

In through the outdoors: Exploring the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my understanding of self and my relations with other people and the other-than-human world

by

Scott Caspell

A Thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Education

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY

THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO

© Scott Caspell

August, 2014

Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to the people, places, and experiences that have shaped my life. Thanks to my parents and brother for continuing to support me in everything I do. Thanks to Clare Magee for introducing me to facilitated wilderness experiences and serving as a positive mentor during a pivotal time in my life. Thanks to David Greenwood for encouraging me to develop this project and explore this inner work and path of development through this thesis. Without your guidance my learnings achieved through this research would not have been possible. Thanks to Connie Russell for your enthusiasm and support. I always leave your office feeling better about myself, this thesis work, and life in general. Thanks to Jocelyn Burkhart for your friendship and perspective, and for sharing many walks in the wilds surrounding Thunder Bay discussing themes related to my research. I have much gratitude for the places and other-than-human beings that inspire and guide me in more ways than I even realize. I would like to acknowledge the Social Studies and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their financial support.

In through the outdoors: Exploring the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my understanding of self and my relations with other people and the other-than-human world¹

Abstract

I examine the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my understanding of self in relation to people and the other-than-human world through a critical qualitative approach using auto-ethnography to engage reflexively with my own experiences and to draw out the importance of those experiences in shaping my self-story and way of being. This thesis weaves a critical analysis of the literature with three narratives of my experiences with facilitated wilderness programs, including a vision quest coordinated by Animas Valley Institute. A unifying theme that emerged through the research is my ongoing quest for self-knowledge and the means of finding a more authentic way of being in the world. The thesis concludes with a look at the key elements of transformative facilitated wilderness experiences.

¹ The title for this thesis, *In through the outdoors*, was inspired by the title of Led Zeppelin's (1979) studio album *In Through the Out Door*.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Overview of the research study</i>	1
<i>Positioning myself</i>	3
<i>The path that led me to this thesis topic and auto-ethnography</i>	5
<i>Chapter overview</i>	6
Chapter Two: Literature Review	
<i>Introduction</i>	7
<i>Outdoor environmental education programs</i>	8
<i>Ecological education</i>	9
<i>Place-based education</i>	10
<i>Concluding thoughts on this section</i>	12
<i>Indigenous education and environmental education</i>	13
<i>Decolonization and re-inhabitation</i>	14
<i>Concluding thoughts on this section</i>	16
<i>Personal development and self-knowledge</i>	17
<i>Self-knowledge and the formal school system</i>	18
<i>Approaches to developing self-knowledge</i>	20
<i>Soulcraft: Education and the human soul</i>	21
<i>Visioning, vision quests and Animas Valley Institute</i>	22
<i>Vision quests</i>	23

<i>Animas Valley Institute</i>	24
<i>Concluding thoughts on this section</i>	25
<i>Concluding thoughts for chapter two</i>	25
Chapter Three: Methodology	
<i>Introduction to research methodology</i>	27
<i>Methodology: situating auto-ethnography within the field of narrative research</i>	28
<i>Auto-ethnography – the ins and outs</i>	30
<i>Auto-ethnography versus autobiography</i>	30
<i>Auto-ethnography – a closer look</i>	30
<i>Questions of quality in auto-ethnographic research</i>	31
<i>Research methods</i>	32
<i>Researcher reflexivity</i>	34
<i>Representation</i>	35
Chapter Four: Narratives and Discussion	
<i>Introduction and chapter overview</i>	37
<i>Narrative one: A transformative trip on the Missinaibi River</i>	38
<i>Reflection and analysis of the 2001 Missinaibi River narrative</i>	42
<i>The influence my experience at Seneca College on my self-concept</i>	42
<i>Changes in my relationship with the outdoors</i>	43
<i>Changes in my relationship with other people</i>	46
<i>The role of facilitation in creating change</i>	46
<i>The transformation of my self-story</i>	48
<i>Narrative two: Another profound trip on the Missinaibi River</i>	50
<i>Reflection and analysis of the 2007 Missinaibi River narrative</i>	56
<i>Co-facilitation</i>	56
<i>Decolonizing self through nature-based techniques</i>	58

<i>Shifting personal mythology</i>	61
<i>Narrative three: The AVI vision quest</i>	62
<i>Reflection and analysis of the AVI quest narrative</i>	70
<i>My expectations for the potency of the vision fast</i>	70
<i>The role of the facilitator</i>	72
<i>Tracking my shifting self-story</i>	75
<i>Animism and learning from the other-than-human world</i>	77
<i>Concluding thoughts on the narratives and analysis</i>	80
Chapter Five: Conclusion	
<i>Introduction</i>	81
<i>Important elements of my transformative facilitated wilderness experiences</i>	81
<i>The role of the vision seeker or learner</i>	82
<i>The role of the facilitator</i>	83
<i>Concluding thoughts on this section</i>	88
<i>Influences of this research on my human relationships</i>	88
<i>Influences of this research on my relationship with the other-than-human world</i>	89
<i>Animism and a porous ecological self</i>	90
<i>Animism and environmental education research</i>	90
<i>Decolonization and re-inhabitation</i>	92
<i>Concluding thoughts</i>	95
References	98

Chapter One: Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of this study, including the research questions and themes, as well as potential academic contributions. I provide a personal introduction that helps situate me in relation to my research. I also describe how I selected this research topic and auto-ethnography as a methodology.

Overview of the Research Study

In this study I examine the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my understanding of self in relation to other people and the other-than-human world.² I have approached this research from a critical qualitative perspective using auto-ethnography (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008; Hughes, Pennington & Makris, 2012) to engage reflexively with my own experiences and to draw out the importance of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my self-story and way of being (Plotkin, 2003). This thesis weaves a critical analysis of the literature with narratives of my experiences with facilitated wilderness programs, including a vision quest coordinated by Animas Valley Institute.

This thesis has the potential to make an important contribution to the field of environmental education in several key areas. First, I explore how facilitated wilderness experiences have shaped my personal mythology (Cajete, 1994) and the development of self-knowledge (Miller, 2000; Palmer, 2007). To accomplish this, I use a first person narrative that highlights my path of developing self-knowledge in a reflexive and experiential manner (Miller, 2000; Palmer, 2007; Wilson, 2008). Further, I share how I have transferred such self-knowledge to my life, such as my interpersonal relationships and way of being in the world (Miller, 2000;

² The term “other-than-human world” builds on Abram’s (1996) oft-cited term “more-than-human world,” which for me implies hierarchy. I prefer this adapted version of Abram’s term, as for me it implies that humans are on the same level – just as special and no more special – than the remainder of life in the universe. Plotkin (2012) also uses the phrase “other-than-human world.”

Palmer, 2007; Wilson, 2008). For example, I look at how facilitated wilderness experiences have shaped the decisions I make and what I have prioritized in my life, including the lifework I have pursued. This reflexive, authentic work provides one example of how self-work and lifework has been influenced by facilitated wilderness experiences. In doing so, this research adds to the literature on place-based environmental education.

Second, in this thesis, I describe various educational traditions/experiences/philosophies that have directly influenced my life: personal outdoor experiences (i.e., not organized by a school or organization), ecological education (Puk, 2006; Van Matre, 1990); place-based environmental education (Asfeldt, Urberg & Henderson, 2009; Greenwood, 2003); learning from the other-than-human world (Abram, 2010; Barrett, 2011; Plotkin, 2003); Indigenous³ education (Cajete, 1994; Ermine, 2002; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999); and contemporary cultural traditions of the vision quest (Foster & Little, 1992; Plotkin, 2003). Through an analysis of my personal narratives I examine how these educational traditions have influenced my personal development, including my life-path and self-story.

Lastly, as each of the above-mentioned education traditions relate to Land use and Aboriginal territory, it is appropriate that I address issues relating to decolonization. As such, I look at the role of decolonization for myself as well as the predominantly White field of outdoor environmental education (Root, 2010). Gruenewald (2003) proposed the twin goals of decolonization and re-inhabitation – both critique and vision/action – to help foster place consciousness. In this research, I explore how facilitated wilderness experiences have influenced

³ As the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are often used interchangeably in the literature, these terms will be left as found in this paper. This is similar to the terms non-Indigenous, non-Aboriginal, and settler, which I explain further in its first use in the text. Following other scholars, in order to represent the importance of terms such as Indigenous, Aboriginal, Land, White, Elder, Spirit, and Great Mystery, I capitalize them in this text (Graveline, 1998; Lowan, 2011). However, as the term indigenization is about a process as opposed to a cultural group or person, it will not be capitalized, following the lead of McKeon (2012).

my own process of decolonization and re-inhabitation. In doing so, this study contributes to the emerging body of literature on the indigenization of environmental education (Kapryka & Dockstator, 2012; Korteweg & Russell, 2012; McKeon, 2012) and decolonizing pedagogies (Battiste, 2005; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Graveline, 1998; Iseke-Barnes, 2008; McKeon, 2012; Root, 2010).

Positioning myself

I am a White, able-bodied, heterosexual male from a middle class family of mixed European ancestry. I was raised in Bolton, a community nestled on the banks of the Humber River in southern Ontario, which is the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat First Nation. While writing this thesis I was living in Thunder Bay while I attended Lakehead University, which is situated on Anishnaabe Land, the traditional territory of the Fort William First Nation.

I spent the better part of my childhood outdoors, playing with friends, exploring the forests and farm fields surrounding my home. Even though I had seemingly endless positive experiences in the outdoors, somehow the role that the natural world had in my life diminished during my adolescence. During my adolescent years I spent less time in natural areas, where my imagination and senses were engaged; instead I was often indoors, sitting in a classroom. In secondary school, I was unable to focus in a classroom and spent most of my teen years frustrated with the education system because I did not excel within the conventional system of teaching and evaluation. As far back as I can remember I did not excel at school, nor was I truly engaged in the learning process throughout middle and high school. I struggled with mathematics and science in particular, but also with the desire and ability to focus sitting down in a classroom. Completing high school was something I did but never enjoyed. It was never in my plans to go to university.

Fortunately, following my intuition and passions, coupled with support and guidance from my parents, I chose to enroll in the Outdoor Education Program at Seneca College. This program combined experiential learning, the study of ecological processes, and self-propelled wilderness travel and outdoor living skills. Through the program our cohort spent many weeks backcountry camping. The camping experiences that were organized and led by our college professors helped form the basis of my understanding of the meaning and potential of facilitated wilderness experiences: shared group experiences coordinated by experienced mentors that aim to foster personal development, interpersonal development, leadership skills, and a genuine relationship with the natural environment.

After my college experience, I set out on a journey to use facilitated wilderness experiences as a tool for my personal growth, as well as an instrument for cultural change. I pursued degrees in Environmental Studies and Education, with a focus on outdoor environmental education. Perhaps more than any other discernible factor in my life, outdoor experiential learning has played a critical role in my life and personal development. Consequently, this research focuses on my own experiences with facilitated wilderness programs. In my research the term wilderness refers to wild outer nature, as well as our individual inner nature (Plotkin, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Facilitated wilderness experiences can take people into the outer wilds of the natural world in order to journey inwards into the wilderness of the human psyche and soul (Miller, 2000; Plotkin, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Outdoor experiential education played a major role in my life until 2011 when I enrolled in the Master of Education program at Lakehead University, which will be the focus of the next section.

The path that led me to this thesis topic and auto-ethnography

My first semester in the Master of Education program was exploratory and expansive. I was considering several options for my thesis, and by mid-winter I was lacking direction for my research and seeking guidance. My academic supervisor, Dr. David Greenwood, encouraged me to do something deeply authentic⁴ that spoke of integrity. He urged me to “dream big.” Working with these suggestions, my searching led me away from the focus on Indigenous youth leadership programs, which up until then had been my primary academic focus. By that time I had been hired to coordinate the development of a culturally responsive, Land-based youth program in Nunavut, so I was able to continue working in that field without focussing my research in that area. David’s suggestions led me to revisit one of my larger areas of interest: the influence of facilitated wilderness experiences. This led me to immerse myself in the literature on place-based education, outdoor experiential education, environmental philosophy, and other areas as I sought to formulate a new thesis topic. At the same time I was learning about the importance of researcher self-reflexivity in qualitative research (Bell, 2003; Lichtman, 2010; Lowan, 2011; Richardson, 2005), as will be discussed further in the Methods section of Chapter Three. I began to explore my self-story in relation to the Land, social justice, place-based education, and other topics.

Delving into my experiences by writing personal narratives was a good way to access these topics in a real way. I began to explore my self-story and experiences with facilitated wilderness programs. I liked how auto-ethnography could help me attend to the complexities of my personal experience while helping me situate my story in relation to a broader cultural context and the issues that captivated me (Brandy, 2012; Ellis, 2009). It felt like a great fit for

⁴ By authentic I mean that my actions, relationships and way of thinking are reflective of my values and personal philosophy. To be trustworthy, genuine and reliable.

my interests and objectives, and an auto-ethnographic investigation into the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my life began to take form. I revisited Plotkin's (2003) *Soulcraft*, and after some pensive pondering and Internet searching I formulated a proposal to draw on my previous experiences with facilitated wilderness programs, Plotkin's work, and my participation in a vision quest with Animas Valley Institute as part of my research. With the guidance of my academic committee we revised my proposal, clarified methodological considerations, and I was set to participate in the AVI quest. It is from here that my thesis story unfolds.

Chapter overview

This chapter provided an outline of the study and introduced the questions, themes, and potential contributions of the research. The positioning section offered a personal introduction, which helps situate me as the researcher. The upcoming chapters will build on this personal introduction and include ongoing self-reflexive discussion. In the next chapter I review literature relevant to the themes of this research, and I connect these themes with my personal involvement with facilitated wilderness experiences. These themes will emerge further in my narratives and their analysis in Chapter Four, while I synthesize the entire study in Chapter Five.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature reviewed in this section helps frame my research questions, my methodology, the data collection and analysis, and the discussion and conclusion of this research. A review of the literature also contextualizes my personal narratives and experiences with facilitated wilderness programs. Additionally, this chapter introduces the key themes of this research: environmental education traditions (e.g., place-based education); self-knowledge, soul/inner work, vision quest, learning from the other-than-human world; and decolonization and re-inhabitation. These themes will be expanded upon throughout the paper, with further exploration of the literature integrated into later chapters. A unifying theme that emerged through the research is my ongoing quest for self-knowledge and a desire for a vision of finding a more authentic way of being in the world. This is really the macro narrative that connects the micro narrative threads of this work into a cohesive whole. This chapter connects each of these themes to my main research question: **how have facilitated wilderness experiences shaped my understanding of self and my relations with other people and the other-than-human world?**

In the first section, I look at several educational traditions that have influenced my life path, including ecological education (Puk, 2006; Van Matre, 1990) and place-based education (Curthoys, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003; Knapp, 2012; Piersol, 2010; Sobel, 2004). I highlight how these educational traditions have influenced my personal path of development, while at the same time build an argument for the importance of facilitated wilderness programs that include a focus on reflection and environmental connections.

In the second section I describe my use of the concepts of decolonization and re-inhabitation, which includes environmental concerns (person-place/Earth relations), social justice

(interpersonal work that includes Indigenous – non-Indigenous relations), and inner work (intrapersonal work) (Greenwood, 2010; Root, 2010). I acknowledge the important work of Indigenous-settler decolonization and reconciliation, while framing my research as a component of a broad definition of decolonization and re-inhabitation as I look at how facilitated wilderness experiences have shaped my relationship with self, people and place. The third section looks at educational approaches that support the development of self-knowledge (Miller, 2000; Palmer, 2007; Plotkin, 2008). As this research and my participation in the AVI vision quest are largely about my path of personal growth, it will be important for me to ground the process of inner work and developing self-knowledge in the literature.

In the fourth and final section I look specifically at the vision quest as an approach/tradition for developing self-knowledge and connections with the other-than-human world. I provide a brief overview of Animas Valley Institute, including a rationalization for my decision to include my experience on their vision quest program as part of the data for this research. These sections build an argument for facilitated wilderness experiences in general, and the vision quest in particular, as a means for developing self-knowledge and ways to relate with the other-than-human world.

Outdoor environmental education programs

Throughout North America and abroad there are a wide variety of wilderness education programs. Facilitated wilderness education programs generally offer participants a guided experience that can have a mix of goals including personal growth, connection with the natural world, outdoor adventure, wilderness travel and outdoor living skills, and ecological knowledge. In my experience, facilitated wilderness experiences are grounded in the traditions of ecological education and place-based education. In this section I will overview these traditions that have

directly influenced my perspective; in so doing I will help the reader to understand how these traditions have influenced my life and way of being.

Ecological education

Steve Van Matre's (1990) *Earth Education* and Tom Puk's (2006) concept of ecological consciousness represent two distinct schools of thoughts about the role of ecological education in fostering healthy and sustainable human-Earth relations.⁵ Although David Orr (1992), Paul Shepard (1982), Thomas Berry (1988, 1999) and alternative Western traditions such as Deep Ecology (e.g., Devall & Sessions, 1985; Naess, 1973) have had a broader influence on ecological and sustainability education in North America, Puk (2006) and Van Matre (1990) directly influenced my philosophy and consequently I draw more heavily on their work. Both Puk and Van Matre privilege understanding the Earth's ecological systems (e.g., water cycle, photosynthesis) and claim this capacity as necessary to support a sustained human presence on the planet. They also stress the importance of structuring one's lifestyle and society based on ecological knowledge (e.g., reducing energy consumption).

I agree with the standpoint of Van Matre, Puk and other ecological thinkers⁶ that awareness of the details of human impact on the planet is essential for a healthy long-term human presence. In fact, in my mid-twenties I believed strongly that developing ecological literacy for the Canadian and global citizenry was of utmost importance in order to reduce our societal ecological footprint and move towards sustainability. Yet, over time I have come to believe that focussing on ecological considerations alone will be insufficient to cultivate truly

⁵ The detrimental anthropogenic effects on the Earth's ecological systems are well documented (Berry, 1999; Orr, 1992; Suzuki, 2002). There is a vast body of literature that looks critically at how the growing human population and advancing technological abilities are seriously threatening the integrity of the Earth's biodiversity on a molecular, species and systems level (Wilson, 2002). Other environmental issues include climate change, pollution of the oceans, waterways and air, deforestation, desertification, and species extinction. A further analysis of the ecological crisis stretches beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ See Arne Naess (1973), and Bill Devall and Robert Sessions (1985) for a description of the Deep Ecology movement.

sustainable and mutually beneficial human-place relations (Berry, 1999; Greenwood, 2010; Gruenewald, 2003; Plotkin, 2008).

