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Student University Email: 1603777@student.uwtsd.ac.uk		
Module code: CSPH7068	Student ID number: 1603777	Educational support needs: Yes/ No
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What is the role of space and place in nature connection? An autoethnographic inquiry into the peculiarities of Wild Land Dreaming.

Andries Saerens

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University of Wales Trinity Saint David & Schumacher College

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Abstract

Contact and exposure to nature is generally accepted now as very beneficial for health and well-being. This dissertation investigates the role space and place play in a sense of nature connection. Inspired by Merrifield and Lefebvre's dialectical approach, we start with a critique on the general treatment of space and place as radically separated. Secondly, we take a closer look at the concept of 'nature connection', to reveal several problematic unquestioned assumptions. Later on, we use both critiques as a basis for an autoethnographic inquiry into the phenomenon of Wild Land Dreaming during wilderness fasts.

Although we have struggled to gather enough data on Wild Land Dreaming, we do report several extrovertive experiences and conclude that they are prime examples of 'nature connection' in which space and place are experienced at the same time. An expanded sensory awareness is primordial to understand how space and place are related during this kind of experiences. Moreover, extrovertive experiences show again how the concept of 'nature connection' is fundamentally flawed and provide an extra argument for our earlier critique.

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Many thanks go towards my supervisor Andy Letcher, for giving guidance and comments which were straight to the point. More than that, he also made me see that science can indeed be beautiful and insightful, and does not need to be reduced to the mere dry, quite boring stuff of the positive sciences. A freeing revelation, after having spent considerable amounts of time and effort in the study and research of bioscience engineering.

A great thank you as well to my parents, who made it possible I could study this MA. Without their support I would not have met the incredible people at Schumacher College and I would not have been able to keep myself busy with such incredibly important subjects of which the value is generally not recognised enough. It is time these themes arrive again at the forefront of societal consideration.

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1. Introduction

It is increasingly recognized that ‘nature connection’ is very important for health and well-being. Therefore, it is valuable to investigate what this nature connection means, how it can be achieved and which elements are the most important in this.

This dissertation focusses on how experiences of place *and* space contribute to nature connection, using the example of ‘Wild Land Dreaming’ during a wilderness vigil.

To first set a context for the importance of contact with nature and nature connection, we will briefly review its multidisciplinary area of research. We will also critically examine the concept of nature connection. As we shall see, it contains several unquestioned assumptions many authors seem to neglect. Later on, building on experiences of Wild Land Dreaming, we will therefore propose a different framework for what is now generally put under the problematic umbrella of ‘nature connection’.

1.1 Separation from nature

There is almost no question anymore that Westerners¹ increasingly live seemingly independent lives from nature and behave accordingly (Abram, 2012; Burton-Christie, 1999; Eisenstein, 2007; Plotkin, 2010; White, 1967; ...). Most of our time is spent indoors, in front of all sorts of screens (Frost, 2012; Marc and Mackian, 1995; McCurdy et al., 2010; Parsons, 2011). We rarely spend whole days outdoors and know very little about our natural environment (Louv, 2008; Young et al., 2016). Many authors are alarmed by these tendencies (Burton-Christie, 1999; Eisenstein, 2007; Louv, 2008; McCurdy et al., 2010; Young et al., 2016), for reasons of health and well-being, and responsibility for environmental action.

1 As very broadly defined by the influential book of Huntington (2011, pp. 151–154), the Western World, of which Westerners are its inhabitants, is comprised of Europe, North America and parts of Australasia. Christianity and roots in Greco-Roman culture are some of its commonalities.

1.1.1 Effects on health

It has been generally accepted by now that regular exposure to nature has significant health effects (Chawla, 2015; Davis, 2004; Driessnack, 2009; Frumkin et al., 2017). Consequently, irregular or very infrequent contact with nature is mostly detrimental to our health². Frumkin et al. (2017) lists 20 (!) health effects of regular nature contact which are now generally accepted. Among them are reduced stress, better sleep, improved mental health (reduced depression, reduced anxiety), greater happiness and life satisfaction, reduced aggression, increased prosocial behaviour and social connectedness, and so on.

It is very interesting to see how community building, building a sense of purpose and values like openness, intimacy, vulnerability and respect are strengthened and facilitated in a natural setting (Davis, 2014, 2004, 1995), which is by many seen as a much needed antidote to our consumerist, individualist culture in which loneliness and depression are ever more prevalent (Eisenstein, 2007; Hidaka, 2012; Hunout et al., 2003; Lane, 1994).

Some have warned however to not see nature as an inert backdrop or commodity that can facilitate human health. As the contemporary British mythologist Martin Shaw explains in a recent interview (Kornevall, 2019):

‘Turning a troubled person into a good person with nature as a backdrop – that has never been the point. [...] As long as you are looking at the living world as a cure-all or basically a backdrop for your processing, you are a hundred miles away from what this encounter used to be about – *a hundred*.’

Because:

‘We get fake news from our own psyche’

² It is interesting to note that most research is done by increasing the participants’ exposure to nature, not by decreasing it. As mentioned, this could be an indication of how little time we already spend outdoors. As if it is impossible, and definitely inhumane, to decrease this nature exposure time even more... Therefore, one could argue that we seem to generally and unwittingly agree that cutting people off from the outside is unethical. And yet, our societal structures and social evolutions continually demand us to spend ever more time inside, in front of screens!

As he explains further on in this interview, he means that we are so disconnected from the natural world, that it is very difficult for us to open up and start relating to it, so badly that we possibly even mistake our own little 'voices' (or inner monologue) for messages from the outside world. 'True' benefits, as Davis (2004) writes, only arise from 'engaging with nature, developing a relationship, and bonding deeply in a reciprocal communion with nature'. This seems quite contradictory because it seems to imply that when one goes to nature to get cured, the healing will not be as profound as when one goes to nature simply to reciprocally relate. This seeming contradiction can be addressed using the theory behind ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology is a relatively new (from the 1980's onwards) area of research which combines issues of environmentalism with psychology. Davis puts it very succinctly (Davis, 2019a):

The deep and enduring psychological questions--who we are, how we grow, why we suffer, how we heal--are inseparable from our relationships with the physical world. Similarly, the over-riding environmental questions--the sources of, consequences of, and solutions to environmental problems--are deeply rooted in the psyche, our images of self and nature, and our behaviours. Ecopsychology integrates ecology and psychology in responding to both sets of questions.

Consequently, it offers three insights into the human-nature relationship:

- 1) There is a deeply bonded and reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Ecopsychology draws on two metaphors for this relationship: (a) nature as home and family (e.g., Earth as mother, animals as siblings) and (b) nature as Self, in which self-identifications are broadened to include the "greater-than-human" world and Gaia.

2) The illusion of a separation of humans and nature leads to suffering both for the environment (as ecological devastation) and for humans (as grief, despair, and alienation).

3) Realizing the connection between humans and nature is healing for both. This reconnection includes the healing potential of contact with nature, work on grief and despair about environmental destruction, ecotherapy and psychoemotional bonding with the world as a source of environmental action and sustainable lifestyles (Davis, 2019).

As ecopsychology posits, Western culture has generally lost the awareness of this reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Going into nature in which nature is an inert backdrop that does not participate in relationships, is an extension of this forgetting. However, as is widely accepted, honest, deep and truthful relationships are paramount for one's well-being. If we now include relationships with nature with these other relationships, as ecopsychology suggests, we come to see that relating is indeed much more important than solely going into nature to gain health. Honest, reciprocal relationships are foundational for well-being and the same can be said for 'going into nature for healing'. The seeming contradiction mentioned above therefore dissolves, as relating and healing become one and the same thing.

1.1.2 Relationship with environmental crises

Not only does a sense of separation from nature lead to suffering for humans, it can also lead to environmental devastation originating from careless behaviour towards the planet (Davis, 2019a). There is very little motivation to behave ecologically responsibly when there is no affection or love for nature. And love for nature is only possible when there is some kind of reciprocal relationship. As Davis writes: 'We make sacrifices for those we love, including the Earth. Such love is a powerful motivation for environmental action' (Davis, 2019b). Similarly, in 'Loving Nature –

Towards an Ecology of Emotion’ the anthropologist Kay Milton (2002) explains how emotion can be seen as a basic ecological mechanism that makes us connect to and care for our environment. When there is some kind of emotional attachment to nature, environmental action towards sustainability is much more likely.

Several other studies have confirmed this, and agree that some kind of affection for the natural environment shows more motivation for environmental action (Braito et al., 2017; Ives et al., 2018; Mackay and Schmitt, 2019). When adolescents for example show a deeper connection to a natural setting, they are generally inclined to exhibit more environmentally responsible behaviour (Vaske and Kobrin, 2001).

