing that in doing so she would have to sacrifice her connections with the more-than-human world, connections central to her identity. Though she chose this move, she still enters into a personal crisis that can only be resolved through challenging the story of Manhattan as a place bereft of earth others. Of this crisis and its resolution she says: "For someone like me who has desired little except a closeness to animals, and who craved this so strongly that without them I often felt fractured and lost, then the creatures of New York City, once discovered, became healers in a way" (xii).

In her essays, Lisa journeys into the parks and wastelands of the cities where she finds herself living. In one essay she writes about watching a gull chick hatch on a heavily polluted tidal strait that separates Staten Island, New York, from New Jersey. The nest is surrounded by old tires, plastic dolls' heads and pools of iridescent, oily water, and yet here she experiences something akin to the Romantics' sublime. She writes,

"I realize that after traveling through the Arthur Kill for two summers, I have given up trying to hate it. It both stuns and offends me. I cannot describe the chick's place of birth as ugly or beautiful: such labels seem too simple. I walk away from the chick knowing only that I feel deeply for this wasteland, where through the births of birds I've witnessed a kind of magic" (7).

In order for Lisa to develop a satisfying story for her self, she seeks out experiences that provide her with the connections to earth others that she craves. In

turn, these experiences lead her to challenge dominant discourses about the landscapes she inhabits and the stories she tells about her self in a way she finds healing.

## 6.2 The Cincinnati Arch, John Tallmadge (2004)

In his memoir, John Tallmadge also writes about moving to a city. John was living in a small town where he taught environmental studies and took students on trips into the wilderness, when he suddenly found himself out of work with his first child on its way. Out of necessity, he took an administrative job in downtown Cincinnati. Like Lisa, he arrived in the city believing that as a city dweller he would no longer be able to live out his preferred storyline of being connected with the natural world. This belief depressed him. However, through a series of "sparkling moments" ranging from watching his partner give birth to noticing a weed growing through a crack in the pavement, he comes to realize that he can hold onto the story he prefers by rejecting dominant narratives that separate wilderness from urban areas and nature from humans.

While John continues to spend the majority of his time in Cincinnati, he feels it is important for his wellbeing to periodically journey to landscapes that are less dominated by human activities than cities. However, he stories these journeys as continuous with his urban experiences. These pilgrimages to places that could be labeled as wilderness help John to stay awake to the presence of earth others in the city and help him to strengthen his vision of what Cincinnati could be like if "the wild" was allowed to further interpenetrate and co-exist with the urban. By understanding the urban and wilderness as interpenetrating, rather than separate, John is able to bring insights gleaned from time spent outside of cities back home to Cincinnati.

These memoirs provide a tiny sample of a growing genre of literature that offers counter-narratives to those that dominate our selves and our landscapes. Rather than story some places as pristine wilderness, untouched by human activities, the protagonists of these tales seek out hybrid places where humans and other elements of nature mix. Once there, they ask themselves how they might heal through healing those places and how they might heal those places through healing themselves<sup>xvii</sup>. These protagonists do not merely consume places, they help restore them. The best of such memoirs are also ecological in the sense of being explicitly located within physical, biological, social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Dixon 2002, Hogan 2001, Williams 2001 [1991], Grover 1997). These authors are as aware and reflexive of their position in society as they are of their place within ecosystems. As Cameron (2003) points out, in order for work on the scale of individuals to have broad implications within society, it is important to provide people with the means to contextualize their experiences both environmentally and socially. As narrative resources, thinking *with* ecological memoirs offers one creative starting point for rewriting wilderness and adventure therapies.

## Final thoughts

One of the many unfortunate consequences of our current stage of globalized industrial capitalism is the reduction of diversity in the places we dwell in and the stories we tell about who we are. While I have critically unpacked the notion of wilderness and highlighted the potential importance of urban places, I do support the conservation of places which may be out of the ordinary, particularly places in which hints of plotlines that exceed the span of individual human lives and societies may be read (Rolston 1998). In landscapes such as these, often but not always the ones

designated as “wilderness”, our chances of experiencing the otherness of other organisms, the sense that they neither need us nor exist for our purposes, may be enhanced. Also, in such landscapes our own sense of wellbeing may be improved through our experiences of connection with earth others (Buzell and Chalquist 2009). However, in order to avoid commodifying and exploiting these landscapes and the organisms that dwell there, the stories that are told about such experiences need to acknowledge that the territories of these earth others do not end at national park boundaries but interpenetrate our own homes. We must take responsibility for all the places that are impacted by our activities.