Scholars and practitioners that exclusively focus on ecological education do not address social issues or help reconcile the historic and systemic marginalization and colonization of minority groups, Indigenous peoples, and the Land (see Cajete, 1994; Graveline, 1998; Gruenewald, 2003).⁷ Although I see ecological knowledge (Puk, 2006) and various ecologically-focused tools, strategies⁸ and curriculum as valuable components of creating healthy socio-ecological communities, ultimately I think a holistic approach should involve broader dimensions of community, such as social, cultural, political and spiritual (Greenwood, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003). Scholars and educators are increasingly looking to multi-faceted place-based responses to various socio-ecological challenges, as represented by an increasing variety of place-related educational literature (e.g., Greenwood, 2010, 2012; Knapp, 2012; Maher, 2012; Sobel, 2004; Wattchow & Brown, 2010).

Place-based education

Place-based education is a tradition that is well represented in the environmental education literature. Brian Wattchow and Mike Brown (2010) note that “place literature is inspired by a desire to develop a realistic response to the many social and ecological challenges that individuals and communities face” (p. xxi). Place-based education is defined by David Sobel (2004) as

[t]he process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts...across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students

⁷ An additional critique of some outdoor education programs that neglect social elements of place is that they may be doing a disservice to the student by creating a false dualism between people and nature (Greenwood, 2012). This may be reinforced if outdoor experiential education only happens “out there” at nature centres or remote canoe trips.

⁸ Examples include Wackernagel and Rees (1996) ecological footprint and Puk and Dustin Behm’s (2003) analysis of the lack of ecological education in Ontario’s public school curriculum.

develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. (p. 7)

The approach of using the local community as a starting point for learning and environmental connections described by Sobel resonates with my experiences with facilitated wilderness experiences, as will be presented in my narratives in Chapter Four.

In their article “Wolves, ptarmigan and lake trout: Critical elements for northern Canadian place conscious pedagogy”, Morten Asfeldt, Ingrid Urberg and Bob Henderson (2009) discuss their place-based university course that is delivered from a remote homestead in Canada's Northwest Territories. This course includes a six-day dogsled trip complemented by a week of homestead living where the students take part in daily tasks, such as chopping wood and hauling water from the lake. This course contains two important aspects of place-based education that I will draw on to discuss an experiential yet critical approach to place-based learning: the role of reflection and storytelling, and attention to a “storied landscape”.

In Asfeldt, Urberg and Henderson's course students create and share personal narratives based on their experience in the program, which the authors propose creates poignant and tangible ways of connecting with place and re-storying human experiences with the Land. The act of writing a personal narrative encourages self-reflection and learning that may not occur otherwise, which can foster ways of knowing oneself and how to relate with the world. Additionally, creating and sharing narratives validates the importance of personal stories and lived experiences. Following their argument, place consciousness arises out of shared experiences on the Land, which is then internalized by writing and sharing personal narratives. This approach, they posit, can guide students towards becoming inhabitants of their places, with deeply vested interests in the long-term health and integrity of the local environment, rather than

temporary residents (see also Orr, 1992; Gruenewald, 2003). Asfeldt, Urberg and Henderson (2009) also emphasize the importance of knowing stories of the local environment. They write,

[a]s educators promoting place consciousness, stories of the place are essential. Without them, the landscape is at risk of appearing empty, which makes it more vulnerable to myriad human abuses.... In a world where we are largely disconnected from nature and landscape, stories from the past are a conduit for reconnection. (pp. 37-38)

In North America, as in other colonized places, having an awareness of settler⁹ and Aboriginal (hi)stories is essential to having a balanced perspective of the human-Land relationship (Greenwood, 2010; Root, 2010).

It is respectful to be aware of the Aboriginal history of the areas where settlers live and travel; without such awareness, newcomers are more likely to perpetuate colonizing patterns, which can have detrimental effects on people and places (Asfeldt, Urberg & Henderson, 2009; Greenwood, 2010). Although Asfeldt, Urberg and Henderson discuss the importance of historical narratives, in this article they do not comment specifically on the importance of Aboriginal perspectives or the potential colonizing effects of settler-Canadian's re-storying their experiences on traditional Aboriginal territory. That being said, there was a great deal of consideration given to the way that storytelling and learning about the storied landscape can help students to develop meaningful place conscious connections.

Concluding thoughts on this section

My personal experiences with facilitated wilderness programs have contained each of the traditions touched on in this section. Ecological knowledge played an important role in my early development as a student and environmental educator, as will be detailed in the first narrative in

⁹ I will follow Joe Sheridan's (1998) lead and use the term "settler" to refer to people who have come to North America since the 1500s. Other academics (e.g., Root, 2012; Scully, 2012) also use this term in their research. The colonization of Indigenous peoples in North America, although never complete or without resistance, was and continues to be destructive for Indigenous people and the Land (Battiste, 2005; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999). Although I use both terms throughout the paper, I prefer the term "settler" to non-Indigenous; for me, it indicates a newcomer to this Land and gives respect and recognition to Aboriginal or First Peoples. Emily Root uses the term ally-settler to distinguish respectful settler-Indigenous relations from historically marginalized relations.

Chapter Four, whereas learning about the importance of socio-cultural dimensions of ecological issues characterized later stages of my personal development. In this thesis I share my experiences relating to my time on the Land and I consider the storied landscape of the places where my facilitated wilderness programs occur. In doing so, I look critically at my personal mythology and relationship with other people and the other-than-human world, including elements of decolonization and re-inhabitation (Greenwood, 2010).

Given that each of the above-mentioned environmental education traditions relates to Land use and Aboriginal territory, coupled with the fact that I have been involved in Land-based education with Aboriginal youth, it is appropriate that I address issues relating to decolonization. As such, I look at the role of decolonization for myself personally, as well as for the predominantly White field of outdoor environmental education (Root, 2010). As a foundation for the discussion of decolonization I will first outline some of the differences and commonalities between the fields of Indigenous education and environmental education.

Indigenous education and environmental education

Indigenous cultures around the world are not a single, homogenous group and it is not the intent here to present them as such; however, numerous Indigenous scholars (Cajete, 1994; Ermine, 2002; Graveline, 1998) and Western intellectuals (Brody, 2000; Davis, 2009) highlight fundamental differences between Indigenous and mainstream Western cultural worldviews. According to Greg Cajete (1994) and Willy Ermine (2002), Indigenous education is grounded in holism (i.e., an interconnection between all people, beings, and the Earth) and focuses on the development of the individual within Indigenous cosmology; this is in contrast to a conventional Western approach to schooling that takes a fragmented human-other approach and places emphasis on preparation for involvement in the modern economy (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008;

Kawagely & Barnhardt; 1999). Cajete (1994) describes how he sees this difference in educational worldviews:

[t]he philosophical perspective received in modern non-Indian school courses, that the world is an inanimate mass of matter arranged by chance into a set of shapes and energy patterns, is a matter of belief, not experience, and is the polar opposite of the traditional Indian belief.... Educators thus face the question of whether they will move the substance of education away from this essentially meaningless proposition toward the more realistic...model that sees the world as an intimate relationship of living things. (pp. 13-14)

Ermine (2002) proposes that Indigenous education “seeks to dispel the fragmented self-world perspective by seeing all of existence as interconnected” (p. 110). Indigenous education (Cajete, 1994; Ermine, 2002; Kawagely & Barnhardt, 1999), with its emphasis on the development of the individual within a cultural context and a focus on interconnection and holism, has much to offer place-based environmental educators (McKeon, 2012).

Margaret McKeon (2012) notes that the prevalent view in environmental education, “with a focus on interconnectedness as well as concepts of transformation, holism, caring, and responsibility, rooted in experiences of nature, community, and land and communicated through story-telling, has been the domain and foundation of Indigenous education models for millennia” (p. 131). With this in mind, settler-educators, including myself, are increasingly looking to Indigenous education philosophies for ways to enhance or guide their practice. Nevertheless, it is vital that settler environmental educators draw on the wisdom of Indigenous philosophies and techniques in a respectful, mutually enhancing, non-appropriating manner.

Decolonization and re-inhabitation

It is necessary for me to engage with processes of decolonization as my research and employment involves Land-based experiences that occur on the traditional territory of various Indigenous communities. Yet, as Root (2009) notes,

little has been written about how complex, decolonizing processes might be conceptualized by and for White Euro-Canadian educators. The decolonizing movement is situated largely within Aboriginal scholarly discourse that attempts to illuminate the social and political contexts of Aboriginal experiences, confront systemic injustices, revitalize culture, and centre Aboriginal knowledge systems as credible and valuable ways of knowing. As a result, most conceptualizations of decolonization have been written by and for Aboriginal peoples and do not make sense in the contexts of non-Aboriginal educators. (p. 32)

For example, in her book *Circle works: Transforming eurocentric consciousness*, Fyre Graveline

(1998) writes about the process of decolonization from an Indigenous perspective:

[d]ecolonization requires and allows reclamation of voice. We are reclaiming our voices. Through voice we speak/write of our acts of resistance, the healing and empowering values of our Traditions and the role of the European colonizers in the destruction of our communities. Through voice we are gaining our own sense of conscious reality and providing another lens through which Eurocentric educators may view themselves. (p. 41)

Graveline and a number of other Indigenous scholars (e.g., Battiste, 2000; Smith, 1999) have written about the challenging and important process of decolonization, reconciliation, and cultural revitalization for Indigenous peoples. Additionally, there is a growing body of literature on decolonizing schooling and teacher education (Agbo, 2004; Haig-Brown, 2009, Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Korteweg, 2010; Lowan, 2009; Tompkins, 2002), and Aboriginal research (Kovach, 2010; Lowan-Trudeau, 2012; Smith, 1999).

There are an increasing number of non-Indigenous scholars (Korteweg & Russell, 2012; Root, 2010; Scully, 2012; Tompkins, 2002) writing about the role of decolonization for non-Indigenous people and educators. Relevant to my thesis, Root's (2009) research investigated what life experiences contributed to the decolonizing journeys of White outdoor environmental educators. Root (2010) argues that "there is a great need to decolonize the largely White, Western field of environmental education" (p. 104). She encourages settler-educators to be critically self-aware by reflecting on their own approaches to, and motivations for, engaging in

work that involves Indigenous territory, concepts, and people. She also cites the importance of learning about Aboriginal history, cultural traditions, and developing authentic relationships with Aboriginal peoples and communities.

As a Canadian citizen (and Treaty partner), educator, and researcher, it is fitting for me to follow the lead of other settler-researchers (e.g., Korteweg & Russell, 2012; Root, 2010; Scully, 2012; Tompkins, 2002) in decolonizing my research and my work as an outdoor environmental educator. I heed Root's advice and strive to be aware of my own Western lens, and to recognize and question my own epistemology in relation to this research. (See Chapter Three for a detailed description of how I went about achieving such self-reflexivity.) I draw on Root's work and other decolonizing literature in my narrative analysis in Chapter Four and in my synthesis of this research in Chapter Five.

While Root's thesis work focused on the decolonization of outdoor educators, Greenwood (2010) proposes that decolonization is important for all people to help create healthy, resilient socio-ecological communities. Greenwood also notes the importance for Indigenous perspectives and participation, especially involving (re)inhabiting traditional Aboriginal territory. Gruenewald (2003) proposed the twin goals of decolonization and re-inhabitation – both critique and vision/action – to help foster place consciousness. He frames decolonization as an important first step – critiquing one's worldview (i.e., myths, values, assumptions) and cultural practices (i.e., lifestyle, institutions, educational programs). To appropriately re-inhabit self and place requires this self-critique, but also explicitly requires applying our knowledge and critique to our daily actions, lifestyles and professional endeavours. As Greenwood (2011) states, “reinhabitation of place is thus a rejection of colonizing cultural patterns – an effort to decolonize unsustainable relationships with self, other, place and planet” (p. 9).

Gruenewald's conceptualization of decolonization and re-inhabitation has a broader focus than many other non-Indigenous authors who write on the topic (e.g., McKeon, 2012; Root, 2010; Scully, 2012). His critical pedagogy of place provides a framework that bridges environmental concerns (person-place/Earth relations), social justice (interpersonal work that includes settler-Indigenous relations), and inner work (intrapersonal work). My research will follow this multi-faceted definition of decolonization and re-inhabitation as I investigate how facilitated wilderness experiences have shaped my relationship with self, people, and place.

The focus of decolonization and re-inhabitation as part of my personal journey, including a significant focus on self-work, is not intended to diminish the importance of the decolonization and reconciliation of Indigenous-settler relations or the re-vitalization of Indigenous culture(s). I do put forward, however that inner work is a significant project in and of itself, and likely an important dimension of healthy human relationships of any kind, including Indigenous-settler relations. In the following section I draw on literature that looks at the importance of self-knowledge and inner work as components of facilitated wilderness experiences and my personal process of decolonization and re-inhabitation.

Personal development and self-knowledge

In this section I build an argument for the importance of developing self-knowledge, with a specific look at how facilitated wilderness programs can integrate inner work. In this research self-knowledge refers to both the awareness and conscious control of one's inner emotional state (Miller, 2000) as well as awareness of one's cultural biases and the personal mythology or self-story that guides one's life (Cajete, 1994). With a few notable examples (Miller, 2000; Palmer, 2007; Wilson, 2008), a review of the literature indicates that there is very little emphasis on self-knowledge in formal education at any level in North America.

Self-knowledge and the formal school system

Jack Miller (2000), a Canadian educator and faculty member at the University of Toronto asserts, “[t]raditionally, schools have ignored the child’s inner life; in fact, our whole culture tends to ignore the inner life” (p. 49). He states that,

[one] of the key factors in the development of healthy emotions and an inner life is the ability to monitor one’s feeling state. One of the key skills is the ability to be aware of the body’s sensations and feelings states so that anger and impulse do not get out of control. (p. 50)

The ability to remain aware and manage one’s emotional state has implications for people of all ages, including children in the school yard as well as for adults negotiating healthy personal and professional relationships. For example, how I remain aware and in control of my emotions directly influences how I manage and relate with challenging co-workers and students in my work as an outdoor educator. It has been my experience that the formal education system does not prepare students, or teachers for that matter, to develop such inner knowledge. Fortunately, however, I have participated in several outdoor education programs that do intentionally develop self-knowledge, even though the majority of outdoor education programs I have been exposed to do not have such a personal development focus.

Bruce Wilson (2008), who has worked as a leadership instructor and trainer with outdoor experiential educators for over twenty years, contends that most of the programs he has worked in “begin with the premise of leading others... prior to exploring the concept of leading oneself” (p. 7). He continues:

a new method of leadership education would be rooted in self-knowledge, and the understanding of oneself, prior to leading others; this awareness of self-leadership is the prerequisite to becoming a genuine leader. The concept that I envision is a wilderness-inspired leadership and self-discovery program facilitated through adventure education. This is one that would encourage students to explore the wilderness that lies within each and every one of us. Solving the problems encountered in travelling the wild places *outside* thus becomes the route for navigating the unexplored *inner* places. (p. 8, original emphasis)

In his master's thesis, Wilson developed curriculum for an 8-day leadership course with a focus on self-knowledge, which he calls the Taoist Alchemic Model of Self-discovery. He then used action research to test its implementation at a post-secondary institution in British Columbia. Interestingly, as part of his research Wilson also went on a vision quest program¹⁰ with the goal of seeking a deeper understanding as to how he should proceed with the leadership curriculum he was developing.

Similar to Wilson's work, Parker Palmer (2007) writes about how the realm of self-knowledge is often undervalued in mainstream education in North America. He suggests that developing self-knowledge will help people transform their work, relationships, and their lives. Likewise, Miller (2000) writes, "[b]y being more attentive to our inner life, or soul life, we can perhaps help in the process of healing ourselves and the planet" (p. 6). My experience is consistent with Palmer and Miller's work in that having the ability to monitor and manage my "inner terrain" enables me to be a more effective person in my various human relationships and professional endeavours. For example, managing my emotional response when working with a challenging student on a three-week wilderness canoe trip can enable me to avoid power struggles and respond to situations as they arise with compassion and a clear mind.

According to Palmer, developing self-knowledge involves increasing awareness of how our personal belief system – or personal mythology – shapes the way we live our lives. On this topic Cajete (1994) proposes that,

[o]ur individual personal mythology forms a dynamic web that informs the very essence of our lives. Awareness of the influence of our personal mythology on the unfolding process of our living is an essential part of self-knowledge. Such awareness begins by becoming more

¹⁰ Wilson participated in a vision quest coordinated by a non-Indigenous organization called Rites of Passage, based in California. This vision quest was facilitated in a tradition similar to the Animas Valley Institute program that I participated in and detail below. Wilson's thesis did not contain more information on the vision quest.

completely conscious of the way our personal myth interpenetrates that of the multicultural universe in which we live. (p. 118)

Building on Palmer and Cajete's thoughts about the importance of self-knowledge, educators of all types and cultures can benefit from structured approaches to help explore their inner life and personal mythology. As Palmer (2007) writes, "[t]o educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world. How can schools perform their mission without encouraging the guides to scout out that terrain" (p. 6)? In an effort to broaden and apply Palmer's work to the field of environmental education I would add, how can adults, parents or educators expect to guide the process of inner work for others if they are not familiar with the process of developing self-knowledge themselves?

Approaches to developing self-knowledge

Palmer (2007) proposes several methods for attending to the voice within: "solitude and silence, meditative reading and walking in the woods, keeping a journal, [and] finding a friend who will listen" (p. 33). Essentially, he supports various ways to reflect, share stories, and contemplate one's experiences. Beyond walking in the woods, Palmer does not promote or discuss ways of learning from nature or the other-than-human world (Abram, 2010; Plotkin, 2003). Like Palmer, Miller (2000) discusses four elements of a curriculum that addresses the inner life: meditation, visualization, dream work, and journal writing. It is interesting to note that each of the four elements that Miller highlights are components of the AVI quest that I participated in as part of this research. Plotkin's (2003) Soulcraft practices have some overlap with Miller's four elements of curriculum, as well as the methods that Palmer proposes for attending to the voice within.

Soulcraft: Education and the human soul

Plotkin's Soulcraft practices are intended to help people connect with their inner nature, what he refers to as the "soul." Plotkin (2008) writes that,

[b]y soul, I mean a thing's ultimate place in the world. I use the word thing to embrace the fact that everything has a particular place in the world and therefore has a soul – all creatures, objects, events, and relationships. By place, I mean not a geographical location but the role, function, station, or status a thing has in relation to other things. (p. 30)

Although Plotkin recognizes that things can have more than one purpose or relationship, he proposes that the soul refers to a thing's "ultimate place" – "the very core or heart of a thing's identity, its decisive meaning or significance" (p. 31). Likewise, in his book *Education and the Soul*, Miller (2000) defines soul as "a deep and vital energy that gives meaning and direction to our lives" (p. 9); he adds that "[s]oulful learning seeks to restore a balance between our inner and outer lives" (p. 5). Miller (2000) details several methods to create a soul-infused education, including "a curriculum for the inner life, use of the arts, and earth education" (p. 140). Plotkin (2008) posits that every being and person has a soul purpose in life – their true inner nature – that can be nurtured through his Human Development Model.