1.2 ‘Placelessness’ as a theory to understand separation from nature

Because it seems so important for our own health and the planetary health to develop a deep connection with the natural world, it is also valuable to investigate which tendencies and circumstances inhibit us from developing this connection and how this can be alleviated.

Several authors have argued that a relationship to a specific place and its *genius loci*³ is primordial in developing a deep connection with nature (Davis, 2004; Young et al., 2016). Young et al. (2016) for example, propose the method of the ‘sit spot’, which is an outside, fixed place in which one regularly sits to observe and gets to know this specific place and its (natural) surroundings, as an outstanding way to connect to nature again. We will elaborate more on this method in the methodology section, as we will also use this in this research. For now, it is sufficient to say that this simple method could be a means to intimately get to know the place one lives in (Young et al., 2016), to even facilitate survival, but in equal measure to meet certain psychological needs. As the French philosopher Simone Weil wrote: ‘To be rooted [in a place] is perhaps the most important and

3 Whereas in Roman times, the *genius loci* indicated a guardian spirit of a specific place, in contemporary Western usage, the *genius loci* of a place could be described as the unique identity of that place, with its distinctive atmosphere (Norberg-Schulz, 2019).

least recognized need of the human soul' (as cited by Burton-Christie, 1999). This is confirmed by the anthropologist Keith Basso when investigating how Appalachian native American culture is literally rooted in the landscape through for example place-inspired stories (Basso, 1996), and how much importance the natives attribute to this for ethical guidance.

Referring to the French anthropologist Marc Augé, Burton-Christie (1999) describes however how we increasingly make and thus spend more time in non-places, such as 'supermarkets, airports and hotels, highways or in front of TVs, computers and cash machines'. In contrast to places, non-places are spaces without a distinct local identity, all the same. Modern culture seems to champion that (local) geography becomes ever more 'history' (i.e. something of the past) due to advancing technology (telecommunication, transport, ...) (Withers, 2009). Places become more the same, more homogenized, and have less opportunity to develop their own identity. Moreover, we become ever more mobile and never really arrive in one place and get to know it thoroughly (Young et al., 2016).

As a result:

[W]e are losing the sense of what it means to dwell within a particular place and community, to become intimate with the landscape, to enter into and be shaped by the stories and the culture of the place. We are losing the sense of place (Burton-Christie, 1999).

Therefore, we cannot feel at home anymore on (a specific place on) this planet, and we lack a basic sense of security and safety in which our soul can 'deepen and grow'. Never ever arriving, we lose track of who we are in relationship to all that lives, and remain empty for having lost touch with something much bigger than ourselves for which we can live a meaningful, beautiful life, for example God, or life on Earth (Ikerd, 2016). In other words, in order to find meaning and purpose on this planet, one must deeply relate to others (human and non-human), as this enables one to

relate to a much bigger picture than oneself. Purpose is always derived from some higher organizational level (see i.e. Ikerd, 2016).⁴ This is why nature connection and inevitably relating to very specific places seems so important, both for our own well-being⁵ and for the planet's well being, as our actions have us do things that make the planet healthier as a result of our feeling part of it and as we derive meaning and purpose from this bigger web of life.

1.2.1 Space as opposed to Place?

Since the 1960's a reaction to the rise of these non-places, homogenization and universality in favour of identity, can be witnessed (Tuan, 1997; Withers, 2009). Because of the rapid globalisation, (some) people have increasingly come to see the importance of particularity and place attachment (Feld and Basso, 1996). The characteristics of the particular, the local, 'home' and distinct identity, which are descriptors of the concept of 'place' became much more favourable than the ones we associate with 'space': abstraction, universality, anonymity and impersonality (Adams, 2016; Tuan, 1997). Likewise, space has often been theorized in radical opposition to place in geography (see i.e. Burton-Christie, 1999; Casey, 1996; Tuan, 1997, 1977). Geographers generally accepted this dichotomy, and this allowed them to investigate the particularities of both concepts. As a result, place is now considered to be much more than a mere location in universal space, and space is associated with much more than the mere context in which places can exist⁶. For example, space can evoke sensations of 'wide horizons and endless possibility' and is associated with freedom

4 Ikerd explains this using the following example: *'the purpose of the heart and lungs cannot be derived from their relationships with each other but only from their essential functions in maintaining the health and life of the body – the higher level of organization. Likewise, the purpose of individual persons must be derived from the "communities" of which they are members, the purpose of communities and societies from the whole of humanity, and the purpose of humanity from some higher level beyond human observation, quantification or sensory experience.'* And further: *'If there is no meaningful purpose for human life on earth, there is no logical reason to be concerned about the sustainability of human life on earth.'*

5 Lack of a sense of purpose is widely associated with depression (Harlow et al., 1986)

6 Hereby a practical example to make this more concrete: in order to go from place to place, one needs to cross space. For example: one needs to take the plane to travel from home to a friend who lives in another continent. Both home and the friend's home are places with a certain meaning and history associated to it. The medium one travels through to get from home to the friend's home however does not have any particular meaning, and is therefore described as space. In other words, places are locations with meaning and history, situated in space.

(Tuan, 1997). Place, on the other hand, has a ‘history and meaning’ and therefore needs to be investigated ‘from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning’ (Tuan, 1979).

This radical opposition however has sometimes led to the impression that a choice between space and place needed to be made in for example architecture and spatial planning. For instance, when one reacts to the rise of non-places by discarding everything related to space, one forgets its added value and the culprits of the (often narrow) sole experience of place. Hägerstrand formulates it succinctly:

At first glance this [...] seems to suggest the older place-bound local community as a viable solution to the social, technological and economic impasse in which the urban-industrial world finds itself. My experience makes me doubt the wisdom of such a solution. To shrink systems, technologies and circulations would probably be a good thing — external circumstances seem to require such changes anyway. That is not to say, however, that all equipment, arrangements and habits of the modern world must be eliminated [...]. Rather, the implicit suggestion, as I read it, is that certain values almost inevitably fostered in stable, place-bound communities are indispensable ingredients for a decent human existence. There must always be a proper balance between ‘place and journey [i.e. space],’ ‘home and reach.’
(in foreword of Buttner and Seamon, 2015)

This geographical critique on the opposition of space and place points towards a deeper, possibly semantic problem when they are indeed considered to be so radically opposed. Some say for example that space could not exist without place et vice versa. Entrikin (1991) specifically describes how he finds space in the ‘betweenness of places’. Place, he writes, should ideally ‘be viewed from points in between’ (Ibid, p. 5), with which he means that it should be studied from between ‘the decentered vantage point of the theoretical scientist’ (which would deconstruct place

to its mere meaningless building blocks in space) and 'the centred viewpoint of the subject' (which might limit the understanding of it being situated in a much larger space) (Ibid, p. 5).

Yet, although Entrikin manages to not see space and place as polar opposites, he still treats them as separate entities, merely influencing each other. Following the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901 - 1991) however, Merrifield (1993) goes a big step further by writing that Entrikin's argument is still firmly rooted in a Cartesian worldview and that space and place should not be approached solely from that perspective. Rather, they should be investigated through a dialectical framework, as done by Henri Lefebvre, in order to truly understand that they are not as separate as it might seem through a solely Cartesian lens. Merrifield writes:

The shortcomings of Entrikin's argument emerge from the ontological nature in which the question is framed. Its central tenets are dualistic and linear rather than unitary and dialectical; by involving the notion of an 'in between' it seeks to understand how two polar opposites can be brought together rather than to comprehend how the locus of place is a unity containing within itself different aspects.

According to Lefebvre and Merrifield, space and place continuously interact with each other, to the point that it is difficult to distinguish them. As a result, space and place become mere concepts which help us describe certain phenomena or aspects of reality, rather than Cartesian, separately existing entities as is (probably unwittingly) accepted in a large part of the literature in geography (Merrifield, 1993). In essence, space and place are 'different aspects of a unity, that is, two aspects of a dialectical process just as the wave and particle aspect is assumed in quantum physics'. In the end however, Merrifield suggests seemingly self-contradictory to investigate this further both through a phenomenological lens *and* a Cartesian, reductionist and materialist lens,

without, however, suggesting that the realm we call place can be 'read off' from a different realm we call space in a vulgar materialist and Cartesian mechanistic fashion or, alternatively, to reduce place to the purely phenomenological realm of experience and metaphysical meaning (Merrifield, 1993).

The true goal of any dialectical approach is to unify and bring together all different aspects and methods of inquiry. This ensures that the diamond we call reality is not always looked upon from the same angle, and it allows us to grasp a little bit more how all different facets contribute to the whole we call space/place.