Instead of rehashing old stories of adventuresome men overcoming all the obstacles that nature puts in their way, new stories must be told, stories that challenge what adventure is and who heroes are, stories that open up possibilities for being and acting and that bring renewed meaning to people's lives and to the more-than-human world. As long as critical attention is paid to the way in which the experiences they facilitate are storied, wilderness and adventure therapists are well placed to contribute to improving both the wellbeing of their clients and the present and future wellbeing of earth others, the places they work in and the planetary eco-system as a whole.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> I acknowledge that the fields of adventure and wilderness therapies are diverse and occasionally contested, I also acknowledge that some outdoor education interventions, while not specifically therapeutic, may aim to effect changes in behaviours and values through adventurous and/or wilderness experiences. However, because of word limits and my interest in the concept of wilderness, I refer throughout to this paper only to adventure and wilderness therapies and I refer to them as a group.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example, the Scottish branch of the World Wildlife Fund's Natural Change program: [www.naturalchange.org.uk/research](http://www.naturalchange.org.uk/research).

<sup>iii</sup> Sociologists Gubrium and Holstein (1999), for example, trace the influence that informal storytelling in meetings of local chapters of a self-help organization for caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease has on the story that the national organization tells.

<sup>iv</sup> Given the interrelationship between the concept of nature and wilderness, it is not surprising that their modern usage shares a common history (see Humberstone and Pedersen 2001).

<sup>v</sup> For the purposes of this paper, my engagement with the literature concerning the social construction of "nature" is necessarily limited. However, those with an interest in

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this area might wish to consult Braun' (2001) book *Social Nature* or the work of Haraway on naturecultures (see for example Haraway 2003).

<sup>vi</sup> See Loynes (2002) for a review of some alternative historical influences upon these fields.

<sup>vii</sup> For an example of a programme that incorporates an "Urban Expedition" component see Norton (2010).

<sup>viii</sup> For an example of stories about relationship see Willis 2009. Hybridity and interpenetration between culture and nature are discussed academically by Latour (1993) and Haraway (1991, 2003).

<sup>ix</sup> Although there are a growing number of alternative representations of adventure being articulated (see for example Loynes 2002), it has been difficult to bring these into practice because of the continued dominance of those same destructive discourses that reduce everything to instrumental value and commodified relationship (Beames 2006).

<sup>x</sup> I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers for pointing this out to me.

<sup>xi</sup> Mary Gergen, along with Kenneth Gergen, was influential in introducing the concept of the narrative-self to psychology. Their 1988 paper is still widely cited today. Her 1992 solo-authored piece discusses the misgivings she began to have over this earlier work--work that attempted to define one overarching plot-line that all self-narratives ought to have. She finds in Joseph Campbell's monomyth the source of the overarching narrative she and her husband were trying to define and concludes that it is the "major manstory" (130) dominating western culture. Contrary to the goals of her previous collaborative work, in her 1992 paper Mary Gergen concludes that having only one plot to follow imprisons people and instead advocates for a diversity of plotlines, for playfulness, and for improvisation in the storying of lives.

<sup>xii</sup> For a more detailed discussion of gender and nature in relation to "nature-based" sports, including adventure-type activities, see Humberstone (1998).

<sup>xiii</sup> This is not to say that there is no perceived benefit from adventure activities. In her analysis of interview narratives Norton (2010) found that they did story "challenge and adventure" as important to their experience of the programme she studied. However, in her quantitative research she also found that "positive peer group interaction" was the most statistically significant component in helping the participants therapeutically. From the perspective of this paper it is also interesting to note that "connection with nature" was also highlighted as important in participant interviews.

<sup>xiv</sup> For a thought-provoking discussion of how the broader field of counselling and psychotherapy is implicated in serving the status quo and working against social change see Masson (1997).

<sup>xv</sup> In working with children in North America, Caduto and Bruchac's "Keepers" series of books, which link environmental lessons to traditional native tales, could be quite useful (see for example 1989).

<sup>xvi</sup> The approach of thinking *with* literature is already being used in the field of healthcare in an effort to bring an ethic of care, respect and generosity to relationships between healthcare providers and patients (Charon 2002 Frank 2004).

<sup>xvii</sup> For more on healing selves through healing places see Willis (2009).