According to Plotkin (2008), the Human Development Wheel, which he also calls the soul/eco-centric development wheel, is a guide or framework for holistic human development and cultural transformation. The model presents eight stages of human development from infancy through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and elderhood. Therefore, the model is a blueprint for holistic human development, but also for creating a soul-centric, or eco-centric, society. In *Nature and the Human Soul*, Plotkin (2008) argues that Western culture has suppressed or otherwise lost the ability to help adolescents mature into true adulthood, which has resulted in a largely adolescent society that is contributing to the various social and ecological issues facing humanity. The model stems from the premise that "nature (including our own

deeper nature, soul) has always provided and still provides the best template for human [wholeness]” (p. 2). He proposes that connecting people with their inner nature can be facilitated through various methods, and that vision quests are one of the most effective methods.

Visioning, vision quests and Animas Valley Institute

In *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers asks Joseph Campbell (1988) what he thinks of Thomas Berry’s suggestion that Western society is in need of a new story (or cultural mythology).¹¹ Campbell (1988) responds: “I’m in partial agreement with that – partial because there is an old story that is still good, and that is the story of the spiritual quest. The quest to find the inward thing that you basically are” (p. 139). Campbell proposed that humans are seeking the transcendent, and he comments that the spiritual quest and visioning are direct paths that many human cultures have used to connect with “the divine presence.”

Similarly, Cajete (1994) writes about the importance of vision for humanity: “[a]s a whole, visions are the source of the important motivation of our lives and the straightest path to fulfilling our innate human potential” (p. 146). He continues, “[t]he elaborations of visioning through ritual and ceremony by Indian people are pregnant with spiritual and psychological meanings.... The Vision quest, among the Lakota, is to find life in one’s being, in one’s world, and in one’s community of relationships” (p. 146). Similarly, David Martinez (2004) proposes that a vision “is more than a way of looking at the world; it is also a way of being-in-the-world. For a vision, in addition to expressing a people’s worldview, also defines one’s responsibility within that world” (p. 97).

¹¹ Berry (1988) writes: “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story” (p. 123).

Vision quests

Various cultures around the world have created and enacted wilderness fasting rites, which are now commonly known as vision quests (Campbell, 1988; Foster & Little, 1992; Plotkin, 2003). European anthropologists introduced the English term “vision quest” to describe the wilderness rites of the First Peoples of North America (Plotkin, 2003). The archetypal vision quest is common to many Indigenous peoples, including similar rituals that have been practiced by peoples in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Plotkin, 2003). Vision quests vary between and even within traditions depending on who is facilitating the process (Foster & Little, 1992; Martinez, 2004; Ridington, 1982). There are numerous approaches to the vision quest with comparable yet differing goals, which may include emotional healing or formally marking the transition – or rite of passage – from one stage of life to another, such as marriage or death (Plotkin, 2003). Plotkin (2003) shares what he believes to be the “basic, universal elements” of a vision quest:

- A remote wilderness setting
- Fasting from food and, sometimes, water
- Solitude (no other human companions)
- Direct exposure to the forms and forces of nature (i.e., only enough clothing and shelter necessary for physical survival and basic comfort, and no distractions from ceremonial intentions, no items of entertainment, reading materials, et cetera)
- Attention-focusing and consciousness-shifting ceremonies, prayers, and practices
- A significant period of time – at least a full day, but usually three or four days and up to as much as several weeks (in which case, small amounts of simple foods are eaten). (pp. 213-214)

At present, there are vision quests being facilitated around the world, some in informal, personal settings, and some coordinated by established organizations who specialize in this type of work (Foster & Little, 1992; Plotkin, 2003; Wilson, 2008). Animas Valley Institute is one organization that runs contemporary vision quests and has carefully crafted their approach over twenty five years of experience.

Animas Valley Institute

Animas Valley Institute (AVI) is a not-for-profit organization based in Colorado. AVI has over 20 guides, many volunteers, three full-time staff, and is “structured as a non-hierarchical, team-led, service organization, with no directors or executives” (AVI, 2013, para. 3). Among other programs, AVI facilitates contemporary nature-based vision quest programs with the goal of helping people become in tune with their inner self through outer journeys in the wilderness. I selected AVI as an organization to take a vision quest through as a result of my connection with Plotkin’s writing and my alignment with the mission and vision of the organization.

According to Plotkin (2003), AVI offers a contemporary Western approach to the vision quest that “[a]lthough different than Native American and other indigenous ways... it is very much nature-based and soul oriented” (p. 214). On AVI courses, the guides¹² use various techniques and activities to enhance the development of self-knowledge and facilitate inner work.¹³ On the AVI vision quest, the natural world is not merely a backdrop for the inner journey, it is part of the process, shaping the experience. Leaders of AVI programs, as with some other facilitated wilderness programs, encourage and mentor the vision seekers to learn from and through the wildness of the Land, as well as the wildness of his or her dreams and intuitions.

The AVI vision quest that I experienced aimed to cultivate a profound interconnection between me and the universe or the Great Mystery. To achieve this, the quest guides used a

¹² The AVI guides are skilled educators who receive intense training through AVI. The guides come from a diversity of professional backgrounds.

¹³ The activities and approaches that the AVI guides use are detailed in Plotkin’s (2003) book *Soulcraft*, and some can be found on the webpage www.animas.org. I detail several of the activities in my narrative in this thesis, but a thorough overview of these techniques is beyond the scope of this paper.

variety of techniques, such as developing our intuition and conversing with the Sacred Other.¹⁴ The activities were intended to help promote an awareness of the interconnection of all beings, and the tools or ability to utilize this understanding to further one's lifework and way of being. My narratives in Chapter Four describe these techniques and my experience with the program.

Concluding thoughts on this section

I purposefully decided to participate in an AVI vision quest as part of this research in order to look closely and critically at this particular approach to facilitated wilderness programs. Prior to my vision quest I had read several of Plotkin's (2003, 2008) books and experimented in a small way with Soulcraft practices (as I detail in the second narrative in Chapter Four). The stated objective of developing vision (e.g., self-knowledge) and using skilled guides and mentors who use approaches and techniques that are nature-based appealed to me. I was craving a better understanding of myself. I have had much success with personal growth through facilitated wilderness experiences in the past, and I value the organizational vision and approach of AVI. These factors contributed to my selection of the AVI vision quest as part of this research.

Concluding thoughts for chapter two

In this chapter I have reviewed a selection of literature that builds a foundation for this auto-ethnographic research. I hope that this section helps prepare the reader to understand my path of development regarding outdoor environmental education, as well as my changing self-story that emerged through my involvement with facilitated wilderness experiences and through this thesis. Exploration of related literature will continue to support my writing throughout the thesis. In Chapter Three I highlight how this auto-ethnography is structured, as well as illustrate how I approach researcher reflexivity, research methods, and academic quality.

¹⁴ A Sacred Other is a non-human being, such as a rock, a tree, an animal, but also the wind, sky, mountain, and so forth.

In Chapter Four I present three narratives from facilitated wilderness experiences in 2001, 2007, and 2012. These experiences are very different from one another in a variety of ways, including my life stage, level of maturity, and my self-story at the time. Although the literature reviewed does not equally apply to each of the three narratives presented in Chapter Four, it relates to the themes of this research and my path of personal development as a whole. In Chapter Five I draw on the narratives and literature to synthesize the findings and themes of the research into a cohesive, interconnected project.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The literature reviewed in Chapter Two built an argument for facilitated wilderness programs and set the stage for my main research question: **how have facilitated wilderness experiences shaped my understanding of self and my relations with other people and the other-than-human world?** Sub-questions for this research included:

- 1) How are various educational traditions (e.g., outdoor experiential education, place-based education, and Indigenous education) influencing my personal development?
- 2) How can this work contribute to the field of environmental education beyond my own personal journey?

Introduction to research methodology

To answer my research questions I utilized a critical qualitative approach guided by auto-ethnography. Norm Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (2000) write that qualitative research can be understood as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). More specifically, qualitative research can be used to understand “a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction” (Creswell, 2009, p. 194). This section details how my chosen methodology and methods are appropriate given the research questions.

In this chapter I situate auto-ethnography within the broader field of narrative research, detailing the methodological considerations for this study and my research questions. I then address the limitations of my methodological framework and highlight issues relating to validity. I detail the methods used for data collection and how these can contribute to researcher reflexivity and the epistemological grounding of the project. Lastly, I describe how I have chosen to represent the thesis, including chapter layout and the rationalization for this approach given the nature of the research questions being addressed.

Methodology: Situating auto-ethnography within the field of narrative research

Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (1990) write, “[o]ne theory in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). The majority of narrative inquiry research focuses on the stories of other people (e.g., Basso, 1996; Bell, 2003; Lowan, 2009; Root, 2010), while auto-ethnography is a distinct branch of narrative research that focuses on the story of the researcher (Hughes et al., 2012; Hamilton et al., 2008). Carolyn Ellis (2009) frames auto-ethnography as “a particular form of self-narrative that has been gaining interest in the social sciences and humanities” (p. 360). In narrative inquiry the focus is the story of the subject(s); for auto-ethnographic researchers, the subject (self) is explored in relation to cultural influences, contexts and complexities (Ellis, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2008).

In this research I use the auto-ethnographic methodological framework to relate my personal narratives with facilitated wilderness experiences to broader cultural trends concerning environmental education. In addition to using narrative or story as a research method to document and express my experiences, I investigate how facilitated wilderness experiences have shaped my self-story (i.e., personal mythology, the story I am living by), thereby drawing on the importance of story and the (re)storying process (Polkinghorne, 2007; Pontius, 2014).¹⁵ I explore and critically analyze my written narratives in light of the question of how facilitated wilderness experiences have been significant to my personal development and the transformation of my self-story. Thus, I will use narrative both as a method to share my experience and as a way of knowing (e.g., epistemology) through which I will analyze my self-story and my relation to cultural stories and influences (Hart, 2002).

¹⁵ See also Berry (1999), Plotkin (2003, 2008), and Sheridan (1998) for further discussion on the need for Western culture to re-story our relationship with the Earth and the other-than-human world.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) warn of some of the risks associated with narrative research, which include the difficulties of using narrative as truth and the researcher being able to “fake the data” or use the data in a deceptive way. Connelly and Clandinin’s concern about the truthfulness of narrative is especially applicable when researchers are collecting and interpreting other people’s narratives. As a goal of this research is to seek an authentic, socially and environmentally conscious way of being in the world for myself it would be counterproductive to “fake the data” or be deceptive in any way. I believe a key to the success of this project is in how transparent, forthcoming and thereby truthful I can be about my challenges and learnings throughout the process.

I heed the advice of numerous researchers (Bell, 2003; Chase, 2011; Hart, 2002; Kovach, 2010; Richardson, 2005) who have cautioned against making broad generalizations from narrative research findings. Being cautious not to make sweeping conclusions from this research is important to keep in mind as I address the second sub question that inquires about the contributions this research can make to the academic community and the field of environmental education. Sherick Hughes et al. (2012) note that rather than attempting to draw broad generalizations from the research, narrative researchers may decide to refocus their analysis to draw conclusions from the study and create additional research questions. As Mary Lynn Hamilton et al. (2008) write, “[a]uto-ethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture, an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (p. 22). I will now discuss the details of auto-ethnographic research, starting with the difference between autobiography and auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography – the ins and outs

Auto-ethnography versus autobiography

Lesley Coia and Monica Taylor (2005) “distinguish autobiography and auto-ethnography suggesting that autobiography focuses simply on self, while auto-ethnography brings forward the shifting aspects of self and creates ways to write about experiences in a broader social context” (as cited in Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 22). There is a broad range of possibilities for determining which aspects of culture to relate to in my research. Looking outward, I examine the educational traditions of environmental education, place-based education, and Indigenous education in relation to my participation with facilitated wilderness programs. Looking inward, I examine my values, assumptions, biases, and my self-narratives relating to my personal mythology and the physical landscape.¹⁶ The challenge for this critical auto-ethnographic research is to expose, reflect on, and question the myths, assumptions and other elements of culture in relation to my self-story.

Auto-ethnography – a closer look

Paul Hart (2002) proposed that, “[t]he purpose of personal or autobiographical narrative is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as lived” (p. 157). This consideration is directly relevant to my research, which sought meaning and significance of facilitated wilderness experiences in my personal development. From this perspective it is less important that my narratives are detailed as thoroughly as possible, but rather that the essence of the experience and my learning is captured and analyzed in relation to various cultural elements previously mentioned. Consequently, I place emphasis on the influence of each of the three

¹⁶ I consider the Land (which includes water, air and earth, and other-than-human world) and other aspects of place to be elements of and interconnected with my culture (and vice versa). See Keith Basso (1996), Hugh Brody (2000), and Wade Davis (2009) for specific connections between various human societies and the intimate, intertwined relationship between place and culture. Further discussion of this nature, however, stretches beyond the scope of this paper.

facilitated wilderness experiences by focusing on my reflection and analysis of my narratives, rather than extensively detailing the experiences themselves. This is especially true for the two narratives that describe experiences that happened in 2001 and 2007, as it is difficult to provide an accurate detailed description of these accounts that happened many years ago. That being said, I endeavoured to provide a rich, thick description (Ellis, 2009) to the extent that my memory allowed, enabling meaning to emerge and be interpreted from the narratives.

Transparency in the objectives, methods, and findings of this research helps address questions of quality in this study.

Questions of quality in auto-ethnographic research

Questions of quality in all forms of academic research are to be expected (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2010). Chase (2011) believes that all narrative research, as with all qualitative research, “needs to be assessed in terms of validity” (p. 424). In relation to auto-ethnographic research, one test of validity is if the work is able to provide an *authentic* understanding of specific human experience (Polkinghorne, 2007). Drawing on the work of Ellis (2004), Joel Pontius (2014) proposed that the word “validity” may be best re-conceptualized and phrased as authenticity: “relating to authenticity, we know that [a] qualitative study is valid when it takes into account the whole person, including emotions and body” (p. 11). One of the guiding principles of my auto-ethnographic study was to seek authenticity in all aspects of the study. I strove to achieve authenticity through several means, including the narrative analysis framework detailed below. Also, the very nature of some of the themes in the analysis – my changing self-story and process of decolonization and re-inhabitation – begs for authenticity and humility, as they are intimately personal.

An auto-ethnographic approach is congruent with my aim to match my methodological and epistemological assumptions about reality and knowledge (Bell, 2003; Hart, 2002). That is, my research is not attempting to provide a definitive, prescriptive truth, but rather is exploratory, seeking understanding with the aim of sharing one truth, one perspective, one story (Bell, 2003; Hart, 2002). If the narratives and analysis are congruent with my stated intentions and methodological grounding, and considered in relation to my biases and assumptions, then the research will stand the test of trustworthiness, rigor, validity, and authenticity. In order to match the goal of validity and authenticity, I used a transparent and systematic approach to research design, analysis, conclusion, and representation (Hughes et al., 2012), which I detail in the following section.

Research methods

In this section I highlight the methods I used to collect data and I rationalize why these methods are appropriate given the methodological underpinning and objectives of the research. I used several methods to collect data, including autobiographical writing and a field journal. I used an autobiographical approach to share my involvement with facilitated wilderness experiences throughout my life. I wrote three narratives that focused on my participation in three separate facilitated wilderness experiences. The narratives are presented chronologically in this thesis. The first two were written as I was preparing the thesis proposal and were constructed primarily from memory of the events as they occurred in 2001 and 2007. The third narrative was written over the course of several months following the August 2012 AVI vision quest. For this narrative I drew on my memory as well as the field journal I started on the quest program and updated throughout the fall of 2012.

These narratives serve as the main entry point for further analysis and discussion. After each of the three narratives there is a reflection and analysis organized by the themes that emerged from the narrative. I did not start the analysis process until each of the three narratives had been written. In order to approach the analysis of my personal narratives in a structured, systematic approach, and to maintain critical reflexivity throughout the research process, I constructed and utilized a narrative analysis framework (Hart, 2002). In addition to the three research questions listed at the beginning of this chapter I looked critically at each of the written narratives with the following questions in mind:

- Why did I include this story in the research? What were my motivations and intentions for including this narrative in the research (Hart, 2002)?
- What perspectives are privileged, silenced or neglected in this narrative (Hart, 2002)?
- How do each of the elements of facilitated wilderness programs, such as the role of the Land, group process, and mentorship relate to this particular narrative?
- As I explore and share this narrative, am I simply reproducing and reinforcing the story I already believe, or am I challenging and critiquing my assumptions and working to re-story my experience in new and creative ways?
- How does this narrative demonstrate the development of self-knowledge?

I drew on these questions throughout the narrative analysis in Chapter Four, although the exact format varies between the three narratives. The analysis was complemented by critical engagement with relevant literature and other themes that emerged through the work.

To complement my narrative analysis I drew from a journal that I started during the AVI vision quest in August 2012 and continued until December 2012. During the AVI vision quest I wrote in my journal every day, averaging two written pages per day. The content of these journal

entries ranged from detailed accounts of the flow and structure of the day to personal reflections on the process and experience. After the AVI program I made five entries at the end of October 2012 and ten entries throughout December 2012. These journal entries vary in length, ranging from several words to four pages. I did not revise my journal entries, but I used the process to encourage the flow of ideas, rather than trying to craft a poetic or articulate representation of my thought process. I decided to include only one section from my journal as data in the thesis, as the journal was primarily used as a reminder of important or poignant thoughts regarding my visioning process.

This structure was designed to ensure a critical and systematic approach, which proactively addressed questions of validity and authenticity, while allowing for emergent themes and discoveries to come forward. Although each methodology and method has its limitations and opportunities, it is my hope that the creation and application of this narrative analysis framework, coupled with the discussion of methodology above, helps the reader to understand the intentions and limitations of auto-ethnography in general, and this study in particular (Hamilton et al., 2008; Hart, 2002; Hughes et al., 2012).

Researcher reflexivity

The importance of researcher reflexivity is well documented (Bell, 2003; Lichtman, 2010; Lowan, 2011; Richardson, 2005). As Greg Lowan (2011) notes, “a reflexive researcher examines his or her role in the research process, reflecting on their experiences throughout the research journey, the influence of their cultural and social positioning, and their interpersonal interactions with research participants” (p. 147). Reading about the importance of researcher reflexivity in the early stages of research development contributed to my selection of auto-ethnography as a methodology, as mentioned in Chapter One. Indeed, the very task of analysing

my self-story and cultural biases and engaging in the process of decolonization is inherently reflexive work. Maintaining an open and reflexive approach to this research significantly contributed to the findings and elements of self-discovery that emerge through the narratives in Chapter Four and are further synthesized in Chapter Five.

I used several methods to maintain reflexivity during the research and writing process. I used my journal, the narrative analysis framework, and the writing process (i.e., writing, revising, thinking, reading, and re-writing) to critically reflect on my role as the researcher throughout the study (Hart, 2002; Lichtman, 2010). In the narrative analysis in Chapter Four, as well as in the conclusion in Chapter Five, I illustrate how my assumptions, biases, and experiences affect the research process and my interpretation of meaning (Lichtman, 2010). By maintaining researcher reflexivity throughout the process, I tried to capture and document my challenges and learnings, which are detailed in Chapter Five (Lichtman, 2010).