The contemporary theologian Belden C. Lane (2002) provides a good example on how this could work in practice, applied to the inquiry on what constitutes a sacred place. He writes of three different approaches to the understanding of sacred place. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to properly address what constitutes the sacred or sacredness. In short however, two scholars are frequently mentioned on this topic. The first is the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) who argued in an attempt to explain religion as a social phenomenon, that something is sacred because of human beings considering it to be so, and standing radically apart from the profane (Durkheim and Swain, 2008, p. 229). The second is the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1907 – 1986). He argued that the sacred is inherent (in the landscape) and is revealed to us through hierophanies, or manifestations of the sacred (Eliade, 1959, p. 11). Both authors agree though that the sacred exists and continues to exist by means of it being set apart from the profane (Durkheim and Swain, 2008, p. 38; Eliade, 1959, p. 12 – 13). Just as the masculine and the feminine can (arguably) only contain meaning because of their being opposed, so do the sacred

and the profane, the former being ‘real’ and the latter being ‘unreal’, or the former being special and the latter being normal.

Lane suggests that the phenomenological approach combines these seemingly radically opposed understandings, although it does not allow to distinguish between them. First and foremost he states that sacred places are more than anything storied places, places of which many stories are told (Lane, 2002, p. 15). We could consider this as the cultural element of the sacred. And yet, he balances this by saying that ‘sacred place is not chosen, it chooses’ (Ibid, p. 19). In other words, humans do not decide where sacred places are going to be, we merely discover them. In the end, it is difficult to make out if stories where first (which would delineate a place to be sacred), or if the places where first, from which the stories evolved. Probably, as Lane insinuates, it is neither of both. Both happen at the same time. They co-create the experience of sacred places.

All three of these approaches have advantages and disadvantages, such as for example the phenomenological method, which shows how Durkheim and Eliade’s ideas can be combined but it does not allow to make the distinction. In the end however, they provide *combined* a more – at first maybe contradictory – holistic understanding of what constitutes a sacred place. Lane (2002, p. 44):

“to a certain extent, all three of these approaches are necessary in grasping the diverse character of any particular sacred place.”

Following Merrifield, we could easily extend this towards the study of place and space, by using both a Cartesian approach and a phenomenological one. Seeing place and space as opposites might help us determine and delineate (if needed) its respective characteristics, while the phenomenological method might help us see how space/place presents itself in tangible experience

and interact with each other. Investigating which elements can be attributed to something we call space and which elements can be attributed to something we call place (Cartesian method) could also help us describe our phenomenological experience. Dialectically, this could give us a more holistic understanding, although it might seem contradictory at first.

1.3 Research Question

Since developing a deep connection with the natural world is extremely valuable, the relationship between place(lessness) and nature connection has already been researched quite extensively, as we have seen. However, space has often been left out of this inquiry. The dialectical critique of Merrifield shows us how it should not be taken for granted that space and place are separate. Therefore, in this dissertation we will investigate how a relationship with place *and* space together contribute to nature connectedness. We hypothesize that ‘Wild Land Dreaming’ (as coined by the British contemporary mythologist Martin Shaw) is a primary experience of nature connectedness in which both the relationship to place *and* the relationship to space can be deeply felt. Therefore, it could be a good example of how place and space contribute together to nature connection. At the same time, it is however often not very clear what this connection means or includes, and it has a tendency to remain rather vaguely descriptive (Ives et al., 2018). Using the concepts of place and space we hope to make this more succinct.

2. Methodology

Having provided some context for nature connection, space and place and its relevance in today's culture, it is now time to turn towards the research itself which is about investigating the role of relationship to space together with place in nature connection. I will do this by phenomenologically examining my own experiences of nature connectedness and Wild Land Dreaming, which are written down in a diary, and investigate how and when place/space can be observed in these experiences. As the contemporary archaeologist Christopher Tilley writes:

Phenomenology involves the understanding and description of things as they are experienced by a subject (1994, p. 12).

In this case, these 'things' are 'wild land dreaming' and experiences of place and space. The 'subject' is me, the author, being a white, middle-class, Belgian male of 25 years old, with an affinity and great reverence for nature. The investigation is done experientially through my *own lived body* (Casey, 1996), using all senses to receive what is there. This might reveal characteristics of that place and its relation to the cosmos that are beyond our everyday perception (see Tilley, 1994, p. 12 and p. 75).

The phenomenological method on its own though has some serious drawbacks too. Lane puts it accurately and concisely, applied to inquiry around sacred places:

Left to itself ... [phenomenology] is inadequate in providing a full understanding of how the transcendent and the cultural come together in identifying the presence of the holy, failing to address theological and sociological dimensions of that reality (2002, p. 44).

In other words, where needed, it might be necessary to bring in some of the insights of these two other methods (i.e. theology and sociology) to provide a clearer, less abstract and more grounded understanding.

I will be using diary entries to relate these experiences. It needs to be noted that most of these entries are not written down in a context of phenomenological research. However, this should not impair investigating how wild land dreaming relates to an experience of place and/or space. This goal is merely a lens through which I will interpret the entries. As Casey mentions, concrete descriptions of experiences (as written down in my diary) are a good starting point of phenomenological research (Casey, 1996).

During the period of this research, I intend to frequently (at least 3 times a week) visit my sit spot⁷, in an unnamed forest patch near my home, which is in Winksele, Belgium. At this sit spot, I observe what happens for half an hour and reflect how space and place interact with each other in that given spot, and if and how I start Wild Land Dreaming. This forest does not have any particular characteristics, apart from it being near where I live and me already having some relationship with it. I will also do one or more wilderness vigils of at least 2 days in a more remote area (not yet determined). During these vigils, I will not eat, and only take minimal gear (sleeping bag and tarp).

To a traditional positivist, this method might set off some alarms. How for instance could one possibly observe something impartially in order to reach some objective facts when one is participant in the same research? Applied to this dissertation: how could we conclude generalities from an inquiry into the unique experience of the researcher?

⁷ A sit spot is a place outside (not necessarily in nature) where one sits regularly and observes one's own feelings, emotions, etc., while also observing the surroundings (animals, birds, plants, people, ...). Its primary goal is to consciously deepen one's relationship with the inner and outer world (see i.e. Young, et al. 2016).

Following the anthropologist Edith Turner (1921 – 2016) however (Turner, 2002), science should not refrain from researching something fundamental to human existence: direct, personal experience. The only possible way of doing this, is by putting oneself as a participant into the research. Honest reporting of personal experiences is hereby very important, and not always easy, since it might oblige the researcher to reveal some very private content.

The postmodern turn in the 1980s has made – especially the social – sciences understand, that objective, impartial observation is generally not possible anyway. Postmodernists saw that in order to study reality objectively, the observer must stand outside of this reality (Ellis et al., 2010). In other words, the observer is not part of reality anymore. This is of course an illusion, especially knowing that each and every researcher brings his or her own background, vocabulary and paradigms through which he interprets the observed (even if this is the scientific method). Turner gives the example of anthropologists considering spirits as metaphor (as only this explanation fits in the scientific, Western worldview), whereas the Ndembu of Zambia for instance perceive them as an integral, tangible element of daily life (Turner, 2002). Whereas going ‘native’ or becoming a participant was considered before as improper methodology whilst risking one’s academic career, it is now much more accepted.

The method of autoethnography includes ones own personal experiences into the research (Ellis et al., 2010). Having the postmodern turn in mind, this is not that far of a stretch any more. On the contrary, investigating these personal experiences could be a way to fine-tune or critique cultural, social and/or political beliefs. Ellis et al. (2010) writes:

Even though some researchers still assume that research can be done from a neutral, impersonal, and objective stance [...], most now recognize that such an assumption is not tenable [...]. Consequently, autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges

and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist.

However, writing a fine, personal story is of course not enough. Autoethnography is not the same as writing an autobiography. Autoethnographers must also:

use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. To accomplish this might require comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research [...], interviewing cultural members [...], and/or examining relevant cultural artifacts [...] (Ellis et al., 2010).

It must be said that autoethnography has been critiqued for its rejection of conventional research goals such as analysis and generalization. Ellis (2004, pp. 195 - 196) is aware of this and mentions that indeed autoethnography does not maintain traditional analytical methods, but does not refrain from analysis entirely. She writes that personal storytelling (as a key part of autoethnography) is unequivocally interrelated with a certain analysis of the world. Moreover, she also writes that personal experience can lead to critical analysis of literature and cultural beliefs (Ibid., p. 198). On generalization, she agrees that autoethnography does not employ conventional standards either, but rather counts on both the author's and reader's capacity to empathize with the autoethnographies. Generalization in that sense occurs when a personal experience is recognized by a wider audience (Ibid., p. 194 – 195). Ellis et al. (2010) writes how autoethnography is not as much preoccupied with accuracy, as it is with producing 'analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better'.

For this dissertation specifically, we will not interview people, nor examine cultural artifacts. In other words, this research will not provide thick cultural ethnographies, but rather through phenomenological examination of direct experience we will contrast personal experience with existing research to question and/or fine-tune cultural beliefs. Put shortly, we will combine phenomenology with certain elements of autoethnography.

3. Literature Review

The goal of this dissertation is to investigate how a relationship to place and space at the same time contribute to nature connection, and whether Wild Land Dreaming exhibits this. In order to know if this contributes to nature connection, it is however necessary to first gain a better understanding of this same 'nature connection'.

3.1 What is meant with 'nature connection'?

As Ives et al. (2018) writes, it is often not very clear what nature connection means or includes and it is taken for granted that the reader knows what is meant. When reflecting upon it, several questions however arise. What does it mean to be connected to nature? Is there something to connect to? And if so, what exactly are we connecting to? How do we do this? How do we know when we are connected to nature and when we are not?

Especially the question whether there is something to connect to leaves me puzzled. It seems to reveal several assumptions we might have when we talk about nature connection. The first one is that we are not connected at the start and that we have to do several things to become connected. This brings us to one of the follow-up questions: how do we know then when we are connected? And on what ground can we say that we are not connected at the beginning of an unquestioned process in which our connection to nature continually increases?

There are several reasons why one could argue that Western society indeed is generally not very connected. Ives et al. (2018) propose 5 subcategories for types or elements of nature connection, which of course interact and influence each other:

1. Material: consumption of goods/materials [directly] from nature (e.g. food/fibre)
2. Experiential: Direct interaction with natural environments (e.g., parks, forests). Note that qualities of connections may vary [meaning that the quality of connection of someone in a

car driving through a national park is probably different from someone hiking in it for several days]

3. Cognitive: Knowledge or awareness of the environment and attitudes/values towards nature
4. Emotional: feelings of attachment or empathy towards nature
5. Philosophical: perspective or worldview on what nature is, why it matters and how humans ought to interact with it (e.g. master/participant/steward)

Especially the first three categories could give an indication of Western disconnection from nature. For example, although we still get our resources from nature, we are not always aware of it (see e.g. Cairns and Johnston, 2018). Our direct interaction with natural environments has substantially decreased over the last decades (see above), similar to our knowledge of plants and the broader natural environment (see e.g. San Jose and Nelson, 2017). However, is there a direct link between these reasons and nature connectedness? Can't we for example still be connected to nature when we don't spend every day in it? And is spending every day in nature a prerequisite for being really connected?

The second assumption is that indeed there seems to be something (not clear what exactly) to connect *to*. This connecting *to* seems to imply a split between the one that connects and the thing that is being connected to. The assumption here is that the connector and that what is being connected to are two separate entities. Applying Lefebvre's and Merrifield's dialectical approach, we could say that this assumption is only one aspect of the entire picture. Maybe we could see the connector and that what is being connected to as separate entities, but we could also see them as not separate. Building on this last perspective, we could then argue that the whole nature connection scheme is redundant, since there is nothing to connect to. The connector and that what is being connected to are not split, but already overlap and have always been. In that case, it might be

beneficial to speak about building an awareness of this already ever existing connection, rather than increasing nature connectedness.

Some say it is even dangerous to continually assert our so-called separation from nature which needs to be 'solved' with a renewed connection to nature. Repeatedly focussing on nature connection 'exacerbates a sense of separation from the very entity with which it seeks reconciliation' (Fletcher, 2017). Indeed, as written above, when we speak of nature connection, we unwittingly affirm the assumption of our separatedness of nature. Fletcher writes:

[A]t the same time as they claim that people need to overcome their disconnection with "nature," environmentalists also commonly frame nature as a "self-willed" entity separate from human consciousness and society.

This "self-willed" entity would then be the something to connect to, although it is merely our framing that could make this at all feasible.

Even more, nature connection, as it is perceived now, is very focussed on the individual (Ives et al., 2018), and thus confirming a neoliberalist, individualist worldview which could be seen as the root cause of environmental devastation, instead of our lack of connection with the natural world. It displaces the attention from the problematic overarching (geo)political structures and economy towards individual responsibility (Fletcher, 2017). This could leave these damaging structures unchanged, which could be very dangerous.

This critique does however not diminish the importance of spending time in nature for health and well-being, and care for the planet. The unknown does remain unloved. We only need to stay wary

of the problematic ideas of humans being separate from nature or already being a part of it and thus that there is something to connect to or not (Fletcher, 2017). Discussions on these ideas tend to ignore that both strengthen the assumption that nature is something ‘out-there’. In order to be able to perceive an entity one would call ‘nature’, one must necessarily stand apart from this entity. Even if one says that humans are part of nature, or are nature, the language and thought used still confirms that nature is something different. Eliminating this language entirely however would be premature, as it can still provide relevant insights. We need to remain cautious though to not confound these perspectives and ideas with the multifaceted reality. As we will discuss in the section about Wild Land Dreaming, an entirely new language might be needed to be able to properly communicate about this.

3.2 Wild Land Dreaming

The term Wild Land Dreaming has been first coined by The School of Myth (Devon, UK) and mythologist Martin Shaw as a way to describe experiences that could transpire during a wilderness vigil, spent in one and the same place (a sit spit) (School of Myth, 2019). During this vigil one fasts alone for 4 days and 4 nights in (wild) nature. Through the method of fasting for these extended periods of time in a natural setting, one could come to experience a phenomenon called Wild Land Dreaming, although it is not guaranteed. Shaw stays vague about what exactly happens during Wild Land Dreaming, as ‘listening to disclosures from the Earth’, as ‘to be dreamt, rather than to dream’ or as ‘getting claimed by the belly of the Earth’. In any case, it consists of deeply experiential work with the surroundings through opening up the senses and trying to develop a relationship with the immediate environment. This development is not active, but seems to be rather passive (cf. Shaw’s sentences to describe Wild Land Dreaming in passive conjugation). It is - as the anthropologist

Irving Hallowell would say - an attempt to listen to what other-than-human⁸ beings have to say – if they have anything to say at all.

3.2.1 Wild land dreaming and spirits

Western cosmology does not generally accept the possibility of communication with other-than-human-beings, nor is it able to deal with phenomena that do not seem to have a purely material explanation (Curry, 2014). Expanding on the concept of ‘spirits’ as entities that exist in more than material realms, the contemporary philosopher and phenomenologist David Abram tries to unify accepted Western epistemology with these phenomena that are more difficult to accept. To Abram, wilderness vigils, vision quests, ... are opportunities to

return to the immediacy of the present moment, and hence to our ongoing, animal experience in the midst of this world, [and] then the flatness dissolves, and the enigmatic depth of the world becomes apparent (Abram, 2014)

Spirits, to Abram, are not wholly ‘disembodied, supernatural entities’, but are a way of acknowledging the many invisible yet tangible aspects and dimensions of reality, which only become more obvious to our experience when we enter the present moment. Spirits are

a way of honouring the manifold invisibilities moving within the visible landscape – and of keeping oneself and one’s culture awake to such unseen and ungraspable aspects of the real (Ibid).

8 Although recently popularized by scholars such as David Abram, the term ‘other-than-human-persons’ was first coined by the American anthropologist Irving Hallowell (1892–1974) in his study of Ojibwa First Nations. In Ojibwa cosmology persons are not just other human beings (as the term is generally used). Rather, they include all beings and objects to which ‘a self must become oriented to’ (Hallowell, 2002). As put by Harvey et al. (Harvey and Wallis, 2015):

[Other-than-human-persons] refers to the widest possible community of living beings. For example, in the Ojibwe language not only are humans, animals, fish, birds, and plants living, relational beings, but so too are objectpersons such as rocks and certain weather systems (the thunder-beings).

Speaking of the ‘enigmatic depth’ of the present moment is nothing more than an acknowledgement of the presence of these spirits, which move through and beyond the sensuous, or everything that enters our senses. There is nothing supernatural, superficial or superstitious to it. Only the technological West, as Abram writes, tends to discard spirits as something ‘utterly insubstantial, entirely beyond all sensory ken’. The West conceives of spirits as completely intangible, as superstition, imposed through projection upon reality to make us feel better or to explain things that otherwise do not seem to make any sense. Abram completely disagrees with this notion as he describes this view of spirits as ‘immaterial phantasms conjured by a naive and primitive imagination.’ In order to fully grasp the realness of spirits, according to the contemporary author Patrick Curry, it is mandatory to reject any distinction between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ or ‘state of mind’ and ‘world’ (Curry, 2014). And we could just as well do this, he writes, because supposing that they can be ‘cleanly separated’ is a mere ‘vestigial Cartesian delusion’⁹. Only when we indeed cleanly separate the inner from the outer, or psyche from the material world, it becomes possible to see spirits as immaterial projections of our own psyche.