Representation

Auto-ethnographic research can have a varied emphasis on self (auto), culture (ethos), or research (graphy) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Nicol, 2013). As Ellis & Art Bochner (2000) note, auto-ethnographic work can be considered to lie “between traditional social science prose and literature and to stimulate more discussion of working the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, passion and intellect, and autobiography and culture” (p. 761). Similarly, Hamilton et al. (2008) note that narrative and auto-ethnographic researchers “often write in first person, using a multi-genre approach that can incorporate short stories, poetry, novels, photographs, journals, fragmented and layered writing” (p. 22). My goal in this research is to produce an artful, fluid meta-narrative that is representative of an authentic, soulful experience.

Chapter One introduced the research project and positioned myself as the researcher. The second chapter reviewed relevant literature, while Chapter Three framed methodological considerations and research methods. Chapter Four, Narratives and Discussion, presents three narratives relating to my experience with facilitated wilderness experiences, followed by a reflection and critical analysis. The third narrative contains a more substantial reflection and analysis than the previous two narratives. This is a result of a building examination of the themes of this work throughout the thesis, and also because this narrative is more recent and consequently probes into issues that are more relevant to my life at the time of writing. In Chapter Five I draw on the narratives and the literature to synthesize the findings and themes of the research. In this chapter I discuss the important facets of my transformative facilitated wilderness experiences. I also illustrate ways that my experiences have influenced my self-knowledge, and my relations with other people and the other-than-human world. Lastly, I discuss my major learnings, new research questions that have surfaced, and future steps for me, as well as share suggestions for vision seekers, educators, and academics working in this area.

Chapter Four: Narratives and Discussion

Introduction and chapter overview

In this chapter I present three narratives relating to my involvement with facilitated wilderness experiences. The narratives are followed by a reflection and analysis of the themes that emerged as they relate to the literature already presented. These narratives serve as a platform for me to explore my main research question: **how have facilitated wilderness experiences shaped my understanding of self and my relations with other people and the other-than-human world?** This research question, along with the sub-questions, are addressed throughout the narratives and analysis in this chapter and further synthesized in the final chapter.

I could have focused this thesis on any one of the three narratives presented in this chapter, but it seemed most pertinent and authentic to investigate the influence of multiple facilitated wilderness experiences, as well as my shifting self-story throughout these narratives and my life over the last 14 years. The unifying theme that has emerged through the research is my ongoing quest for self-knowledge and an authentic way of being in the world. For me, these narratives are indicative and representative of a true journey, an inner process, and a profoundly changing personal mythology.

I begin with a narrative that highlights a transformative near-death experience canoeing on the Missinaibi River while I was in the Outdoor Education Program at Seneca College in 2001. In the reflection I explore the role of this experience in shaping my self-concept and my relationship with other people, as well as my hobbies and ways of relating to the Land. I discuss the role of facilitation in the program as it perceivably influenced my learning and personal growth. I also examine my self-story that emerged to guide and motivate my life in the years after my college experience.

Narrative number two describes a second trip I did on the Missinaibi River in 2007 with a friend.¹⁷ The role of co-facilitation, mentorship, the power of the Land, the use of Soulcraft (Plotkin, 2003) or nature-based techniques for developing self-knowledge, and decolonization are themes that emerged from this narrative. I also revisit my shifting personal mythology at that time in my life. The third and final narrative probes into my experience on a vision quest with Animas Valley Institute in 2012. The analysis of this narrative looks at my expectations for the experience, the role of the facilitator, program design, and the potential for learning from the other-than-human world.

In the analysis of each of the narratives I draw on the narrative analysis tool presented in Chapter Three. Methodologically speaking, my application of the analysis tool varies between the sections based on what seemed appropriate and authentic for each specific narrative. For example, in the second narrative I explicitly indicate when I am using the analysis tool, whereas in the first narrative I address each of the sub-points of the analysis tool without specifically referring to the tool itself. Similarly, the integration of literature in this chapter varies between the narratives based largely upon the themes that emerged and what felt like the most suitable way to address the research questions for each given narrative. My reflection and analysis of each of these narratives is used to explore the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my life; the findings of which are synthesized in Chapter Five. I hope you enjoy the journey.

Narrative one: A transformative trip on the Missinaibi River

A capstone college experience – and a transformational experience in my life – was a 15-day whitewater canoe trip on the Missinaibi River in May 2001. After hearing intriguing stories about this river by previous graduates of the program, I proposed this river as our final extended

¹⁷ I am maintaining the anonymity of this friend to respect the privacy of this individual.

trip and enticed half my class to paddle the Missinaibi River with me. Throughout the winter months our group distributed the tasks of planning the route, menu, budgeting, and logistics for the trip. As soon as the ice began to melt at the college our class was out testing our paddling strokes on the campus lake. In late April we did a whitewater training trip on a local river in southern Ontario. After several months of preparation and skill development our group of eight students and one instructor were ready for the adventure of our lives. Or were we? The ice was late to melt that year and two weeks before our scheduled trip start date the access lake was still choked with ice. Only days before our early May departure date we heard from a local outfitter that the ice was out of the lake. After a 12-hour drive from our college campus, our group was on the shores of Dog Lake, the put-in for our 270 kilometre canoe trip down the upper Missinaibi River. For several days we paddled around islands, underneath towering cliffs, and portaged over the height of land between the Lake Superior and James Bay watersheds. Early on in the trip one of my classmates became ill with a stomach bug. As a result we were aiming to evacuate him at the last road access before the river began its decent towards James Bay.

As our group was nine people total, we had four tandem canoes and one solo canoe. On the third day of the trip the water temperature was six degrees Celsius. It was my turn to paddle the 35-pound fibreglass solo canoe. When our group set off to paddle across Missinaibi Lake the winds appeared to be moderate. As our group made our way across the lake the winds picked up and were funnelled by the natural shape of the lake, which has a great distance of fetch for the waves to build. Before I knew it, I was challenged to keep the bow of the solo canoe I was paddling into the wind, perpendicular to the waves, to avoid capsizing the boat. I was paddling with a bent-shaft paddle, taking approximately 45 to 70 strokes per minute – three strokes on one side, then several brief strokes on the other, back and forth repeatedly. I maintained this rapid

paddling cadence for over an hour. By the time our group was halfway across the lake the waves were well over one metre high; the loose paddles in my canoe became airborne when my vessel crested each rolling wave. The sky was overcast; the winds were howling.

My canoe had several inches of frigid water sloshing around in the bottom, and I was starting to lose feeling in my legs as a result of kneeling in the canoe to keep a low centre of gravity and aid its stability. Our paddling group was now spread out, and I was several hundred metres from the closest shore, a massive rock face that extended a long way down the lake. This rock face is called Fairy Point, a significant Ojibwa pictograph site. I knew that if my canoe turned parallel to the large waves it could capsize quickly and that the chance of a rescue in these conditions was unlikely. My task, then, was to remain focused and keep the canoe pointed at a slight ferry angle towards the far side of the lake and slowly make my way to dry land.

As our paddling group became increasingly separated, I started feeling the effects of mild hypothermia from kneeling in the cold water. I motioned to the nearest canoe to me that I wanted to meet up. I struggled with the wind and waves to paddle up to my classmates so I could bail some of the water from my canoe. I told my friends that I was not able to wait for the remainder of the class, and that I was going to paddle for the shore while I still could. Even with the majority of the water out of my canoe I was still very cold and unable to generate enough body heat while paddling to counteract the cold air and water. My speech was slurred and I was becoming anxious about my ability to remain coherent and focused if the hypothermia progressed. I rounded Fairy Point and was desperate to get out of the canoe at the first place possible. When I came close to an open rocky point I ran the canoe ashore and heaved my body onto the rocks. I could not feel my lower legs, and I tripped and stumbled as I dragged my body and my bag up onto the shore. My feet ached as I tried to support the weight of my body and

move myself onto the rock. Thankfully I had my personal bag in the canoe with me. I stripped down and put on all the warm clothes I had and curled up until my class could come find me. The winds were strong, bending the tree tops like flimsy blades of grass, and pounding the waves against the ancient pre-Cambrian granite shoreline.

After I had rounded Fairy Point, one of the tandem canoes carrying two of my classmates crashed into the rock face; the students needed to scale the cliff face to make it to safety. One classmate got the other person on a rope tether while they collected the bags and items out of the swamped canoe before dragging the canoe up a crevice in the rock face. We lost all our group cutlery, plates, and mugs in the incident, but everything else was salvaged and everyone was safe after the experience. I was the most shaken up of the class.

In hindsight, this experience is potentially the closest I have come to dying in my life, the single event that had the greatest risk potential for my safety. I have also come to believe that it is also the closest I have come to truly living. Paddling across Missinaibi Lake that day was the most alive I have ever felt: the wind in my hair, the spray of the lake on my face, the intense focus on living in the present moment, and the feat of drawing on my physical and emotional reserves to accomplish the essential task at hand. Not for a single moment did I doubt my ability to make it across the lake safely. Even though it was an incredibly challenging and seemingly dangerous task, my belief in self, purpose, and ability stayed strong. This belief in self – or enhanced self-concept – stayed with me well after the trip. My understanding of self and my potential was stretched during this experience.

The remainder of the trip became legendary for our group. The next day it snowed; we paddled past amazing Ojibwa pictographs (although we missed seeing the Fairy Point pictographs up close), and contemplated what life was like hundreds of years prior when the

canoe was the main mode of transportation in this area. We experienced dazzling northern lights. I learned to fillet my fresh catch of fish. I learned an incredible amount of ecological and place-based knowledge, such as new plant species I had never heard about before. Learning about flora and fauna and developing skills relating to wilderness travel and outdoor living transformed my relation with the other-than-human world. The bonds that we formed in our tripping group remain to this day, and I have done personal canoe trips with four members of the group since then. We often reflect on and share stories of this trip when I see my classmates from that program. When I reflect on my experience at Seneca College, with the culminating trip on the Missinaibi River, I am continually amazed at my personal growth and transformation at that time.

Reflection and analysis of the 2001 Missinaibi River narrative

With reflection and the passing of time, it becomes increasingly evident what a profound impact my time at Seneca College – with the culminating canoe trip on the Missinaibi River – had on my life. My experience in this outdoor education program was essentially a progression of facilitated wilderness experiences. There are several facets of my personal transformation during my time in college that are directly related to the research questions in this study, including an increased self-concept, my relationship with the natural world, and my self-story.

The influence of my experience at Seneca College on my self-concept

In college I was fully engaged in the learning process. This was the first time in my life that I was academically successful, which was inspiring, empowering, and ignited in me a love of learning. As someone who had been unable to excel at school, experiencing success and enjoyment in college was a profound experience for me. This experience rekindled my love of learning and I felt more motivated to achieve my personal best than ever before. The facilitation,

group process, and time on the Land during this program are factors that I now attribute to my personal change through the program. It is likely that there were other contributing factors to my personal growth that year. Perhaps I was developmentally ready for an increased academic challenge. Maybe I was ready for change in my life in general. Nevertheless, the increased self-confidence I developed through this program influenced all facets of my being, including my relationship with the natural world.

Changes in my relationship with the outdoors

My relationship with nature and the community where I was living was altered as a result of the facilitated wilderness experiences I participated in at Seneca College. Through the Outdoor Education program I developed a passion for spending time outdoors on a daily basis as well as through extended backcountry wilderness travel. Backcountry travel became a motivating force in my life. There was virtually nothing more I wanted to do with my time than be on the Land, canoeing wild rivers, sleeping under the stars, and sharing these experiences with other people. The sense of living simply and in the moment while being “on trail” brought (and continues to bring) me immense joy. The summer after I graduated from college I led canoe trips in the Algonquin region of central Ontario. During the periods of time off work that summer I did personal canoe trips with family and friends. In fact, every summer since 2001 has been devoted to leading backcountry trips of various sorts.

While I loved being out for multiple days or weeks at a time in wild places, my participation at Seneca also inspired me to be outside on a daily basis even when I was not on backcountry trips. After the program I began to seek out urban green spaces for walking, hiking, canoeing, skiing, and biking. These local recreational endeavours also had a significant influence on my life. My hobbies, habits, and social engagements shifted from being largely sedentary

events to physically active pursuits. From one perspective, these recreational pursuits might seem self-indulgent and dependent upon a certain amount of time, resources, and access to outdoor “green” spaces. What broader benefit to society or the planet do such recreational endeavours provide? Questions of this nature led me to consider what recreation means to me and further reflection enabled me to see outdoor recreation from a new lens – as the ongoing ability to re-create myself. I saw how outdoor pursuits, such as Nordic skiing, helped me re-create the life I wanted to live and the person I wanted to be; to re-create (and in some cases release) friendships based on mutual interests and shared values, and to re-create my relationship with the Land/place.

My desire and ability to enjoy and explore my local watershed on foot, ski, bike, and canoe shaped my relationship with the landscape. There is nowhere in the world I know better than the Humber River valley and the surrounding area of Bolton where I grew up. I recognize now, however, that I know the area primarily through the lens of outdoor pursuits, such as when there is enough water in the river to paddle.

Although my experiences in this watershed can be seen as simply recreational, they nonetheless also strengthened my environmental ethic and fostered an engaged citizenship and increased pro-environmental behaviours. At this time in my life I became concerned for the health and integrity of the Earth on a global scale, my local watershed, as well as my own personal well-being. My college schooling strengthened and expanded my knowledge of ecological concepts and informed me of the degradation of natural areas near and far. I joined my community’s Environmental Advisory Committee as well as a number of environmental and educational organizations that had varying platforms of advocacy, outreach, policy analysis, and environmental education. My community involvement had a direct correlation to time spent

outside in, and my increased connection with, my local watershed. I began to care where my water came from, where my waste went, and became interested and involved in various environmental issues on a local, regional, and provincial scale. My involvement with the fields of environmental education and outdoor recreation cultivated my interest in healthy active living and environmentally conscious living.

While various outdoor recreation activities influenced my values and behaviours relating to the Land, they have also had impacts on the local environment and the planet. Outdoor recreation pursuits are not value free, nor are they without impact. It is not uncommon for recreational users to purchase expensive outdoor clothing and equipment that are often made of petrochemicals that have ecological impacts and varied social impacts depending on where and how the goods are manufactured and transported. I know many paddlers and skiers who regularly drive multiple hours a week to recreate. I help balance these concerns in my life by purchasing quality goods either second-hand or from vendors who have reputable socio-environmental policies, such as Mountain Equipment Co-op. Further, in my daily life I tend to recreate close to home, rather than drive a far distance. I believe life is about balance, and I am aware that my lifestyle has myriad impacts on people and places. Part of the decolonizing process that Greenwood (2010) writes about is learning how to identify and minimize detrimental effects of our actions on people and places at various scales.

I am by no means a model ecologically sustainable citizen; however, my recreational pursuits have contributed to socio-environmentally conscious thought and actions when making choices regarding what to purchase, where to recreate, and other decisions in my life such as where to work. While a recreational lens for using the landscape has been critiqued (Lowan, 2011) as privileging an instrumental relationship to nature rather than intrinsically valuing

nature, in my experience self-propelled outdoor recreation pursuits have been a gateway to deeper environmental thought and pro-environmental behaviours. In my experience, connections with my locale through outdoor pursuits has contributed to improved environmental behaviours and lifestyle choices, as I will explain later on in this analysis.

Changes in my relationship with other people

My experiences with facilitated wilderness programs have taught me that experiences in place, including outdoor recreation pursuits, have the power to influence my self-concept as well as my human relationships. My relationship with my brother Owen is a good example of how facilitated wilderness experiences helped to change some of my human relationships. During our high school years Owen and I had very different interests and social circles and we did not spend time together very often. After my time in Seneca College we began to connect over our mutual interests in outdoor activities, healthy eating, and environmental education. In this way facilitated wilderness programs profoundly influenced my relationship with my brother, which has remained strong to this day. My experience at Seneca College also led me to create new social circles and allow old friendships that were less aligned with my developing personal philosophy to fade away. I believe these changes in my human relationships, as well as the transformed self-concept and relationship with place already discussed, were in large part enhanced by the program structure and the facilitation of the instructors.

The role of facilitation in creating change

As indicated by the title and focus of this thesis, the importance of facilitation in outdoor environmental education has been very important in my experience. There were many aspects of the structure and facilitation of the program at Seneca College that impacted me. Broadly speaking, experiential learning, mentorship, the value of a shared group experience, and the

power of being on the Land emerged as valuable aspects of my college experience. Several aspects of the course structure and facilitation come to mind as being influential for me: participant-centred teaching strategies that focus on the personal growth of the individual, time in nature, and an environmentally conscious philosophy.

One of my professors, Clare Magee, structured the program to provide participants with the opportunity to experience success and accomplishment throughout the learning process. The lessons and content of the program were delivered in a sequential order, allowing me to absorb and build on the material being taught, which contributed to my sense of success. Clare was a very strong and positive role model for me. He championed what I have come to see as an eco-centric/place-conscious way of learning, teaching and living; he demonstrated a respect for people, places, and the other-than-human world in a way that I had not yet seen articulated and modeled so clearly. He also introduced me to the discourse of a Land ethic or eco-centric perspective – what it means to care for self, people, the other-than-human world, and the planet. Clare modeled integrity, compassion, and refined abilities in relating with people, along with superior skills in wilderness travel and outdoor recreation pursuits. Clare created a learning environment that was engaging, respectful and supportive, yet also one with very high academic expectations. Having knowledgeable and inspiring mentors was important for me at Seneca, but also served as a measure of what I could aspire towards as an outdoor environmental educator.

While mentorship was an obvious factor in my growth and learning at Seneca, time outside on the Land was a more subtle factor, but one that I have come to believe is equally important for me. I have no doubt that the structure of the program, with the numerous day excursions and backcountry trips, helped me regain a love and appreciation for the natural world, a strengthened self-concept, and love of life and learning. These themes have since informed my

understanding of what I am now calling facilitated wilderness experiences. In my early twenties, facilitated wilderness experiences helped me transform my life and my self-story. The next section will look at my changing personal mythology (or self-story) through facilitated wilderness experiences.