In contrast, when truly experiencing the sensuous as one (and not separated) integrated whole in which mind and world continually interact, one understands that the spirits which inhabit that place cannot get more ‘natural’, ‘real’ or ‘tangible’ (whilst still invisible, as they always will be). Spirits, Abram writes, are

not intangible, they are not of another world. They are the way the local earth speaks when we step back inside *this* world. (original emphasis) (Abram, 2014)

9 Drawing on Merrifield again and his rejection of onesided perspectives, we agree that the Cartesian worldview is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon of spirits. However, also following Merrifield, we do not entirely reject the Cartesian perspective as untrue and of no value. Therefore we would rather say that seeing ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ as cleanly separated is one way of looking at things, but it indeed becomes a delusion when it is seen as the *only* true way.

Similarly, the School of Myth speaks of Wild Land Dreaming as listening to ‘disclosures from the earth’ (School of Myth, 2019). Since spirits are the way the local earth speaks when we truly step back inside the world - or in the present moment - and Wild Land Dreaming is listening to disclosures from that same earth, we could then argue that the experience of Wild Land Dreaming is an experience of spirits of the land which are revealed to us through the increased awareness and perceptive capabilities in the present moment.

One could critique David Abram for still remaining rather vague about spirits as being for example ‘manifold invisibles’ and for not using more adequate academic language in order to describe it more succinctly. However, as Abram writes himself as well, conventional language makes it difficult to clearly express these ideas and concepts (Harris, 2014). Once we start describing, reflecting on and writing about our sensuous experiences, including our sense of having witnessed the spirits, we seemingly enter a different domain of dualism and rationality in which the sensuous has little to no ground to stand on. Reflection, conventional language and thought pulls us out of the sensuous, the present (Abram, 2014). This makes academic research on this topic quite a challenging endeavour. Western epistemology does not allow for these kind of notions or experiences (yet), and thus there does not seem to be an appropriate language for it (yet). That is why Abram actively wonders how this ‘earthly world’s invisibility’ could easily become part of a new way of thinking and speaking. And yet, maybe this is not necessary. Maybe it is also possible to let these two seemingly opposed languages or epistemologies exist next to each other, without choosing (Letcher, 2014). This would however require humility from both sides, since they both would have to accept that they are but one way of knowledge, and not the only way.

Another more fundamental critique of Abram can be based on the work of anthropologist Edith Turner (1921 – 2016) and her experiences with the Ndembu of Zambia, their healing practices and

rituals (Turner, 2002). Whereas Abram considers spirits as invisibles, which are always just outside of our direct perception, Turner describes how she has literally seen a spirit during a ceremony – as a gray blob in this case. Compared to this, Abram’s notion of spirits indeed is vague and adheres much more to the concept of ‘spirit as metaphor’ or the idea of it being a way to describe something ineffable, rather than to a phenomenon/entity that actually exists and can be directly witnessed. To entirely discard Abram’s exposition as a smart way to fit ‘spirits’ into an unchanged Western epistemology is however premature. Abram only provides a different take on spirits. His argument centers around the idea that Western culture should pay much more attention to the inquiry of the ineffable, instead of discarding it as something ‘not real enough’ and therefore not worthy of investigation. Turner’s view in contrast is much more challenging to Western epistemology as she speaks of the tangible existence of different realities, and not just one which can be scientifically proved and investigated. However, both explanations do not need to be mutually exclusive.

In an attempt to make sense of her experience, Turner herself cites the ‘anthropologist gone native’ Michael Harner (1929 – 2018) who describes how objects are perceived differently in different realities, and that ordinary perception is different from the one during a shamanic state of consciousness¹⁰. Neither of them has any claim on what is more real or not. They do not negate each other’s validity. Turner seems to imply that seeing this grey blob was partly due to her changed consciousness and therefore her awareness of a different reality.

If now combine Abram with Turner, we could speculate that Abram’s invisibles are an ‘ordinary-state-of-consciousness’ acknowledgement of Turner’s spirits, which can only be directly perceived during a shamanic state of consciousness. Abram’s invisibles would then be a vague sense, feeling or knowing in ordinary life of Turner’s spirits who really do exist tangibly in altered states of consciousness. In that sense, Abram and Turner complement each other.

10 i.e. the altered consciousness shamans experience during their rituals and ceremonies, induced by monotonous drumming, singing, psychedelic drugs, ... which allows them to journey to other worlds (Harner, 1996).

It remains to be seen how we will experience spirits during Wild Land Dreaming, as something ineffable, like Abram, or as something with substance, like Turner.

3.2.2 Wild land dreaming and ecopsychology

So why after all would one want to go out on a solitary wilderness fast, and go through the physical ordeals this brings? Why would one want to meet the spirits and listen to ‘disclosures from the earth’ in order to find some kind of vague revelation or vision? How does one benefit from this? Is it just because it is fun to do or is there more to it?

As explained before, ecopsychology combines psychological questions with environmental questions. It suggests that in order to find out who we are, where we come from, why we suffer, we need to start relating to the land around us. Because in truth, the who, the where, the why do not stop at our skin, but extend much further into the world. Self-identification is broadened to include the more-than-human beings and the consequent relationships (Davis, 2019a)¹¹. Realizing this is deeply healing for both nature and self, because it deepens relationship and mutual reciprocity.

Whilst going on a multi-day solitary wilderness fast, one actively (although maybe unwittingly) looks for relationships with these other-than-human beings (see e.g. Davis, 2019b). For that reason, the ‘solitude’ (i.e. in this case the absence of other humans) in a natural setting is mandatory. This allows one the time to make relationships, which are not as self-evident as relating to fellow human beings. It is quite possible that these relationships present themselves as ‘invisibles’ or ‘spirits’. This kind of relating is of a wholly different and much more subtle level than what is generally understood with relating to other humans. In itself, experiencing these other kinds of relationship might already be rewarding enough to go through such an ordeal (Davis, 2019b). And yet, there is

11 This can be interpreted as a justification on our critique on the concept of nature connectedness, since nature is not seen anymore as something out-there, nor as something purely within ourselves.

even more to it, because once it becomes clear that there is so much more to relating than previously thought or considered, a whole new world of wonder and pure love opens up (Curry, 2014). ‘An active and conscious cultivation of relationship to Spirit [or God or the Universe or Love or...] by each individual for the health of both the individual and the whole community’ (Jane, 2018) becomes the guiding principle of ones life in which relationship is central. Eventually, it is about cultivating the sense of being an integral *and* essential part of ‘the fabric of the universe’. This is utterly meaning-giving and laden with purpose, as feeling part of something and being recognized for it is a primal prerequisite for meaning and purpose (see above and Ikerd, 2016 and Jane, 2018).

3.2.3 Ecopsychology, relationship and nature connection

At first sight it seems as if ecopsychology is as well stuck in a dualistic approach of man and nature. It speaks of making relationships, reciprocity, connection... between humans and nature, which again seems to acerbate their separation and distinction. It still does seem to treat nature as something ‘out-there’, something one needs to go to to connect to. As explained before, this is problematic as this could bring us even further from target. Should we therefore entirely abandon the theory of ecopsychology? Again, this might be preliminary, as it still gives us a framework to start thinking about it. Caution and awareness of this problematic language and thinking behind it, remains direly needed though.

4. Phenomenological inquiry

Before we dive into some of my diary entries, let us first elaborate a bit more on our hypothesis of Wild Land Dreaming being a prime example of space and place coming together.

4.1 Wild Land Dreaming and place hypothesis

As mentioned before, Wild Land Dreaming seems to happen when spending extended periods of time in the same place in nature. Through this extended time and the fasting in one place, one gets to know this local place very well. The locality, the uniqueness and the individuality of this place therefore become very apparent through these days spent alone in this place. As a result, the aspect of place should be very clear during Wild Land Dreaming.

4.2 Wild Land Dreaming and space hypothesis

However, there seems to be more to Wild Land Dreaming than just an experience of the immediate and the local. Why, for example, do we not call it Land Dreaming but *Wild* Land Dreaming? To me, this adjective adds a notion of spaciousness. Wild seems to imply something bigger, something grander, something mysterious. We are talking about the *wild* land, not just the land.

And indeed, the experiences of Wild Land Dreaming would not be the same if there were not some aspect of universality or the non-local present. Something that is beyond direct experience, having a direct connection with everything that lives at the same time. Spirits are also something of the wild to us, because they are immeasurable and beyond our control. They are also something wild to us, because they do not fit and therefore challenge our current mainstream worldview.