The transformation of my self-story

Facilitated wilderness experiences through Seneca College helped me re-story and transform my life. By re-storying my life, I mean that my personal cosmology (i.e., my way of seeing the world) and my personal mythology (i.e., the story I was living by, my perceived purpose in life) (Cajete, 1994) were profoundly altered through my participation in this program. My emerging cosmology had a different measure of success than I perceived to be prominent in mainstream culture – it encouraged me to consider the health and well-being of myself, other people, and the natural world, albeit with an emphasis on the natural world at that time. My emerging personal mythology was grounded in firsthand experiences on the Land, coupled with a critical perspective of the rampant consumerism and environmental destruction I saw happening all around me.¹⁸

It seemed to me that my emerging personal mythology situated me on the fringes of dominant culture, literally so in some cases as I found myself on the outskirts of human settlements as I hiked and explored the green spaces not yet developed or paved over. My emerging environmental ethic also placed me on the fringes of society figuratively speaking as I found that I valued different things than most of my high school friends, and I wanted to spend my time, money, and energy in different ways than many of the people in my life. Before my time at Seneca I wanted to live and thrive in mainstream culture – I wanted a big house with

¹⁸ For example, my home community of Bolton began sprawling into the countryside at an increasing rate in the 1990s and early 2000s. The wetlands in three different areas where I grew up playing pond hockey were paved over, as were the woodlots and farm fields that surrounded my community.

many garage doors and beautiful landscaping. After the program I didn't see any way I could function in the mainstream. I wanted different things: I dreamt of creating an alternative sustainable living centre, a place that championed skills, approaches, and values relating to more sustainable ways of being in this world. This marked a radical change in my personal story and perceived purpose in life. Along with the motivation to follow my passions and interests was a certain amount of responsibility and urgency to make this happen to reduce my personal impact and humanity's collective impact on the planet.

I saw my purpose in life as using environmental education as a tool for connecting other people with the Land and ecologically sustainable ways of being, just as facilitated wilderness experiences had done for me. I took it into my own hands to learn as much as possible about environmental issues, and set off to become the best educator I could be to make this happen. I researched various university programs and found that the Bachelor of Environmental Studies program at York University was best suited to my interests. I transferred my college credits and earned an honours degree. Next I went on to complete my Bachelor of Education degree with a focus on Outdoor Ecological, Experiential Education at Lakehead University. I began making decisions that set the course for my life journey in the environmental education field.

My college experience was an important turning point in my life, one that connected me to my childhood interests and provided direction for my future. My entry point into this work was primarily based in ecological interests; it wasn't until later in my life path that I gained a more well-rounded perspective that also included social issues and a broader understanding of human and environmental issues. Up to this point I was mostly concerned about changing human behaviour and culture through education and shared experiences on the Land. I saw the change

that was needed as being outside myself. That personal storyline began to change over time as well, as the next narrative illustrates.

Narrative two: Another profound trip on the Missinaibi River

In 2005, I came across Plotkin's (2003) *Soulcraft* book in a bookstore near York University in Toronto. Several years later, after sharing *Soulcraft* with a friend of mine, the two of us went on a 10-day canoe trip together on the Missinaibi River. This is the same river where I had the transformational journey recounted in the first narrative. I had initially planned this time as a solo canoe trip where I could do some soul searching and visioning for the future. I had finished my Bachelor of Education degree earlier that year, had led my first canoe trip in the arctic that summer, and I was preparing to head overseas on my first big international adventure later that fall. Although I was not completely aware of it at the time, I was preparing myself for what I perceived as a major life transition. It was a transition in several respects, including a shift away from being a full-time student, and as I remember thinking at the time, a passage into true adulthood. My previous major life transition, interestingly enough, was during my time in college, with the pivotal point being the final expedition on the Missinaibi River.

My friend had just returned to Ontario and also had the intention of doing some soul-searching and self-reflection. We decided to do the trip together with the explicit intention of creating the space and time for one another to do what called us. We discussed the desire to co-facilitate each other's journey through discussion, reflection, and the use of various facilitation techniques, such as the *Soulcraft* practices that we had been reading about. We could guide the learning process and serve as facilitators for one another and for ourselves. With the stated intention of personal growth and exploration, coupled with substantial experience leading

wilderness expeditions and facilitating group processes, and a modest understanding of Soulcraft practices, we were set to undertake this self-facilitated wilderness trip together.

We looked at several route options and decided on the Missinaibi for its remote nature and cultural significance. On the morning of October first, 2007 we departed my home in Bolton and began the four hour drive to the train station in Sudbury. We savoured a late lunch with a mutual friend in Sudbury before heading to the train station. After loading my 16'6" yellow Evergreen Starburst canoe and our trip supplies into the luggage compartment we settled into the passenger train for the several hour ride to the river. Around midnight the two of us were dropped off on the side of the river at Peterbell Marsh where the railroad crosses the river. Other people in the passenger car looked at us like we were crazy; it was dark outside and we were many kilometres from the closest road, community, or train station. "You're getting off here!?" several people commented with surprised looks on their faces.

We got off the train and unloaded our gear several metres off to the side of the tracks. I walked down to the river to give thanks and request permission for safe passage, as I often do on paddling trips, a tradition I learned from Clare Magee. I remember standing beside the river in the dark and feeling a palpable vibrancy from the river. The river *felt* alive to me, like I could feel the energy of the water and that place. The Missinaibi River already had a very special meaning for me, partially stemming from the incredibly powerful 2001 trip years earlier, and also from knowing that the river has a rich and storied past reaching back several millennia. During our 2001 expedition, Clare helped our trip group learn about the cultural and historical significance of the river, as Oji-Cree territory, as well as a major travel corridor during the fur trade between the Lake Superior and James Bay watersheds. Cree grave sites, Ojibwa

pictographs, well-worn portage trails, and abandoned Hudson's Bay trade stations are evidence and remnants of the cultural legacy of the Missinaibi River.

There were not many good camping spots that we could see where the train dropped us off, so we pitched our tent on a grassy patch underneath the train tracks beside the river to get a few hours' sleep before making our way downstream the following day. In the middle of the night I was abruptly woken from my sleep as a train passed by overhead. It was the most unpleasant way I have ever woken up in my entire life. Eventually I fell back asleep. My friend woke me just before sunrise and said it was time to start moving. We loaded the canoe and paddled several kilometres to the nearest campsite to cook our breakfast over an open fire. Several years later my friend told me that when he got up that morning and went up to our gear he found the canoe laying across the train tracks. The train that passed by the night before must have caused a wind vortex that sucked the canoe onto the tracks from several metres away where we had stashed our gear. If another train had come by it could have smashed our canoe and ended our trip before we had even put the boat in the water. Clearly we should have done a better job of securing our equipment before going to bed. Symbolically, however, I retroactively believe this incident could be interpreted as a sign of the potential (physio-psycho-spiritual) hazards of this expedition, and to proceed with caution on the journey ahead.

It was a physically and emotionally challenging trip, with the average air temperature being around six degrees Celsius. The water temperature was also very cold, being late in the season. For the first several days of the trip the water level was very low, and consequently the rapids were very rocky and "technical" to paddle, requiring precise manoeuvring to avoid the rocks. Then it began to rain, and it continued off and on for many days. It rained so much that the river level rose over a metre during our trip! The cold weather and persistent rain created

challenging conditions for staying warm and comfortable. I remember several campsites where I was grateful to be able to dry out and warm my bones beside a crackling fire as we cooked dinner and talked intently about our voyage down the river and our larger journey in life. We encountered a number of extraordinary moments on this adventure. We shared our hopes and fears, and also shared time together in thoughtful silence as gravity and our muscles pulled us downriver towards James Bay. Friendship, courage, uncertainty, support, and vulnerability characterized this experience for me. While there are several stories I could share from this trip, one is especially relevant to this thesis.

One evening we pulled our canoe off the river on a rocky ledge where there was no indication of previous human use such as an established campsite. We lit a fire on the river bank and set an intention to use drumming as a tool to facilitate the process of self-discovery, as informed by Plotkin's (2003) Soulcraft practices. The site was fairly flat with grassy patches and a rocky ledge that sloped down into the tannin-rich waters of the river. We were just downstream from a short set of rapids, which offered us the soothing sound of gargling, cascading water in the background. The river was about 100 metres wide at this point. This was a relatively straight section of river, meaning we could see upstream and downstream more than 500 metres before the river bent out of sight. These characteristics offered good perspective and a sense of openness that was not as common on other sections of the Missinaibi. It was partially cloudy, with altostratus clouds forming a ceiling high above us. As the sun set the sky was mottled with vibrant hues of pink, purple, and red.

As the sun set on the Missinaibi River the two of us danced and drummed and called out for guidance by singing and chanting in our own unique rhythm. We used sticks found along the river and the lids of our waterproof barrels for drums. The drumming was interspersed with short

breaks to stoke the fire, personal journal entries, and soul-inspired discussion. Although the details of our conversations have become fuzzy in my memory over time, I do recall candid sharing back and forth at a depth that was uncommon in my other human relationships.

(Unfortunately I have been unable to locate my journal from this trip, so I have no easy memory aids.)

We danced and drummed for hours, well into the darkness of the night. I cried out to the river for guidance and vision, as well as to the four cardinal directions, the Earth below and the universe above. From instruction I had received from teachers in the past I understand these directions each as unique sources of power and insight, so it seemed fitting to draw on these resources in the drum ceremony. After the sun set we danced and drummed by firelight, with the scent of burning cedar filling the air and a sense of purpose guiding the way. Many years later, I still have an image of the riverscape that evening as the sun was setting etched into my mind.

Vivid images, strong emotions, and poignant thoughts flooded my awareness while drumming. The images and emotions that came to me during the drum ceremony were diverse, some unpleasant and others joyous, and they spanned the course of my life. Images from middle school arose, tormenting me with recollections of being bullied at school. I was unclear at the time why these disagreeable images were emerging through the drumming. In the years following the drum ceremony I began to understand how these images related to the foundational experiences of my self-concept and the origin of my insecurities, some of which were continuing into my adult life. Many of the thoughts that came to me while drumming were aspects of my life that I had learned to cope with but were still rooted somewhere deep within my psyche. Feelings of uncertainty and insecurity were re-surfacing in 2007 as I was dealing with a major transition in life. I was leaving the sheltered harbour of student life and heading out into the

tumultuous and uncharted waters of adulthood, international travel, and the full-time workforce. The feelings of uncertainty related to the life transition I was in and how best to proceed.

Feelings of love, compassion, self-awareness, and non-judgement also came to me as a way to integrate the learning from the drumming experience into my life. These feelings, emotions, and thoughts were antidotes to the self-doubt and insecurity that would sneak up on me and limit my self-concept and internal happiness. I remember the potency of the experience and how it related to understanding my identity and the process of coming to know myself. The experience helped me become more self-aware when a critical perspective was limiting my actions and relationships. The next day I collected a handful of palm-sized river rocks on which I wrote a word or phrase relating to these themes that I wanted to remember and bring forth into my life: compassion, non-judgement, love, belief in self. These words related to unhealthy trends and perspectives I developed as a child and adolescent through challenging social situations such as being bullied. I had developed ways of seeing the world, guarding myself, and interacting with others that was rooted in fear as opposed to love, and I was unnecessarily carrying these into my adult life. It appears that I had internalized some of these challenging situations as they re-surfaced in the drum ceremony. The strength of the images and memories that surfaced while drumming indicated to me the emotional, formative energy they maintained for me. Some of these themes emerged again in my vision quest that I discuss in the third narrative. Clearly, the drum ceremony was a very powerful experience for me. I still have these stones today as a reminder of the power of this experience.

Reflection and analysis of the 2007 Missinaibi River narrative

Several important themes stand out to me as I write this narrative and reflect on the experience. First, we used the process of co-facilitation as a means of self-discovery. Second, this narrative provides an entry point to reflect and analyze my ongoing process of decolonization and re-inhabitation (Greenwood, 2010), such as the effectiveness and ethical appropriateness of the drumming ceremony. Lastly, this narrative is representative of my shifting personal mythology from seeing the problems in the world being outside myself to seeing the inner work I wanted to undertake.

Co-facilitation

This trip on the Missinaibi River provided a unique opportunity to explore my understanding of self and how I relate with the world through personal reflection, discussion, and by drawing on Plotkin's (2003) work. My friend and I drew from Plotkin's Soulcraft practices of drumming, and we were also influenced by his language and concept of soul and the importance of inner work. All of my approaches to developing self-knowledge during this trip were cultivated, nurtured, and enhanced through the process of co-facilitation. While it was not a facilitated experience in the way that either the Seneca College or AVI program were, we did intentionally guide and shape each other's experience.

My friend and I maintained an ongoing discussion over ten days on the topics of spirituality and personal growth. Through this process we acted as sounding boards and mirrors for one another on what we heard as the hopes, challenges, and pathways to success. In this way we were facilitating conversations, inviting reflection, asking difficult questions when it would provoke further analysis, and providing insightful feedback where appropriate. These are elements of other facilitated programs I have been a part of. This informal approach to

facilitation is different than many formal outdoor education programs where there may not be an established trust or friendship going into the experience, or a sustained relationship after the program is over. The camaraderie, mutual support, and openness to sharing and co-shaping this experience helped create fertile ground for a profound experience.

While it was incredible to share and co-facilitate the experience with my friend, it seemed to me that I was unable to incorporate the resultant learning into my day-to-day life in a way that discernibly affected my way of being. That is, it seemed as though I did not actually alter my habits or lifestyle after this experience. In the weeks and months following the trip I now believe that I would have benefited from the guidance of an experienced facilitator or Elder to help me transfer the learning back into my life after the experience.

It is interesting to me what I am now seeing in hindsight, such as thinking that I would have benefited from an experienced mentor or facilitator. Yet the lack of an explicit facilitator did not stop me from having a profound experience, or from eventually making meaning of the experience, even if years later through this research. I can see now that it was a profound experience for me. This was the first definable moment I can acknowledge receiving insight from the other-than-human world. I was unaware of the depth of the significance at the time, but I did recognize it as special. The learnings from this experience may have taken more time and unfolded in a different way, but I wonder what would have been different with an experienced facilitator. Would it have been simply the degree of change or the speed of change that would have been different with a mentor? What does this call now for a mentor then tell me about my own process and way of learning both then and now? Is it that I seek external approval and acknowledgement, both from society and from individual teachers? I can see now that in the past

I have had a tendency to seek external guidance and affirmation, and in the future I would like to balance this with a deeper knowing and personal confidence that I am making good decisions.

Embracing the power of personal relationships to “co-facilitate” personal change can be extremely potent and rewarding. Indeed, one of the most effective ways I process things going on in my life is through conversation with friends and family members. This experience on the Missinaibi River helped me realize the potential for co-facilitation to nurture human relationships and foster profound connections with the other-than-human world. With inspiration from Plotkin’s (2003) work, my friend and I were able to create space for the other-than-human world to play a major role in the facilitation of learning and growth. In the next section I will look at the potential for and complexities of Western educators and vision seekers using nature-based techniques, such as drumming, for developing self-knowledge.

Decolonizing self through nature-based techniques

I now believe that our drumming ceremony used nature-based or Soulcraft methods to access my inner wisdom while inviting the other-than-human world into the conversation (Barrett, 2009; Plotkin, 2012). That is, I believe that the drumming was a ceremonial gateway to receive/access vision and guidance from non-human beings, such as the river and local environment where the drumming occurred. I knew it was a powerful experience at the time, but was naive and ignorant to the significance of what we were doing or the potential for transformation through the process. I did not have the experience or guidance in effectively using techniques such as the drumming ceremony. Despite the powerful, insightful experience I had with this drumming, in hindsight I believe that I was unprepared for the learnings and messages presented to me. Did my feelings of naivety and unpreparedness reflect the ineffectiveness of the experience to promote personal change and transformation, or did it reflect what I was ready for

at the time? The awkward feeling stirring in my belly as I began writing this critique relates in part to questions of authenticity and cultural appropriateness of the drumming ceremony.

M.J. Barrett (2009) highlighted this concern regarding non-Aboriginal educators using nature-based techniques (that are often associated with Indigenous peoples) for knowing and teaching. Barrett (2009) suggests a way forward “requires moving beyond accusations of cultural appropriation often placed on non-Aboriginal animists, while at the same time recognizing the historical and ongoing violence done to Aboriginal and other peoples who practice ancient ways of knowing” (p. 12). Even in 2013 as I first wrote this section I was hesitant about sharing this story for fear of appearing culturally inappropriate or disrespectful. Yet asking critical questions of myself, my narratives, what insights they may have into my identity, and what implications they may have regarding my work as an educator and daily life are essential to the decolonizing process (Root, 2010). I heed Root’s advice and strive to be aware of my own Western lens, and to recognize and question my own epistemology in relation to this research.

Drawing on the narrative analysis tool presented in Chapter Three, I now further deconstruct this narrative. Following Root’s (2010) suggestions for decolonizing our experiences, I considered the motivations behind our drumming. We had honest intentions for self-development through the drumming ceremony and our time on the river. We also paid respect to the river upon arrival and made authentic verbal requests for safe passage as I often do on paddling trips. As we had been reading Plotkin’s (2003) work, we privileged ontologies and epistemologies of learning from and with the other-than-human world (Barrett, 2009; Plotkin, 2003), even though we lacked personal experience working with these practices or even the language to describe the experience in this way.

Despite my hesitation, I chose to include this narrative in this study because it reflects my learning edge as a researcher, educator, and vision seeker. The drumming experience had me expanding the margins of my personal experience, while blurring the boundaries of the human/nature/spirit divide commonly presented in Western culture, research, and educational discourse (Abram, 2010; Barrett, 2009). I chose to include this narrative as part of my research because it represents a key moment in my journey for authenticity and truth and highlights the role of Land-based experiences and ambiguity in my experience of this process. When I write about this experience it feels very alive for me, and a sense of excitement arises in my mind. This excitement stems from the feeling of being on the cusp of a new area of learning. This feels like the progressive edge of my work: direct experience that situates me in conversation with the “listening, speaking world” (Abram, 1996, p. 96). This narrative thus feels like it is aiding an authentic process of decolonizing and re-inhabiting self, which I further explore in the third narrative.

Around the time of the 2007 Missinaibi trip I began to seek out different approaches to facilitate the inner work I longed for, including meditation, time in nature, and the informal study of Buddhism and Indigenous philosophies. Additionally, I started to question the personal mythology that had been guiding my life. I connected with Plotkin’s philosophy that humans belong on the planet, and that mainstream Western culture has lost or forgotten how to connect with our inner nature, our soul, as well as the outer nature, what Plotkin refers to as the “Great Mystery.” Rather than only decolonize my relationship with self and place, I wanted to re-inhabit place and self, as Greenwood (2010) proposed. I was learning experientially how to expand my notion of the other-than-human world to include Spirit, divine presence, the Great Mystery. My shifting self-story was not as focused on ecological sustainability, but more on the process of

inner work. My process of inner work has been enhanced through facilitation and, in this case, the support and insight of my friend and travelling companion.

Shifting personal mythology

For me this narrative represents a definable moment when I was actively seeking personal development and increased self-knowledge. During the years 2001 to 2006 I was focused on developing myself as an educator so I could create pro-environmental change in myself and other people. This co-facilitated wilderness trip on the Missinaibi River occurred at a time of change in my life. Influenced by Plotkin's writing, I remember viewing this 2007 trip as a rite of passage from early adulthood to full adulthood. Undertaking a rite of passage was not the original intent of the trip, but through conversations with my friend and through reading Plotkin's work the thought of a rite of passage emerged and seemed fitting. Although I did not realize it at the time, this trip on the Missinaibi occurred at (and I believe contributed to) a major transition in my life. Yet I do not think it was a rite of passage or a transition between life stages as defined in Plotkin's (2008) Human Development Wheel, or by any other definition of the term. Rather, it was a shift in what I am now calling my personal mythology, my self-story.