4.3 What is wild land dreaming to me?

Let us start with a personal testimony, which was written a few weeks *after* the experience itself:

5th of September 2017

I remember I was on a 24 hour vigil in an ancient forest in Belgium, to open up completely, to listen. The first hours I was very restless, and could not sit still. I wiggled about on my sit spot, stood up, jumped up and down, paced around in a circle within the boundaries of the perimeter I set up myself. It felt very uneasy. Maybe I was not far enough from people, I wondered later when I got back. There was a forest track a few hundred meters away, and although I knew very few people came by and definitely could not see me, even if I jumped up and down, waving my arms, it still felt uneasy. It made me see that I always feel some kind of 'pressure', some uneasiness when there is a possibility of encountering people. Especially when my intention is to open up completely.

At the same time, it was not very comfortable being there because of the many flies and the mosquitoes. When it got dark, it got even worse. So, although it was still really warm, I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag to completely cover myself. I traded discomfort for different discomfort: I was now way too hot. So I started opening my sleeping bag periodically to let in some fresh air, but that was a real hassle because the zipper of the sleeping bag always got stuck in the fabric... Eventually I realised I had come to completely open up and surrender myself to the gentleness and beauty of the forest, and instead I was fighting to be at least a little comfortable. It really felt like the forest was playing tricks on me, to come down from my pink, spiritually inclined cloud and get 'real'. To accept the discomfort as part of a life which is not all peace and divinity. To live with it, not even trying to be graceful. Just to live with it.

So I kept struggling through the night, sometimes dozing of, waking up frightened of sleeping in a place which could possibly be dangerous (or that was what I told myself). I did not want the night animals to come close to me, not even the deer, and yet they did, one deer almost stumbling over me when I had just woken up again. I was not in control anymore. Other forces were, like animals who knew the place much better than I did. Like trees and branches that could come crashing down on me. A small part of me was amazed this deer had come so close to me, but mostly I was just frightened. It felt like I had lost the advantage of being human. And I hadn't even considered before I had had an advantage. It made me more frightened and even more restless.

I was so glad when dawn came, the sun bristling through the leaves, casting moist rays on my skin. Finally a peaceful moment. No divine revelation, no communication with 'other-than-human-beings' or other worlds, no personal breakthrough or whatever nonsense new-age doctors seem to promise. Just gentle peace. And that was enough. I did not feel perfect, and certainly not ecstatic, because I was tired and the remnants of a restless night still clung to my body. In that instance though, I felt like I had finally come down to the Earth. Present, that's all, no more. A herd of wild boar came by, big animals and little cute ones. I counted fourteen of them. I was glad they had come, and I was even more glad they strode along, leaving me undisturbed. No amazement, as we can so often read in testimonies of people having encountered non-humans. Just gratitude, a smile on my face and a little fear.

It did not take long before Discomfort came again, as it grew hotter along with the mosquitoes waking up. As if they were nudging me out of the forest. As if they said that the forest was not my place and that I did not belong there, unless I proved myself otherwise. My mind was telling me that I indeed had proved myself and that I could leave soon, leaving the discomfort behind. Didn't I receive a beautiful experience at dawn? Wasn't this what I had come for? I longed to go. Why on Earth had I been thinking to do this? Had I been

deluding myself again with romantic ideas about nature? Did I really think that trees would start talking to me? I wanted to curse and shout, but then I restrained myself because I felt like I was not far enough from people to be able to freely do this. Eventually, I sank down against the trunk of a big oak tree looming over me, apathetic, tired, done. I could not be bothered anymore, although the mosquitoes continued to harass me.

Finally I could go. I had spent my stupid 24 hours. I greeted the trees, gave thanks and left, committing to a long bike ride home on an empty stomach. Another stupid idea.

Being back in the 'human' world, I noticed however that I felt very open and vulnerable. For some strange reason, it felt alien not to be in the forest anymore. As if I had left known, safe territory behind. I was perplexed when I understood that I missed the embrace of the forest, when only a few hours before I really wanted to leave it behind. Some strange emptiness inside of me became apparent, an emptiness left behind by the presence of the forest and the trees. They indeed had been present, they indeed had been communicating with this strange fella that had interrupted their peaceful existence, almost begging for attention. But I just could not notice in the moment... Its strange beauty only struck me afterwards. From that moment onwards I am convinced that communication with non-humans is possible. We can (literally) talk to them, we can affirm or presence and confirm or intention to communicate with them and as a result we might or might not get an answer – in different form – if we listen. Because the answer might not be nice, but it will always be ruthlessly honest. Maybe.

As the reader might notice, this testimony does not reveal any great visions, wondrous encounters with spirits, dreaming or anything of the sort. At first sight, there does not seem to be anything special to this experience compared to a regular camping trip with minimal gear. But we do not have to look far to notice how being in the forest in the same spot for an extended period of time has influenced me. We could argue that it was just me being affected by an unfamiliar scene or me

projecting my own fears/demons/... on the environment, but this would lead us again into a dualistic discussion which only goes around and around and has been discussed widely elsewhere and boils down the the nature/culture dichotomy (see above). What we can observe in this testimony is that there is indeed some interaction between me and the forest, and that the forest is not merely perceived as an inanimate backdrop, nor as partner with which conversation is fluent or self-evident (like it would be with a regular human being). It seems to be something in between. Something which could be perceived, but not necessarily, as can be concluded from the last paragraph. This brings us suspiciously close to the descriptions David Abram gives us of spirits, as ‘manifold invisibles’ at the edge of our vision (Abram, 2014). Could it therefore be that I experienced a spirit or several spirits of that forest, as ‘entities’ with a certain presence which can not be easily perceived in the rush of day to day life, but only when one slows down to stay in one spot for an extended period of time? Are spirits then the mere experiences of the presence of non-humans, similar to the presence of another human being when there is no apparent communication? Building on the testimony above, they are. And what is even more, although it does not look like there is apparent communication, there definitely is some kind of valuable exchange. The last paragraph of this testimony speaks of an ‘emptiness’ when not in the forest anymore. It seems that this emptiness was felt as a loss, as if I was missing something. Therefore experiencing the spirits did seem to be valuable and enriching (although it was not easy).

Whereas I did experience spirits such as in Abram’s view, I did not encounter them physically like Turner. These spirits remained sort of ineffable to me, just ‘beyond the edge of my vision’.

So was I wild land dreaming without me being aware of it since I was experiencing spirits? Maybe I was, maybe I was not. One could say I encountered one or several spirits, but one could also say that there was no grand revelation or divine input involved and it did not feel much different from how I feel normally. Coming out of the forest though, I did feel how being in there had changed me (cf. my feelings of openness and vulnerability) and how this was different to how I usually spend

the day, but I strangely did not notice it whilst being *in* the forest. In other words, I did not know whether I was wild land dreaming or not at the time, and I am hesitant to conclude it now for danger of adding characteristics to the experience in hindsight.

The experience of place in this testimony is quite clear. Since I spent 24 hours in one spot, I got to know the immediate surroundings pretty well. Or did I? It seems like I was more preoccupied with myself than with anything else, to keep cool, to keep the mosquitoes from stinging me, to get comfortable somehow. It seems like I got more intimate with my own discomfort than with the landscape (as Burton-Christie, 1999 would suggest). However, this approach might be a bit too black and white. Maybe it was not just *my* discomfort, maybe this discomfort was also one of the characteristics of the place I spent 24 hours in. This would mean that I rather got to know the place from a felt experience, rather than from a knowledge-based perspective (i.e. which plants grow where, etc). As Ives et al. (2018) writes, knowledge is not the only way of getting to know a particular place in nature. The ‘spirits’, as being presences of the particular trees (and plants, rocks,...) in that place that I perceived, were another way of getting to know the identity of this place. Moreover, imagining myself going back to that place now, would feel very familiar.

The experience of space in my testimony is however less clear. There does not seem to be any connection to the universal or the divine. On the contrary, I even wrote that there was not anything divine to be experienced. I did not feel connected to anything bigger or mysterious. Nor was there any notion of ‘endless horizons’ or ‘endless possibility’ (cf. Tuan, 1997). That would have been quite extraordinary anyway, since I was in a forest which gives a rather enclosed feel (cf. ‘embrace’ in my testimony). It also seems like I felt a bit trapped or even imprisoned within the perimeter I set up myself, longing to go, longing to be free again. So indeed, an element of space does not seem to have been present, and it looks like this brought at least part of the discomfort. It could have been

that, had I stayed longer, this would not have been the case. Maybe space would have started to reveal itself slowly, maybe I did not allow myself to ‘tune in’ sufficiently. According to Martin Shaw, only on the fourth day of the vigil extraordinary things start happening, because, as he proclaims, the clutter of our civilisation ‘is only three days deep’ (Kornevall, 2019). From this testimony, I cannot confirm, nor contradict this statement. It is possible, and worthy of investigation in the future. Therefore, from this testimony, we could argue that an experience of place without experiencing space is after all possible. Yet, we need to remain cautious, since space might have been right there without me noticing.