For the previous seven years I had been deeply concerned about environmental issues and the ecological integrity of the planet. I had focused much of my undergraduate studies on environmental themes, and had just finished a teaching degree with an outdoor, ecological, experiential education focus. Yet the work and life experiences I was being drawn towards did not have an explicitly ecological focus, but rather an emphasis on travel, exploration, and personal development. There was a tension between what I thought I should be doing and what my heart was yearning for. I now realize that this trip on the Missinaibi River also brought me an acute awareness of the value of self-knowledge, clarifying my values and crystallizing my vision

of the person I wanted to be. It was during this time in my life that I started to believe that the change I wanted to see in the world need not only to come from actions and external change; rather, what I desired was a change within me. Instead of believing that the world really needed less people, less greed, and less environmental degradation, I started seeing internal change and the development of self-knowledge (and personal work, personal exploration, self-development through travel) as well as socio-cultural work as my top priority. While for a long time I had valued self-knowledge, this was a notable change in my self-story.

At that time in my life my desire to be on the Land in beautiful and remote places led me to pursue work in Canada's northern territories. It was my connection with the Land that led me to community-based work, Indigenous education, and teaching high school in Nunavut. Spending time in remote communities in the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, as well as my work as a community educator in Uganda, contributed to a shift in my personal mythology towards a narrative that sought and (at least partially) understood and valued the complexity of socio-environmental issues facing the communities to which I was connected. Community-based education, youth empowerment, and inner work entered my personal mythology as important components of an eco-centric, well-rounded way of being and a holistic approach to environmental education. This process continued to take shape up until my time in the M. Ed program, which is the focus of the next narrative.

Narrative three: The AVI vision quest

In early August, 2012 I flew to Colorado for a 12-day vision quest facilitated by Animas Valley Institute. My flight to Colorado happened only several short days after a five-week contract in Nunavut where I had been working with community partners on Baffin Island to design and deliver a pilot Land-based youth leadership program for northern youth. The month

in Nunavut had been amazing, yet very intense and exhausting. I had only 48 hours to get from Iqaluit to my parents' home in Southern Ontario to Colorado for the quest. When I arrived at the quest I was still recovering from the previous month and did not yet feel fully present.

The first several days of the quest were based at a spectacular car camping site about 9,000 feet in elevation in the San Juan Mountains of western Colorado. The guides led us through a progression of discussions and activities to facilitate the process of developing self-knowledge and to prepare us for the four-day fasting solo. The guides drew from a range of Soulcraft activities, including conversing with the Sacred Other (which is described later in this narrative), and a formal introduction to Plotkin's (2008, 2012) Human Development Wheel and Nature-Based Map of the Human Psyche.

One of the first things our group did was to sit in a council circle. The council circle is a ceremonial activity in which the guides would pose a question and every person would respond. In the first council circle each of the 12 participants and the two guides shared what had led us to the quest. This was the first of five council circles that we participated in during the program and for me it was one of the most impactful components of the quest. The guides set up the council in rich ceremonial fashion, introducing the intent and structure for the sharing circle. The intent for the first circle was to clarify and share our personal goals and expectations for the quest. Regarding the structure, the guides encouraged us to share from the heart, to listen from the heart, to speak to the heart of the matter (i.e., be concise), and only the person holding the talking piece could speak. The guides introduced a talking piece and placed it in the middle of the circle. The first person who was inspired to share picked up the talking piece, shared what they had to say, and then passed the item to their left in a clockwise (and sunwise) direction around the circle. Each person had an amazing and touching story to share. This shared group experience

was a very important element of the program for me because it allowed me to see elements of my story mirrored in others as they spoke.

The council circles encouraged reflection, sharing, humility, and compassion. While I did share what was on my mind it still seemed comparatively shallow to what others had to offer. I felt unsure that I had a story worthy of sharing with the group, which I can at least partially attribute to not being fully present at the beginning of the quest due to my busy previous month's activity. I hadn't had a chance to really think much about the quest before I arrived and I was still processing the intense month in Nunavut. A number of the other participants had been preparing for the quest for months and arrived having already reflected on their goals and were ready to articulate why they were there and what they wanted to get out of the experience.

In addition to the council circles, the guides facilitated a number of other activities and discussions throughout the program. I particularly enjoyed a series of activities the guides facilitated relating to how we approach or respond to situations, relationships, and other beings (human and otherwise). For one activity we were instructed to cover our ears with our hands and move about the designated program space with the intensity that we have when we commute to work in the morning during our "normal" life. The activity started and we hurried about the circle almost bumping into one another. After several minutes of chaotic movement, the guides called us all together to briefly reflect and share our thoughts on that experience. For the second half of the activity we were asked to walk barefoot, ears unplugged, and move about the circle with a heightened sense of awareness to how we responded to, and interacted with, our surroundings. It was amazing what a difference it made to feel my bare feet on the earth and consciously consider how I moved the program space! I walked slower, placing each footstep

with care and precision, and I was much more mindful of my movement and body language in relation to the other people in the group.

After these two activities the guides facilitated a group debrief that resonated very strongly with me. In the debrief the guides posed an insightful question relating to how we approach situations in life (e.g., relationships, interactions), whether we rush past or take care and be receptive to the people and places around us. Several participants mentioned that, to them, it seemed like many people rush about their day without noticing their impact on others. Indeed, this activity made me think about the times in my life when I give very little attention to the people or other-than-human beings around me. The activity also encouraged me to look more closely at how I approached challenging situations, human relationships in the questing group, and even the process of visioning. This reminder helped me remain present in my thoughts and interactions with others throughout the quest. Cumulatively, the activities in the first few days of the quest fostered a positive group culture and set the stage for the vision fast.

On day four of the program, we packed up our belongings and drove further up the mountain road to a remote dirt parking lot. From there we put on our backpacks and started to hike away from civilization and deeper into the wilds. For several hours we made our way up the mountain following elk trails through the thick spruce forest, crossing pristine mountain tributaries, switch backing when the terrain became steep. We emerged from the forest into a large clearing on a plateau beneath a prominent mountain peak. Along the plateau there were forested sections for shelter and open sections caused by rock slides that granted us perspective and views of the valley below. At a slightly higher elevation from the plateau there was a rocky talus slope that continued upwards to meet sheer cliffs that rose into the sky to form the 13,000 plus foot peak. There was a spring that came out of the side of the mountain, providing us with

fresh water for drinking and cooking. It was a very magical place, and this area was our base camp for the next week as well as the location for our vision fast. We settled in and continued our program.

For one of the activities we were invited to wander alone until we found a place that attracted us, then stop and tell our story of why we were on the quest to a Sacred Other. We were encouraged to speak out loud from the truth at the depth of our being and to take as long as necessary to share the whole story. The guides asked us to take note of what parts, if any, we left out of our narrative, as well as any strong emotions, images, or thoughts that arose as we spoke our story. I climbed partway up the rock fall clearing until I found a large boulder that felt like a good place to share my story with the unfolding valley before me. What was revealed to me during this activity felt insightful and related to my shifting self-story over the course of my life, which I will illustrate further in the analysis of this narrative. This and other activities helped prepare our group for the vision fast.

Day six of the quest was the time for the vision fast. I fasted for four days, and was in solitude from other humans for three full days. The guides provided us with a number of suggestions for how we could spend our time on the solo, including a variety of exercises and ceremonies we could perform to help connect with our inner truth and the Great Mystery. I selected a solo site that was on a narrow ridge that protruded like a long, narrow finger away from the mountain. There were several clearings offering vistas of the surrounding area, and it was in these clearings that I spent most of my time on the solo. I enacted several ceremonies, following the suggestion of the guides, and spent a good deal of time meditating. For the meditation time, I used a vipassana technique that involves scanning the body for sensation, which I learned prior to the quest through two 10-day silent meditation retreats at the Ontario

Vipassana Centre. I also used a simple meditative approach that involved sitting silently while remaining aware of my thoughts, emotions, and surroundings. Once each day I walked about 750 metres to the stone cairn where I left a pre-determined sign for another quest participant to let her know I was safe and to ensure that she had done the same. Much of my time on the vision fast was spent sitting quietly.

The guides encouraged us to remain aware of strong feelings, images, and thoughts that emerged on the solo and to remain open to what the other-than-human world had to share with us. This was easier in theory than in practice. One of the poignant learnings that resonated with me on the solo was to take care of the small things in life. While I longed to see an elk or another large, charismatic megafauna species, my most important wildlife encounters on the quest were two insects. On the second afternoon of the solo I was sitting quietly in the sunshine, clearing my mind, remaining aware. A small, beautiful blue insect landed on my left forearm. I felt a welcoming feeling toward the little being. The insect crawled around for a little while as I observed intently. Later on that day I had another similar experience while sitting in the same location when a different type of insect landed on my body. I realized that if I hadn't been aware and attentive I may have missed these tiny visitors. In both of these experiences a strong and direct message came to me to "take care of the little things in life, the small things that may be easily overlooked." This was not just a passing thought, but a distinct message that resonated with me.

One of my biggest learnings on the quest was the need to make changes in my life that can help create the structure for me to be in good relation with myself, people, and place. Examples of small changes I wanted to make include limiting the distractions in my life, such as the amount of time I spend on the Internet checking email or social media websites. Being

attentive and making such a small change could open space and time for good things to happen, whether they be time spent nurturing personal relationships, or increased time on hobbies or pursuits that bring me joy, such as playing guitar or being out on the Land. More substantial changes that I wrote about in my journal during the quest include opening myself to, and inviting in, more intimate conversations with the important people in my life. Despite this insight and my encounter with the insects, towards the end of the solo I was feeling bored and frustrated that I had not had the powerful experience that I was hoping for.

When I reflect on the final day of solo I remember dark and overcast skies. When I think about this experience, I notice in my body that my breathing becomes shallow, my shoulders begin to hunch over, and tightness forms in my stomach. For me, this embodies the experience of my self-disappointment. I was being self-critical for not living up to my hopes for the solo and this was creating a building sense of frustration in my mind and tension in my body. I felt disappointed on both a personal level for not having a profound spiritual encounter and on an academic level as I was concerned that I would not have enough quality ‘data’ to work with for my thesis. I began to wonder if it was a mistake attempting to research such a personal endeavour.

On the final day of the solo I felt embarrassed that I did not have a more positive, powerful, and insightful solo. When I arrived back to the whole group I was welcomed with open arms and huge smiles. This warm welcome changed my mood very quickly and was quite meaningful for me. It was thrilling to see the excitement and the light in everyone’s eyes! In the afternoon we gathered again in council circle. Here, every person had the opportunity to share elements of their solo experience. One woman shared how she did not have the profound spiritual awakening that she was expecting; she joked about how she somehow expected the sky

to part and thunder and rain to usher in a spiritual vision, like a Hollywood movie. I chuckled to myself, as I think I too was expecting such a noticeable, undeniably powerful experience on my solo. My expectations and self-critical perspective influenced my feelings of success on the solo. The group experience and hearing others share their story of their quest helped moderate my self-imposed expectations of the quest and helped put things in perspective.

The next day we hiked back to the vehicles and drove back to the car camping site where we began a transition into post-course life. Back at the site our guides facilitated several transference activities that had us working in small groups, thinking and sharing how we would bring our learning from the program back to our lives after the quest. As before, the facilitation and mentorship of the guides, along with my interaction and relationship with the other members of my group, significantly contributed to my experience. Indeed, in these three examples – returning from solo, the council circle post-solo, and the transference activities at the end of the quest – the facilitation and shared group experience were pivotal for me as they brought perspective and made space for reflection when I needed it most. This excerpt from my personal journal from the last night on the quest describes this:

Tonight, as the scent of the newly fallen rain fills the air, with the San Juan Mountains silhouetted on the horizon, and the Perseid meteor shower is at its finest overhead, feelings of contentment fill me. After hearing everyone's stories of their quest experience, being in this beautiful place, I am now more fully in love with the Great Mystery (life process). What I need/yearn to do now is further cultivate my love of self, my life, and the place where I live. Is my vision then to embody these thoughts, to bring them to life? Move forward from a place of love.

I am being coached by the guides and encouraged through conversation with my peers to develop tools, approaches, and ways of thinking that further enhance my desires and my goals. What shifted from a frustrating end of solo is now a rich, inspiring love story. This was encouraged and nurtured through the intentional facilitation of the guides, the physical space selected for the program, and the designed course structure that allowed and created time for re-integration after the solo and wilderness component of the program.

This afternoon I wanted to drive away from this experience and these people and keep moving on with my life. By coming into the experience very full I was challenged

to receive a vision and to make the most of the experience. Here at the end of the quest I am starting to draw connections and see how this experience will relate to my life beyond this program, and how I will relate this experience to others in conversation and through my thesis. As our guides said to us today, “it’s not how you tell your story, but how you live your life.” A good reminder indeed.

Reflection and analysis of the AVI quest narrative

Reflecting on my experience on the AVI vision quest brings me a range of emotions, thoughts and memories. For me, the journal excerpt above is indicative of the benefits that facilitated wilderness experiences have brought me: increased self-concept, and feelings of belonging, inspiration, purpose, and aliveness. The support of the group, the mentorship of the guides, the power of the Land, coupled with time to reflect and make sense of the experience, are at the core of why these experiences have been so influential in my life. On the other hand, my facilitated wilderness experiences have always involved a sense of ambiguity, personal challenge, and unpredictability. In this analysis I will explore several themes that emerged from my reflections on the AVI quest narrative: my expectations for the vision fast, the role of the guides, the structure and curriculum of the quest, and the importance of learning from the other-than-human world.

My expectations for the potency of the vision fast

Surprising to me, the solo was not the most powerful aspect of my quest, which is likely a result of a variety of factors. In this section I will theorize why the vision fast was not as impactful for me as the other components of the vision quest or other facilitated wilderness programs. First, as I already mentioned, I was not as ready as I could have been for the quest, largely as a result of rushing into the program from an extremely busy time in my life. Additionally, maybe I did not spend enough time in the vision fast location, or the fact that it was not my bioregion detracted from my experience or my ability to connect with that place. Also,

my expectations for the quest in general, and the solo in particular, may have been unrealistic. In retrospect, I believe I was hoping for notable, undeniable signs of change. As a result I do not think I was as receptive as I could have been to the questing experience or the learnings available to me on the quest.

Through this research I have been seeking to understand and explain the role of facilitated wilderness experiences in shaping my ability to know myself and the world around me. It is possible, however, that my effort to comprehend, rationalize and document my process of inner work through this research may have been beyond my current level of preparation, knowledge and skill. Perhaps I was over prepared (or prepared in a particular way) for the vision quest as a result of my thesis work, academic reading, and previous involvement with facilitated wilderness experiences. My previous experience may have led me to, among other things, favour my rational, intellectual mind, to the neglect of fully embracing an embodied, sensual experience on the vision fast. Maybe my inner voice over powered the influence of the Land. Moreover, combining such a personal endeavour with a research study added a palpable self-awareness that did not completely distract me from the quest, but it did make me more self-critical of the process. I do not intend to fully explore these all of these thoughts in this thesis, but I believe it is important to recognize that I am uncertain why some facilitated wilderness experiences are distinctly impactful while others are much less so.

Nevertheless, the message I did receive on the vision fast, to take care of the little things in my life, has stuck with me since the quest. Further, the medium in which I believe I received this message, via the insects on my vision fast, has led me to do significant theorizing in Chapter Four and Five about the role of animism and learning from the other-than-human world. The potential to receive insight from the other-than-human world, as proposed by Barrett (2009) and

others was my “ah ha” moment on my quest, although the significance of this learning did not solidify until the writing stage of this thesis long after the AVI quest was over. Although there are still some elements of the vision quest that remain ambiguous and will require further contemplation well beyond the scope of this thesis, there are several aspects of the program that I am able to analyse with more certainty, including the role of the facilitator in shaping my experience.

The role of the facilitator

The guides on the AVI quest influenced my experience of the program in a variety of ways. They helped create a positive and supportive group culture through a series of welcoming activities. The guides also provided ongoing guidance for the development of self-knowledge throughout the program, both when we were in a group and on our own. Additionally, the guides’ language, facilitation, and the structure of the program, including Plotkin’s (2008) Nature-Based Model of the Human Psyche, helped me explore my self-concept and identity.

The guides enhanced my ability to relate to the area with their nature interpretation (e.g., species identification) as well as through sharing personal stories of past experiences in that place. For example, one of our guides shared his experiences bow hunting for elk in the area. These facets helped the experience “come to life” for me, creating accessible pathways to knowing that particular place, rather than occurring in an “empty” space. This echoes Asfeldt, Urberg and Henderson’s (2009) observation: “[a]s educators promoting place consciousness, stories of the place are essential. Without them, the landscape is at risk of appearing empty, which makes it more vulnerable to myriad human abuses” (p.37).

Although the AVI guides shared respectful personal narratives of previous time spent at the quest site, their narratives were virtually devoid of information pertaining to Indigenous

history or treaty rights, let alone contemporary Land ownership or livelihood considerations of any kind. In some ways, not knowing the areas' historical significance or ownership made it easier to view the area as a "pristine" space for a vision quest since we were unaware of any political or controversial issues to distract us from our experience. However, not knowing the cultural or political history of the area being used for a facilitated wilderness program, such as this quest, sets a dangerous precedent that such considerations are not worthy of discussion or concern. This approach, even if unintentional, is problematic as it disregards the historical and/or spiritual significance of an area for its human inhabitants and may be perpetuating cycles of colonialism and oppression (Newberry, 2012). The guides did, however, mentor our group to learn from the other-than-human world, which arguably contributes to the decolonization of human-place relations (as will be discussed in detail below). The guides also taught us about Plotkin's (2012) Nature-Based Map of the Human Psyche, which can be used to understand our inner workings and decolonize ourselves and our self-story.

We learned about the four dimensions of human wholeness or four facets of self¹⁹ in the Nature-Based Map of the Human Psyche model. Plotkin posits that each person has these inner resources but, for many, they may remain undeveloped and/or misunderstood. According to Plotkin, an important component of well-being at an individual, community, or cultural level can be attained by gaining awareness of our inner resources, including both our gifts and limitations, and then working to create wholeness and balance. Thus, one of the goals of AVI programs, and a holistic approach to wellness and learning more broadly, Plotkin (2012) proposes, is not to eliminate undesirable symptoms or facets of ourselves, but rather to cultivate wholeness of our inner resources. In Plotkin's model, each of the four facets of self also has a fragmented or

¹⁹ The four facets of self are: North, the nurturing generative adult; South, the wild Indigenous one; East, the innocent/sage; and, West, the muse-beloved.

wounded sub-personality that forms during childhood as a defence mechanism.²⁰ According to Plotkin (2012),

the function of the sub-personalities is to protect us, especially psychologically and especially during childhood: they keep us safe by keeping us small. I mean *small* in the psychological and social senses: relatively powerless, non-assertive, harmless, invisible, and unaware; or conversely, psychologically small by appearing socially, economically, or politically “big” through the wielding of immature, dominator power over others. (p. 26, emphasis in original)

Working with the concept of the sub-personalities on the quest helped me make sense of some of my personal struggles and re-occurring themes or situations that have caused me strife. By using Plotkin’s model as a guide I was able to see how my fragmented sub-personalities formed as a child and served me at an earlier time in life by keeping me “small” to avoid or manage uncomfortable social situations. However, sometimes my sub-personalities resurface as an adult and limit my ability to nurture healthy relationships. Several instances of this were illuminated for me on the quest, including how I avoid social situations where I think I may humiliate myself socially by not being smart enough. I was able to connect this patterned behaviour to my decreased self-concept as a child who did not excel at intellectual tasks, as discussed in the first narrative. It was powerful for me to draw connections between some of my personal responses to life’s challenges and the insight into how they originated in childhood and may have actually served a helpful purpose at one point in time. I can now identify and then choose to either minimize these wounded aspects of myself in my daily life, or continue to respond in ‘old’ ways.

This self-awareness has had a notable impact on how I deal with situations when my sub-personalities arise. The guides’ skilled facilitation during the program helped me interpret and

²⁰ Plotkin’s (2012) sub-personalities are: North: Loyal Soldiers; South: Wounded Children; East: Escapists and Addicts; West: The Shadow and Shadow Selves. See Plotkin (2012) for more information on the four facets of self and the corresponding four sub-personalities.

apply Plotkin's work to my own circumstances, which strengthened my understanding of self and how I relate with the world. As a result, my self-concept and self-story is shifting from being somewhat of a helpless victim of my old ways to being more able to identify and respond in constructive and empowering ways. This is one way that my self-story has been shaped through facilitated wilderness experiences.

Tracking my shifting self-story

As noted in the narrative, one of the activities the AVI guides facilitated had us sharing our self-story with a Sacred Other, be it an animal, rock, or the sky. While sharing my life story with the valley below me, several points stood out to me. I noticed how my self-story had undergone a significant change that I had never taken conscious note of before. In 2007, my zealous desire to make drastic change in the world through education began to occupy a less active role in my personal mythology. Although I had noticed shifts in my perspective relating to the importance of environmental sustainability work, as expressed in the analysis of the 2007 Missinaibi River narrative, I had not until that moment spoken the story in its entirety nor been able to see it from a bigger perspective.

Additionally, what was not apparent to me until further reflection while writing this thesis, was the tension and incongruence between my beliefs and my behaviour in the time between the 2007 Missinaibi River trip and the AVI quest in 2012. Between 2007 and 2012 there was a tension between the sustainable life I thought I wanted to live and my actual lifestyle choices. During this time I continued to hold on to the vision of creating a sustainable learning centre and the desire to immerse myself in creating local livelihoods, relationships, and skills relevant to and emergent from the bioregion where I was living. However, my passions were leading me to fly to the arctic every summer to lead canoe trips and spend time in remote areas. I

still lived a relatively ecologically conscious lifestyle wherever I was living.²¹ Yet as the years went on, each spring, when some friends were planting their gardens (and I have longed to have my own garden) and rooting themselves even deeper in place, I was packing up my things and heading north. This is a trend that continues in my life now.

I cannot fathom not going north in the summer, and consequently I justify my actions, lifestyle, and the use of resources (e.g., jet fuel) to sustain my way of being. I have turned down multiple job offers because they would prevent me from continuing the outdoor and northern work that has fuelled me for over a decade. This is one example that is representative of the tension I have experienced between the life I think I “should” want and the life I am happy actually leading. I don’t think either of these life paths are inherently right or wrong, however, the incongruence between my intentions, behaviours, and life structure have been a cause of internal stress and dissatisfaction.

Strengthening my self-knowledge and becoming more aware of my perceptions, as I am doing through this thesis, has the potential to contribute to a more fulfilling life. Reading the work of Donald Epstein et al. (2009) on reorganizational healing and the Triad of Change as a model for personal transformation has helped me make sense of the incongruence between my perception and my behaviour. Epstein et al. (2009) write:

[t]he premise of the triad is simple: all change includes structure, behavior, and perception. Plainly stated, for each structure, there is an accompanying behavior and perception; for each behavior, there is a structure and a perception; and, for each perception, there are certain structures and behaviors that define and support it. (p. 481)

The triad model thus considers the relationship between our behaviour, structures (how our life-systems are organized), and perceptions. Epstein et al. propose that incongruence amongst any of

²¹ For example, the majority of clothes I wear come from a secondhand store, and I continue to purchase fruits and vegetables that are grown locally and in season. While in the north, I eat local wild “country” food, such as seal, arctic char and caribou on an almost daily basis.

these three elements will cause dis-ease (which could manifest in the form of health concerns or relationship struggles), tension, and/or struggle. In contrast, aligning these facets can contribute to a state of flow, well-being, and joy. In this way, the triad is applicable to all aspects of our lives, including physical, relational, and spiritual dimensions.

The triad model helped me make sense of the tension in my life. I had changed my behaviour and structure, but held on to the perception of the life I wanted to live. The conversing with a Sacred Other activity helped me become aware of these facets of my identity and self-story. This level of personal knowledge is part of what Palmer (2007) described as the importance of understanding our identity. Living with integrity, Palmer suggests, involves shifting incongruent aspects of our lives so we can cultivate wholeness and flow, rather than tension and challenge. This example illustrates the importance of self-knowledge and the dis-ease that can result if one is not in tune with one's identity and living with integrity. This is one tangible way that this facilitated wilderness experience shaped my understanding of self. I continue to work to align my beliefs, behaviour, and life structure as I write this thesis, which I will discuss further in Chapter Five. The conversing with a Sacred Other activity is also an example of how the AVI guides facilitated learning from the other-than-human world throughout the quest.

Animism and learning from the other-than-human world²²

Although the AVI guides coordinated the program, they facilitated the experience so the other-than-human world was the primary teacher. A sense of mystery and ambiguity carried throughout the program, supported by the language, activities, and the structure of the program.

These factors helped situate humans in a web of interconnection with the other-than-human

²² I recognize that readers may not have similar experiences or beliefs relating to soul-work, spirituality, and animism. I do not mean to imply that my path of development is the only or best way to know self and the other-than-human world.

world, rather than as superior. The Soulcraft activity of conversing with a Sacred Other is a great example of how the AVI guides positioned the other-than-human world as a subject to be communed with, as opposed to an object to control. These factors fostered a humble sense that we were all subject to larger forces at play, which is representative of Plotkin's (2008, 2012) work and the mission of AVI.

Regarding soul work and programming on the vision quest, Plotkin (2012) emphasizes the significance of positioning our “encounters with the other-than-human world [as] the central feature. [To] allow nature itself to be the primary therapist or guide, while the human mentor or advisor becomes more of an assistant to nature” (pp. 7-8). The guides and the course structure of the quest encouraged participants to be receptive to what the other-than-human world had to share with us, whether it was plants, animals, the sky, mountain, or other non-human entities. The guides did this in numerous ways, including through several activities that had us conversing directly with other-than-human beings, and other activities where we were instructed to remain aware and open to what messages we might receive from the animate world around us. The guides also shared stories of conversing with Sacred Others from their personal journey and previous quests they had guided. In this way, the AVI quest situated “ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this living field, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape” (Abram, 2010, p. 47).²³

The guides also instructed us to listen to our own inner nature, our soul, by tuning into our intuition and inner voice. To help acknowledge our inner voice the AVI guides encouraged us to pay attention to emotionally charged responses to people, situations, dreams, and so forth, as they may bring particularly poignant and important messages or learning. For example, when

²³ It is interesting to note that David Abram (1996, 2010) is a colleague of Plotkin and has guided for AVI in the past.

we were beginning the process of selecting our solo sites the guides had us close our eyes and turn around several times to disorient ourselves. Then, with our eyes still closed, we were asked to feel which direction we were being drawn to for the solo site and to point in that direction. For some participants, including myself, this exercise confirmed the direction where we already wished to go, while for a surprising number of participants they were pointing in – and being drawn towards – an area that either contradicted their rational mind, or at least was not a direction they had consciously thought to set up their solo site. After that activity we were encouraged to continue to be aware of our inner voice as we set out to physically look for a site to enact our vision fast.

By guiding AVI participants to learn how to listen to their unique inner nature, their soul, as well as the other-than-human world, participants had the opportunity to experience the interconnection between themselves and nature. Such a connection is part of Plotkin's (2012) mission "to shape a new Western psychology that acknowledges humanity as, first and foremost, natural, of nature – not separate from it" (p. 8). In my experience, AVI programs help participants not only acknowledge this proposition, but to experience this interconnection firsthand. In this way, the AVI course structure and guides are, as Barrett (2009) has urged, providing opportunities for a "porous ecological self" to emerge, a self that is able to intentionally relate with the other-than-human world, be they plants, animals, spirit, or other non-human beings. Barrett (2009) proposed that,

[o]ne of the most important roles of environmental educators and researchers is to open up spaces for a porous ecological self to be named, engaged, and lived. Acknowledging this self has the potential to disrupt dominant and oppressive power relations which (re)produce the human/nature dualism which is frequently named as a primary root cause of current anthropocentric environmental destruction. Furthermore, the possibility of learning more directly from Earth, in a state of open awareness, can become (re)valued. (p. 11)

AVI participants are guided to seek a vision of how to integrate their experience with the other-than-human world and the Great Mystery into their self-story, behaviours, and lifestyle.

I thus found that AVI is conducting innovative and authentic work using facilitated wilderness experiences to achieve their organizational mission. While the long term cultural implications of AVI's work remains to be seen, based on my own experience in the AVI quest, I believe there is a huge potential for educational approaches like this to help people develop self-knowledge and transform their lives in profound ways.

If the ability to listen to one's inner nature, one's soul (Plotkin, 2012), and listen to outer nature all around us is indigenous to homo sapiens, as Abram (2010), Barrett (2009), Plotkin (2012), and Sheridan (1998) propose, then there is great potential for human communities anywhere to decolonize, re-shape, and re-story (all) their relations – with self, other people, and the other-than-human world. This could form the foundation for a profound re-inhabitation (Greenwood, 2010) of self and place on an individual and cultural level by providing a means to develop deep and meaningful connections with ourselves, our places, and all beings.

Concluding thoughts on the narratives and analysis

In this chapter I have presented three narratives that focus on impactful wilderness education experiences. As shown in the narratives in this chapter, the two trips on the Missinaibi River were transformative experiences for me. Indeed, without these experiences I would likely not be where I am today – in graduate studies or involved in my work as an environmental educator. Undertaking this research provided me with a unique opportunity to select the AVI vision quest as an experience to include in the research based on the stated intentions of the program. In the last chapter, I will synthesize the themes of my research, discuss my learnings, and make suggestions for what my research may offer the field of environmental education.

Chapter Five: Synthesis and Conclusion

Introduction

Undertaking this research has been a process of discernment for me. Writing the narratives for this study has helped me more fully understand myself, has clarified ways that facilitated wilderness programs have influenced my human relationships, and has provided deep insights into my relations with the other-than-human world. In this chapter I draw on the narratives and the literature in order to synthesize my learnings, key findings, and potential contributions of my research to the field of environmental education.

First, I illustrate two important facets of my time on the Land and my transformation through facilitated wilderness experiences: the role of the learner and the role of the facilitator. Second, I look at the ways that facilitated wilderness experiences have influenced my outer world, including my relations with people and the other-than-human world. In this second section I examine the role of animism and the importance of learning from the other-than-human world. Third, I look at my personal journey with decolonization and re-inhabitation, complemented by discussion of the indigenization of environmental education. Lastly, I discuss my major learnings and my suggestions for other vision seekers, educators, and academics working in this area. I also share new research questions that have surfaced and outline future steps for myself.

Important elements of my transformative facilitated wilderness experiences

Reflecting on my experiences and analyzing the narratives presented in this thesis has led me to identify two elements that were foundational to my personal transformation through facilitated wilderness experiences: the role of the learner or vision seeker, and the role of the

facilitator. I now present an overview of each of these facets drawing on the literature and examples from the narratives.

The role of the vision seeker or learner

As the learner and vision seeker, the potency of each facilitated wilderness experience was enhanced or detracted by three qualities: personal readiness, open mindedness, and the conscious intention of self-development. These qualities can be amalgamated in the following question: to what extent is the learner fully engaged, open, and committed to the learning experience? Each of these qualities played a significant role in contributing to my transformation through facilitated wilderness experiences. For example, during my time at Seneca College and on the 2001 Missinaibi River trip, I strongly demonstrated each of these three qualities, which I now suggest contributed to my transformation at that time. In contrast, during my AVI quest I had an open mind and the intention of learning, yet I was not physically or emotionally ready for the experience, at least partially as a result of the busy month before the quest program. I believe this lack of readiness on my behalf limited my growth through the quest.

As a learner and vision seeker, my process of developing self-knowledge has been enhanced by critical self-reflection and aided by the use of several theoretical frameworks, such as Plotkin's (2012) sub-personalities, animism (Bai, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Harvey, 2006a), decolonization and re-inhabitation (Greenwood, 2010), and the Triad of Change model (Epstein et al., 2009). These concepts and models have helped me make sense of my facilitated wilderness experiences and have provided a framework to explore and communicate about my path of self-development. Since my AVI vision quest I have remained more attentive at tracking my emotions and thought processes and have found Plotkin's (2012) sub-personalities particularly

helpful. For example, I am now better able to recognize my sub-personalities and be aware of when I am having an emotional, “old” response to a challenging situation.

The role of the facilitator

This study has investigated the influence of facilitated wilderness experiences in my life. In this section I examine the role of the facilitator in shaping the participant experience in wilderness programming. There is a substantial amount of literature relating to facilitation and leadership in outdoor experiential education (Gookin & Leach, 2004; Myles & Priest, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997). Drawing on this literature, coupled with reflection on my own experience represented in the narratives, I have discerned three pertinent elements regarding the role of an effective facilitator: their intention for the program, their skill set, and their capacity. In this section I will discuss these important elements of facilitation, supported with examples from my narratives, followed by a brief discussion of several key aspects of facilitation in wilderness programming.

Based on my own experiences, I believe the most important characteristic for an effective facilitator is their genuine intent to be of service and contribute to the holistic development of the participants. This element is captured in two of Priest’s (1994) important components of outdoor leadership: awareness and empathy for others, and the motivational philosophy of the outdoor leader. Certainly I believe that the facilitators mentioned in each of my narratives had the intention of genuine service: Clare Magee in the first narrative, my friend in the 2007 Missinaibi River narrative, and the AVI guides. For me, the intent to be of service comes across as a passion, willingness and ability to support and nurture participants’ growth.

In the Seneca College program and the AVI vision quest the guides were exceptionally skilled at facilitating a group experience while personalizing the instruction for each participant.

For example, before the solo portion of the AVI quest the guides met with each participant individually to provide customized suggestions for what activities and ceremonies we could perform on our solo to get the most out of the experience. Clare Magee also facilitated personal meetings with each student on a number of occasions, and he also made himself available to students outside the regular class hours to help us with coursework or to bring us on outdoor excursions, such as white water canoeing. Clare's passion, willingness and ability to go above and beyond the base requirements for his job, coupled with his warm and encouraging demeanour, helped create a supportive learning environment and gave me the impression that he was committed to his students' growth and development. For an educator to show the interest and ability to provide personalized guidance over a period of time indicates to me a genuine intent to be of service and contribute to the holistic development of participants.

The second important facet of an effective wilderness facilitator is his or her skill set. This skill set includes what the leader knows, the tools and techniques she or he employs to guide participants, and the ability to help participants engage with the Land as a subject and teacher, as opposed to merely a backdrop for the experience. Examples include the activities, leadership styles and debriefing strategies the facilitator is able to utilize. In my narratives I detailed a number of activities that the AVI guides facilitated, as well as the drum ceremony that my friend and I co-facilitated on the 2007 Missinaibi River trip. The facilitators discussed in my narratives used their tools and techniques to achieve varied goals of developing self-knowledge, interpersonal skills, meaningful connections with place, and technical skills (e.g., Nordic skiing, knot tying).

The importance of technical skills, instructional skills, and group management skills have traditionally received a significant amount of attention in the outdoor education leadership

literature (e.g., Myles & Priest, 1999; Priest, 1994; Priest & Gass, 1997). Programs and authors that privilege these elements of outdoor leadership have received critique for being too formulaic (Loynes, 1998, 2002), for disregarding other important elements of community and the outdoor landscape (Greenwood, 2012; Gruenewald, 2003), or for neglecting colonial roots of outdoor education – and in particular recreational canoe travel – in Canada (Newberry, 2012; Root, 2010).²⁴ Nevertheless, skills relating to participant instruction and group management have been important in my history with facilitated wilderness experiences.²⁵

Abram (2010) and numerous others (Foster & Linney, 2007; Louv, 2005; Plotkin, 2008; Sheridan, 1998) highlight the need for people in contemporary Western culture to have access to direct experiences on the Land. Facilitated wilderness programs are one tangible way for people to experience the Land; however, some critics argue that many outdoor education programs are anthropocentric, often using a particular environment merely as a backdrop for technical skill instruction and leadership development (Wattchow & Brown, 2010). In my experience, the facilitator has played a major role in helping participants engage with the Land as a subject and teacher, rather than merely as a place to learn how to canoe or develop leadership skills, for example. As illustrated in the analysis of the third narrative, on the AVI quest the guides skillfully facilitated the program so the other-than-human world was a subject to be communed with, thereby encouraging a porous ecological self (Barrett, 2009) to be named and experienced. The facilitation of the AVI guides significantly contributed to my ability to be receptive to the ways that the physical environment shaped my experience. Therefore, it was not only time on the

²⁴ Chris Loynes' (2002) generative paradigm, Gruenewald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place, and Newberry's (2012) analysis of the absence of a critical discussion of the colonial roots of outdoor education and canoe travel in Canada are several notable critiques in this area.

²⁵ Much has been written on leadership styles (Gookin & Leach, 2004; Priest & Gass, 1997) and instructional strategies (Gookin, 2006; Stanchfield, 2007) in outdoor experiential education; however, further exploration of these nuances of facilitated wilderness programs is beyond the scope of this research.

Land that influenced my learning, but effective facilitation was momentous in helping me experience animate Earth (Barrett, 2009) in a meaningful way.