4.4 Place and sensory awareness

So how do these experiences of space and place relate to my sense of nature connectedness in that place? Did I feel ‘connected’ at all? The first sentences of this testimony reveal my intention of going to this place. I was there to open up *to* something, listen *to* something, as if there was something outside of me that could be communicated *with*. It seems like I was trapped myself in a dualistic perspective. Maybe this is part of the reason why I did not consciously notice in the moment that there indeed was some kind of exchange. Only later, when I did not try anymore to relate to, listen to or communicate with, I grasped what had happened. This seems to be a confirmation of our earlier critique on the concept of nature connectedness and the underlying assumptions it is built upon. We would really rather leave this concept behind and instead work from a notion of expanding awareness. As implied by Abram as well (Abram, 2014) and his idea of ‘stepping back *inside* this world’, the expansion of this awareness is initiated by ‘an awakening of the senses’ in which our senses seem to become more alert, more alive and more receptive (Harper, 1995). The ecopsychologist Steven Harper writes it as follows:

Upon entering the wilderness, one of the first things almost everyone experiences is an enlivening of the five senses. [...] With practice and patience, sensory awareness can be

cultivated to a more focused awareness I call “attentiveness”. In wilderness, we begin to develop a sustained continuum of mindfulness. We are not necessarily focused on a single object, but rather *on the stream of awareness itself*. (emphasis mine)

This ‘enlivening’ of the senses is not something one consciously takes action for. Other than going to the wilderness, there are no exercises or other actions to make this happen. It just happens *by itself*. Maybe during the vigil described in the testimony above, I tried to do too much to connect to something out-there in the natural world (which I might have unwittingly assumed to be different from the ‘normal’ world I live in), to establish and deepen my so-called nature connection. Harper in contrast, does not speak of ‘nature connection’, but solely of sharper, more active senses. These activated senses allow for a more intense experiencing of the surroundings, and might consequently result in a feeling of being more ‘connected’ to these same surroundings. Experiencing place thoroughly seems therefore intricately intertwined with more receptive senses. In other words, receptive senses allow for an intensified experience of place. It is as the geographer Y.F. Tuan wrote already:

Place is a construct of experience in all its modes (Tuan, 1975).

And as he writes later on, the senses are one of these modes. In other words, according to Tuan, the experience of place is built up from several elements, of which sensory experience is one (and thinking, zeitgeist,... might be others). This corroborates our argument that more intense sensory experiences contribute to a more intense experience of place.

Although I do not write in my testimony about my senses being more ‘alive’, ‘active’ or ‘receptive’, I do write that I felt ‘open and vulnerable’ which might indicate a certain kind of increased

receptivity. This confirms that indeed the ‘enlivening’ of the senses indeed just happens in wilder environments, even without being aware of it in the moment itself, and that no action other than merely going into nature is required in order to establish something some would call ‘nature connection’.

Apart from the act of going into the wilderness, it is however not clear from Harper’s argument how these sharper senses come to be.

Also, for Harper, the increased receptiveness of the senses is one aspect of an expanded awareness, which ultimately evolves towards an awareness without focus on a particular object. This kind of awareness does not seem to have been present during my vigil. A next testimony might shed some light on how more receptive senses could lead to an expanded awareness without focus.

4.5 Space, place and extrovertive experiences

The following testimony was written during the vigil itself, a few hours in, as opposed to the previous one which was written a few weeks after the vigil. This vigil was done in the same place , which I had now visited earlier quite a few times, so I was familiar with some of the natural surroundings.

14th of July 2018

I have been here before, I know now I can trust them. The beech, the oak, no need to prove anything. I can just relax. I can already feel them, their emanating presences, rock solid and yet very vulnerable and alive. I seem to slowly, deeply merge with one awareness that connects all that is present here. It does not go gradually, sometimes I dive in deeply to suddenly emerge again, bewildered, on the surface again. And then I dive again, maybe deeper, maybe more superficially. It is all interesting. I grow restless, yes, for not being to be

able to do anything, for not being able to stay under the surface, but it feels somehow witnessed, cared for, supported by this vast awareness.

The massive beech tree I am sitting against feels like a mother or grandmother, its presence emanating something powerfully reliable. Trustworthy. Safe.

Slowly some extra sense seems to become active. A sense that makes me aware of incredibly subtle, all-pervasive joy. It makes my heart leap, my forehead tremble.

It is not here for me, it just is, it just lives, minding its own business. Of course nature is not a mirror. Nature just is.

Witnessing becomes joy, as if eyes float on the same thing as the trees, the blackbird, air. It is all tangible, all energy that weaves itself through itself, and somehow it makes everything exist. 'Me' has dissipated into this endless ocean of energy, soft, subtle energy. I am everywhere, although I can't see it, nor hear it. But I am. I want to merge, ever more vastly.

This testimony clearly shows that I was sensorily (sight, touch) aware of a presence of beech, oak, etc., more than mere visual confirmation. They almost seem like companions. It seems like I had learned my lesson from the earlier vigil in the previous testimony, because this time I let everything just be as it is, without trying to connect to anything. I am both aware of these presences (or spirits) of the surrounding trees and at the same time I seem to be aware of a much vaster awareness, which really was not the case in the earlier testimony. It is difficult to recall how this vast awareness felt at the moment of writing, but having used terms like 'endless', 'everywhere', 'everything', it must have felt quite big and all-encompassing.

Again, the element of place is quite clear in this testimony, similar to the previous one. The locality of the trees, their particular characteristics, and the intense tactile description of the 'presences of the trees' point towards an increased receptivity of at least one sense. This seems to allow for a more intense experience of this particular place.

In contrast to the other testimony however, this testimony seems to have quite some other than sensory elements. I write that I feel an endless ocean of energy, a vast awareness, ... These descriptions come close to Tuan's description of space as endless possibility and wide horizons (Tuan, 1997). Moreover, I seem to write of some unity, something universal (being 'everywhere', 'all-pervasive'). It is remarkable that although I was again in an enclosed forest, I still felt this vastness, this endlessness. At first, I could feel the presence of the local spirits again (like I did unconsciously during the previous testimony). Later on, some 'extra' sense became 'active' which made me tune into this vastness. From this testimony it is not clear why this happened here and not in the previous one. However, as the major difference seems to be that this time I was conscious of the spirits and I was not previously, it might have to do something with this. I was also much less uncomfortable (no mosquitoes or excessive heat this time), and I was already much more familiar with the place, which might have made me a bit more relaxed. We cannot draw any further conclusions on cause and effect of this experience from this though.

We can only observe that first there was a tuning in to the local (spirits, surroundings), which then shifted into a tuning into something else, something 'vaster', although the local was still present in my perception (cf. 'eyes floating on the same thing as the trees, the blackbird, air'). Put differently, it is quite clear that at first the local was experienced more intensely due to sharpened senses and that this shifted in an experience which was less local. It is difficult to make conclusions from statements such as wanting to 'merge, ever more vastly' and a 'dissipated me', but it does seem to be that after a while I did not have a particular focus on any of the local elements (which was the case in the previous statement with the mosquitoes, the boar, the deer, ...). This would therefore indicate an experience similar to what Harper (1995) describes when he writes of developing sensory awareness which develops over time into an expanded awareness without focus on a particular object.

Interestingly, I write about a ‘dissipated me’, which is not to say that ‘I’ was not there anymore. It still was, but it had somehow changed. Interpreting the word ‘dissipated’ as scattered or dispersed (see Definition of dissipate on Dictionary.com, 2019), we could suggest that my sense of self had broadened, but that it had become less ‘dense’, less concrete at the same time. This is very similar to a testimony recorded by the contemporary American mystic Paul Marshall:

[...] at one moment I was rigid, and the next I had become fluid and merged with all there is. There was no sense of individual identity, yet personal awareness and appreciation remained. [...] (Marshall, 2005, p. 25)

Together with other testimonies in Marshall’s book, this shows us that these kind of experiences are not uncommon, and are certainly not the sole privilege of the slightly baffled.

Following the American scholar of religious studies Robert Forman, Paul Marshall elaborates further on mystic experiences in which pure consciousness and a rich experience of the natural world come together (Marshall, 2005, p. 8). He describes this ‘pure consciousness’ as a ‘contentless state of consciousness’, in which indeed there does not seem to be any focus on any specific element. However, he also writes how this contentless, pure consciousness can be experienced together with content from the natural world. In other words, the experience of a contentless consciousness does not exclude the experience of content at the same time. On the contrary, this contentless consciousness (or ‘expanded awareness without focus’ in Harper’s terminology) has the possibility to intensify sensory experience. Marshall calls this kind of phenomena ‘extrovertive experiences’. He writes:

In extrovertive experiences, the mystical features – unity, knowledge, reality, love, luminosity and so forth – characterize experience of the natural world, not experience of something completely beyond the natural world, such as a transcendent god, self, soul, or realm. Hence, [an] experience [...] can be called ‘mystical’ because there was a profound sense of unity, and it can be called ‘extrovertive’ because the unity involved the natural world. (Ibid, p. 3)

Since the elements of ‘vast awareness’, unity and intense sensory experience were present in the testimony above, we could categorize this as an extrovertive experience. If we now remember space as a concept which includes ‘universality’ and ‘endlessness’, and place as a concept which includes identity, individuality and locality and which is intensified through intense sensory experience (as contended earlier), we can argue that space and place come together in extrovertive experiences. The element of space is then represented by the aspect of unity, vastness, pure consciousness and universality, the element of place would be the aspect of intense sensory experience of the local natural ‘content’ (or trees, birds, rocks, ...). Moreover, in my testimony and in extrovertive experiences in general, there does not seem to be an experiential split or distinction between the aspect of vastness/consciousness/universality and the aspect of sensory awareness and its consecutive experience of the local. In other words, in extrovertive experiences space and place are not experienced to be separate and are experienced simultaneously.

It remains important to note that it is not because both aspects are *experienced* to not be separate and are *experienced* simultaneously, that they *are* not separate. Experience does not equal absolute truth. In contrast, keeping Merrifield’s dialectical critique in mind, this is but one angle to look at space and place. However, it does show us that indeed space and place are not separate per se and fundamentally different, as has often been assumed.

More specifically, we phenomenologically noticed that experiences of place and space are deeply related, so we too have to question the Cartesian assumptions. Space and place do not seem to be set apart in this instance. And yet, we keep on using the same terminologies which were put forward to describe phenomena in which they did appear to be set apart. It seems a bit of a paradox, but it shows us that the investigation of space and place does not only necessitate research on the outcome, but also needs to inquire into the assumptions. Using a true dialectical approach, making the same argument or investigating the same outcome with different assumptions, might help us grasp each of the facets of multi-faceted phenomena¹² and provide us with a more whole understanding. This does not mean that we adhere to a postmodernist view in which all truth and observation is purely relative. Rather, we prefer an approach in which each different view and understanding contributes to the make-up of a more complete picture.

Whereas it is thus clear that my testimony can be described as mystical (such as the ones recorded in Marshall's book), it is still not clear whether this can be seen as Wild Land Dreaming, and whether Wild Land Dreaming is some kind of extrovertive experience and vice versa. Hindsight, the concept of Wild Land Dreaming seems too vague to be able to recognize experiences as such. This also impairs us to investigate the role of space and/or place in Wild Land Dreaming.

Since extrovertive experiences are generally characterised by a sense of unity that connects everything that is, it could be seen as a supreme form of 'nature connection'. Viewed from this angle, it confirms our fundamental critique on the concept of nature connection, as the experience of unity coincides with a 'dissipated' sense of self without rigid individual identity. This is completely different than an 'I' which connects *to* something, because in that instance the original I remains intact. The latter could be seen as two human beings shaking hands, whilst the former can be seen as a sublimating ice cube: at the start it is very distinct from its surroundings, but it merges

12 If at all, they are multifaceted... This could also be seen as one way of looking at it.

ever more with its surroundings. It literally dissipates, and yet it is still there. The fundamental difference here is that with connecting *to* there is an active reaching-out to something externally, whilst with the dissipated self there is a rather passive merging with the environment *in which it already thrives*. The former is dual, the latter is non-dual. On this topic the ecopsychologist Steven Harper writes the following:

Our relationship with nature is more one of *being* than *having*. We *are* nature; we do not *have* nature. As Alan Watts once expressed it: “You did not come *into* this world. You came *out* of it, like a wave from the ocean. You are not a stranger here.” (Harper, 1995)

From my experience and others, like Harper’s and Marshall’s testimonies, in ‘nature connection’ there is no ‘other’ to reach out to, there is no other individual to shake hands with. Rather, there is a dissipation or sublimation into the environment, loosening boundaries, sharpening senses. As mentioned earlier, this is very hard to grasp in dualistic language in which subject and object are for example two grammatically separate entities. Thinking of senses that become more active or more perceptive by themselves in wilderness settings so that the environment is perceived more intensely, combined with the mystic’s notion of a blurred boundary between self and world, proves a good argument to say that it indeed is about a passive loosening up rather than active connecting to. To us, terms like ‘expanded awareness’ or ‘intensified sensory experience’ therefore start to cover the implied phenomenon much better.

5. Conclusion

“In the face of such experiences, academic anthropology seems to fall away and become of lesser concern.” - Edith Turner (Turner, 2002)

The famous American anthropologist Carlos Castaneda (1925 – 1998) wrote how his mentor and Juaqui Indian Don Juan increasingly got frustrated by Castaneda’s never ending analytical questions (Castaneda, 1998). Just like Turner’s quote, he tried to shift his pupil’s attention from his hunger for logical explanations towards a hunger for experience. True, deep experience, Don Juan and Turner thought, makes academic analysis much less appealing. Sitting at my sit spot, whilst thinking about my dissertation, I recorded a similar entry in my diary a while ago:

29th of August 2019

There is a truth in everything, a truth before everything, before words, articles, newspapers, books, academia, ... It is the lived truth, the truth in everything. It is always there, does not need proof. Experience is proof in itself. No need to make this truth more true by writing about it, analysing it, fixing it in articles, papers or academia...

I must admit that this had made it difficult for me to find the motivation to write this dissertation. I hungered (and still do) for more experience of the sort of my second testimony, not for analytical satisfaction. And yet, I really felt the urge to inquiry more deeply into this kind of experiences, not out of analytical interest, not in order to find a reason to ‘believe’ them, but as a way to let them have their way with me even more, to consciously feel how they transform me, to remain busy with something so utterly meaningful. Paradoxically, the analytical, autoethnographic process of this dissertation, with its literature review and often interesting publications, has aided me greatly to do

so. For example, it has been instrumental to tackle some general cultural preconceptions about 'nature connection' which helped me to see my own experiences in a much clearer, less romanticised light. Put bluntly, it helped me remove excess material (which was initially added by unsubstantiated societal tendencies) in order to facilitate growth from the core. Similarly, I started this dissertation with some vague ideas about 'Wild Land Dreaming' and how it somehow relates to space and/or place, and I concluded it with a more focused sense of 'spirits', 'nature awareness' and extrovertive experiences. It also showed me how heightened sensory perception leads to more intense experiences of place, which could then evolve into an experience in which the place is observed as being part of a much bigger whole (space) due to the establishment of an awareness-without-focus. The element of an increased sensory awareness is therefore crucial in understanding the relationship between place and space. More so, extrovertive experiences, as mystical with sensory awareness of the surroundings, are examples of space and place coming together and thus provide a good argument to not treat them solely as radically separate any more, as has often been done before in the study of geography. This is not to say that there is no value in treating them separately. It only becomes a problem when this is the only way of dealing with space and place. Because of a lack of data on Wild Land Dreaming, we could not categorise it as an extrovertive experience, nor make any general conclusions about the role of space and/or place in it. In order to do so, more research needs to be undertaken with people who claim to have experienced Wild Land Dreaming.

However, insofar the concept of 'Wild Land Dreaming' was not of any help, the concept of 'extrovertive experiences' was very helpful. Not only did it allow to see how space and place exist together and are fundamental elements of this experience, it also shows how the general tendencies around 'nature connection' are rather counterproductive. As a prime example of 'nature connection', it confirms our critique of unwittingly treating nature as something 'out-there'. Mystical, extrovertive experiences like the ones described above, show us how Cartesian dualism

and the nature/culture dichotomy pervades our way of dealing with the world and that this is but one way of looking at it. Moreover, if we do not pay attention, the same happens in academia. In that case, the mystical loses every ground to stand on and retreats again to the outskirts of our culture, not serious enough to be considered worthy of investigation - or it has to be as an observer of a peculiar people. Do we really want to take this risk again? To lose something this meaningful? My answer is clear. We need to continue to allow academics to be non-dual observer/participant of all sorts of experiences and phenomena. Only then can academia remain appealing in the face of such wondrous experiences. Only then could it become a humble servant of diving ever more into the mystical depths of experience, instead of compiling evidence for what is true and what is not. And is that not what it is supposed to do?

6. Bibliography

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