The final element of an effective facilitator is their capacity to use their judgement in applying their knowledge and tools when working with people in wilderness education programs. Effective facilitators are able to discern when it is best to use a certain facilitation style or activity depending upon the situation. Another dimension of a facilitator's capacity is to be self-aware and able to remain open, compassionate, and grounded and thus capable of minimizing the extent that their own personal issues negatively influence interpersonal relationships with students and co-workers. Each of these elements of a facilitator's capacity converge in the following questions: what is the leader motivated to pursue and capable of doing? How is the leader able to use their knowledge and skills to work with participants and the learning environment to invite growth and foster transformation?

From my experience as a facilitator I have found it can be a delicate balance determining what program options will provide the most benefit for a particular group. During the ten summer seasons I led canoeing programs with youth there were many days when I had some flexibility in deciding with my co-instructor what we should do to make the most of our program. The physical landscape, weather and wildlife often influenced the daily flow and program options on wilderness canoe trips I have guided. Portages, polar bears, rapids, black flies, thunder storms, northern lights, windy lakes, and calm sunny days each influence a facilitated canoe program in particular ways. Some days we needed to push the group to travel further to find a suitable campsite. Other days we could be creative and facilitate programming relating to environmental connections (e.g., lessons on natural history, wilderness skill development, or quiet reflective time on the Land), provide structured fun (e.g., whitewater

canoe play and skill development in rapids), or unstructured downtime at the campsite for socializing, rest, or play. Each of these programming options can add educational value to a canoe trip, but too much of one or the other can detract – rather than enhance – the participant experience, group culture, and environmental connections. In this example, it was my role as the guide to discern how to best facilitate the wilderness experience, keeping mind the goals of the program, the opportunities the learning environment had to offer, and the needs of the students. I have found several factors beneficial in making these decisions: organizational support to deliver a unique educational experience, adequate time to be flexible and creative with programming, and sufficient training, experience, and “tools” (i.e., knowledge, activities and lessons) to draw from.²⁶

Talking broadly about the role of facilitation in wilderness programs, a common feature in each of my narratives is the ability for the facilitator to involve my whole person in the learning process, create a supportive learning environment, and help me reflect and make meaning from the experience. In each of the experiences described in the narratives a guided reflection coordinated by the facilitator helped me process and make meaning of the experience. A good illustration of this is the end of the AVI vision quest when the guides coordinated an activity where we as participants worked in small groups to discuss our learnings from the program and future steps as we returned to our home lives. This structured opportunity to reflect, discuss, and vision a path forward made a huge difference in how I interpreted my experience and how I moved forward into my life after the quest. In each of the three narratives the role of the facilitator offered something unique to the experience and enabled learning and growth that would have not been possible without human mentorship. As my narratives and analysis

²⁶ Further exploration of the nuances of facilitator judgement and decision making on wilderness programs is beyond the scope of this paper.

indicate, in my experience the role of the facilitator in wilderness education has been instrumental in developing a deeper understanding of self, strengthening my interpersonal abilities, and helping me connect with place.

Concluding thoughts on this section

I have found that the role of the participant and the role of the facilitator were pivotal in my transformation through facilitated wilderness experiences. These reflections about the important facets of facilitated wilderness experiences are not comprehensive or complete. I build on the thoughts presented in this section below in my discussion of animism and my personal decolonizing journey. Further theorizing and critical analysis beyond this study in the areas of eco-psychology (Abram, 2010; Fisher, 2013; Plotkin, 2012), animism (Bai, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Harvey, 2006a, 2006b) and environmental thought (Berry, 1999; Greenwood, 2010) will continue to deepen and re-shape how I conceptualize the important elements of my facilitated wilderness experiences.

Influences of this research on my human relationships

Facilitated wilderness experiences, along with this research process, have shaped my human relationships in a variety of ways. Many of my closest friends are people I have met through wilderness programs I have taken or through my work as an outdoor environmental educator. During the thesis process I have engaged in conversation with a number of people in my life on the themes of this research and the role of transformational experiences in our lives. Doing so has actively shaped my human relationships through shared soulful conversation. For example, the research process inspired me to contact my friend with whom I went on the 2007 Missinaibi River trip and we engaged in several insightful conversations about our journeys together. Further, I am extremely grateful to have been able to share candid conversations on the

topic of soul and transformation with a dear friend in Thunder Bay who is on a similar journey. I have also been in touch with one woman who was on my AVI vision quest. We have shared emails back and forth, and when we met in Argentina while I was travelling, we had intense discussions about our personal journeys. Sharing a common language and experience of the AVI vision quest greatly aided our discussions, allowing us to go into greater depth. Additionally, as mentioned in the analysis of the first narrative, my relationship with my brother Owen has been strengthened through my involvement with facilitated wilderness experiences. These relationships continue to shape my life through conversation and shared experiences.

Not only have facilitated wilderness experiences shaped who my friends are and what we talk about, it has altered the way I communicate and interact with the people in my life. Although it is difficult to draw a direct, tangible correlation between facilitated wilderness experiences and my interpersonal abilities, I do believe my human interactions have changed through these experiences. I have found that I am now more open to sharing my thoughts and feelings, and I am more tuned in to the emotional state of those around me. Although there have been a number of notable changes with my human relationships as a result of facilitated wilderness experiences, I believe that these changes are comparatively shallow in relation to the significant change in my self-knowledge, as well as my relationship with the other-than-human world.

Influences of this research on my relationship with the other-than-human-world

This research has revealed a number of ways that facilitated wilderness experiences have shaped my way of perceiving and relating with the other-than-human world. As the first narrative shows, my relationship with the outdoors and my local community changed dramatically as a result of facilitated wilderness experiences through Seneca College. New hobbies, such as Nordic skiing, and my work as an environmental educator at my local

conservation area, are two tangible changes that came about in my life. On a deeper level, the second two narratives indicate how this research – and especially the AVI vision quest – has strengthened my ability to experience the world as a web of animate beings.

Animism and a porous ecological self

If only in a small way, this study has created space to explore and discuss how a “porous ecological self” (Barrett, 2009) emerged through my visioning process and encounters with the other-than-human world. It wasn’t until the end of the research process that I revisited Barrett’s (2009) dissertation and realized that there had been a notable shift in my perception towards a belief in animism, as discussed above in the second and third narrative. Like Barrett, I wrote about my “insights garnered through intimate interactions with plants, animals, and the world of spirit” (2009, p. 2) attained through the drum dancing ceremony on the Missinaibi River and through the encounter with the little blue bug on my vision fast, both of which involved a heightened relationship with other-than-human world. While I had an awareness of animism throughout my life, I had not consciously experienced it in a direct and discernible way before this research project. My experience of animism on the AVI quest was facilitated by the guides based on their belief and understanding of the animate and interconnected nature of the universe.

Animism and environmental education research

Like Barrett (2009), I am also curious about how to research, write, and think in ways that “explicitly invite the ‘listening, speaking world’ (Abram, 1996, p. 86) to participate in the production of knowledge” (p. 1). Through my research I have shared aspects of how I have learned from and with – as opposed to simply about – the other-than-human world through facilitated wilderness experiences. If insight and knowledge can be attained in relationship with

the Land and the animate world around us then this can have profound implications for the field of environmental education and research (Barrett, 2011).

Research that discusses and privileges animist ways of knowing, including knowledge-making and communicating with other-than-human beings, pushes the boundaries of conventional research (Barrett, 2011; Harvey, 2006b; Plotkin, 2012). Barrett (2009) asserts that “more space needs to be provided for epistemological difference in research, including the deliberate inclusion and acknowledgement of insights garnered through intimate interactions with plants, animals, and the world of spirit” (p. 2). However, research of this nature contradicts and challenges conventional knowledge systems regarding what counts as research and what are legitimate (and possible) ways of knowing (Barrett, 2009, 2011; Harvey, 2006b; Plotkin, 2012). My study stretches these boundaries through my exploration of the influence of animist epistemologies and ontologies on my life through facilitated wilderness experiences.

One contribution my research may make to the academic literature and the field of environmental education, then, is a written account of my experiences with animism. As there is a limited amount of academic research or literature involving animism (Barrett, 2009; Harvey, 2006b), my study may make a small contribution in this area. My research presents one example of how inner work and animist ways of knowing have been integrated into an educational process. The fact that I have been able to integrate this work and the AVI quest into my master’s thesis indicates the potential to stretch the boundaries and integrate aspects of soul-based and Land-based work into post-secondary education systems. There are certainly barriers to integrating this educational approach into other formal education such as elementary and secondary settings; school tends to undervalue this type of learning and focus on other skill sets, such as English language literacy (Cajete, 1994; Miller, 2000). For now, environmental

education programs such as AVI courses, as well as in informal learning with our families and communities, offer greater flexibility and opportunity to support, mentor, and seek out opportunities for learning from and with (as opposed to simply about) the other-than-human world.

Decolonization and re-inhabitation

This research has explored my process of decolonization and re-inhabitation (Greenwood, 2010), albeit with a primary focus on my enhanced self-knowledge such as tracking my shifting self-story. Engaging in critical self-reflection in this research responds to the call for self-reflexivity in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2010; Lowan, 2011; Richardson, 2005). My process of self-reflexivity and vision seeking also resonates with Greenwood's (2010) proposal that "[r]einhabitation...implies taking a new stance toward one's own becoming" (Greenwood, 2010, p. 19). My approaches for conducting such inner-work have been similar to the methods recommended by Palmer (2007) and Miller (2000) and include journaling, meditation, walking outdoors, and soulful conversation with other people. These techniques have helped me to identify and deconstruct colonizing, unsustainable patterns in my life, such as my ability to recognize my sub-personalities (Plotkin, 2012) and begin to move beyond these "old" ways of responding to situations.

My research supports the perspectives of Root (2010) and Greenwood (2010) that decolonizing pedagogies need to include both Land-based connections as well as the decolonization of one's self, including one's cultural biases, as I have begun to do in this research. The focus of decolonization and re-inhabitation as part of my personal journey are not intended to diminish the importance of the decolonization and reconciliation of Indigenous-settler relations. I do put forward, however, that inner work is a significant project in and of

itself, and likely an important dimension of healthy human relationships of any kind, including Indigenous-settler relations.

Future steps on my journey beyond this study will involve further decolonizing my relations with other people, including a more significant response to the call for the indigenization of environmental education. There is a growing body of literature that calls for the critical decolonization of the predominantly White, Western field of outdoor environmental education in Canada (Korteweg & Russell, 2012; Newberry, 2012; Root, 2010). Lisa Korteweg and Connie Russell (2012) propose that “[i]ndigenizing environmental education means actively recognizing, centering, validating, and honouring Indigenous rights, values, epistemologies or worldviews, knowledge, language, and the stories of the people of the Land” (p. 7). Several settler-scholars (Newberry, 2012; Root, 2010; Scully, 2012) working in the area of decolonization propose various approaches that settler environmental educators can use to help reconcile past injustices and move their practice towards respectful Indigenous-settler relations. These practices include learning about Indigenous history and treaty rights, developing authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples, and critiquing their Western cultural viewpoints. These approaches presented by settler-academics, while essential, tend to privilege human (and in many cases political) dimensions of decolonizing work, to the neglect of human-Land relations.

I propose that learning to embrace animist²⁷ epistemologies and ontologies through programs like the AVI quest can contribute to the indigenization of environmental education by broadening decolonizing work to include a more substantial focus on human relations with the Land. Although animism is not the only way for settler environmental educators to decolonize their work, in my experience exposure to animist epistemologies and ontologies through the AVI

²⁷ According to Harvey (2006a), “an animist ontology... assumes non-human Others, or persons such as trees, birds, rocks, clouds, rivers, etc. not only possess self-consciousness and intentionality (i.e. agency), but are able to communicate intelligently and deliberately” (p. 187, as cited in Barrett, 2009, p. 1).

quest has contributed to my ways of knowing self and the other-than-human world. Barrett (2009) proposes that animism has not only

served and supported indigenous communities worldwide, but also [functions] as an activist discourse which supports decolonizing relations with all beings. It is through such decolonized relations that one might begin to close the ongoing gap between desire and action, thus making significant progress towards environmental and social sustainability. (p. 2)

Barrett's work specifies the importance of an embodied, relational human-Land dimension of decolonizing work through animism, which is not as well represented in other settler-Canadian decolonizing literature.

It is important for settler-educators who choose to embrace animism and/or other nature-based ways of knowing (e.g., Soulcraft practices) to also couple their approach with other dimensions of decolonizing Indigenous-settler relations such as honouring Indigenous rights, as proposed by Korteweg and Russell (2012). The combination of these approaches may strengthen the ability for settler-educators to successfully undertake such decolonizing work. In my research, for example, my embodied experience and interactions with the Land through facilitated wilderness experiences have contributed to a deep interconnected relationship with the other-than-human world and it has motivated my commitment to decolonizing work more broadly. I intend to hold the suggestions of settler-educators for indigenizing my practice as an environmental educator in complement with nature-based practices, such as Soulcraft practices and time on the Land. My process of decolonization and re-inhabitation is challenging work that will involve ongoing critical reflection, learning, and will stretch beyond the scope and timeframe of this study.

Concluding thoughts

It is my hope that sharing my experiences through this study will contribute to the field of environmental education and future research in this field. There are several learnings from the research that I can offer to others interested in facilitated wilderness experiences, whether they are on their own path of self-development, educators leading such experiences, or academics conducting research in this area. As I enter the final phase of my research, I am considering how I can continue to embrace ways of learning from and with the other-than-human world. New research questions are also arising: “how are other educators integrating animism and learning from the other-than-human world into facilitated wilderness programs?” Also, “in what ways are outdoor educators engaging with the processes of decolonization and re-inhabitation?”

This research has helped me clarify the next steps on my personal journey. I am motivated to pursue my path of learning and development, and, as such, I will continue to seek the guidance of experienced mentors, particularly through facilitated wilderness programs. I am considering organizing more co-facilitated experiences with friends who share common interests. Also, I am interested in returning to AVI to take another course to help deepen my soul work and personal development. Further, as I gain experience and perspective on the visioning process, I would like to be able to offer my support and guidance to others on their path of development. Part of my lifework in the future will be to find, support, and collaborate with people involved in decolonizing work, facilitated wilderness programs, and spiritual questing.

At the end of my AVI vision quest the guides told our group that our journey would be ongoing, and that the real work entails living the vision on an ongoing basis. I suspect that my challenge will be to stay committed to inner work and remain open to what emerges from the visioning process. I will strive to stay involved with the process of identity work, especially

during busy times when I tend to neglect my inner voice and struggle to make time for healthy, soul-nourishing practices, such as meditation and spending time on the Land. Simple as they may be, I will continue to draw on the techniques and practices that have worked for me in the past to enable learning, such as journaling, time in nature, and soulful conversation. Reflection, inner work, and decolonization and re-inhabitation will be an ongoing process for me.

As I review the three narratives I see a well-defined pattern of strengthened self-awareness and enhanced self-knowledge influenced by my involvement with facilitated wilderness programs. The unifying theme that has emerged through this research is my ongoing quest for self-knowledge and a more authentic way of being in the world. I seek a way to live that is aligned with the self-knowledge that has been attained through the process of inner work. In this way, I view myself as much a vision seeker as a researcher. Palmer (2007) talks about the purpose of self-work as a way to better understand self, both our shadows and our strengths, in order to live in a way that is integral to our personal identity. I have found great benefit in the process of developing self-knowledge.

I invite other educators, vision seekers, and researchers to embrace such inner work, as well as time on the Land and storytelling, to develop meaningful connections with people and places, and to follow a path of authenticity and integrity. For me, the self-knowledge I have developed through facilitated wilderness experiences, and further enhanced through this auto-ethnographic research, will contribute to my ability to know my inner-self and act with integrity outwards. This research has expanded my capacity to know myself, and enhanced my way of relating with others. I have no doubt that further reflection, conversation, and time on the Land will continue to illuminate a path forward for me. I will continue the process of recalibrating my

self-story and life vision and live outwards from there. Thank you for sharing this stretch of the journey with me.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Random House.
- Abram, D. (2010). *Becoming animal*. New York: Random House.
- Agbo, S. (2004). First Nations perspectives on transforming the status of culture and language in schooling. *Journal of American Indian Education*. 43(1). 1-31.
- Asfeldt, M., Urberg, I., & Henderson, B. (2009). Wolves, ptarmigan, and lake trout: Critical elements of northern Canadian place-conscious pedagogy. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 14, 33-41.
- Animas Valley Institute. (2013). *About our organization*. Retrieved from www.animas.org on March 25, 2013.
- Bai, H. (2009). Re-animating the universe: Environmental education and philosophical animism. In M. McKenzie, H. Bai, P. Hart & B. Jickling (Eds.), *Fields of green: Restorying culture, environment, and education* (pp. 135-151). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Barrett, M. J. (2009). *Beyond human-nature-spirit boundaries: Researching with animate Earth*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. Retrieved from http://porosity.ca/pages/Executive_Summary.pdf on April 5, 2012.
- Barrett, M. J. (2011). Doing animist research in academia: A methodological framework. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. 16, 123-141.
- Battiste, M. (2005). You can't be the global doctor if you're the colonial disease. In P. Tripp & L. Muzzin (Eds.), *Teaching as activism* (pp. 121-133). Montreal: McGill Queens University Press.
- Battiste, M. (2000). *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

- Berry, T. (1988). *The dream of the earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Berry, T. (1999). *The great work: Our way into the future*. New York: Random House.
- Basso, K. (1996). *Wisdom sits in places: Landscape and language among the Western Apache*.
New Mexico: University of New Mexico.
- Bell, A. (2003). A narrative approach to research. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 8, 95-110.
- Brandy, E. (2012). *Lakes of Change: Exploring the potential within significant outdoor experiences. An autoethnographical investigation of a Canadian wilderness canoe trip*. Unpublished master's thesis. University of Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Brody, H. (2000). *The other side of Eden: Hunters, farmers and the shaping of the world*.
Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Cajete, G. (1994). *Look to the mountain: An ecology of Indigenous education*. Colorado: Kivaki Press.
- Campbell, J. (1988). *The power of myth*. New York: Doubleday.
- Chase, S. E. (2011). Narrative inquiry: Still a field in the making. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, (4th ed.) (pp. 421-434).
Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Castagno, A. E., & Brayboy, B. M. (2008). Culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth: A review of the literature. *American Educational Research Association*, 78(4), 941-993.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Coia, L., & Taylor, M. (2005). From the inside out and the outside in: Making a difference in teacher education through self-study. *Self Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices*, 2, 19-33.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, (2nd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, (3rd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Curthoys, L. (2007). Finding a place of one's own: Reflections on teaching in and with place. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 12, 68-79.
- Davis, W. (2009). *The wayfinders: Why ancient wisdom matters in the modern world*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.
- Devall, B., & Sessions, G. (1985). *Deep ecology: Living as is nature mattered*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 1-28). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Roman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Ellis, C. (2009). Autoethnography as method. *University of Hawai'i*, 32(2), 360-363.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher

- as subject. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Epstein, D., Senzon, S., & Lemberger, D. (2009). Reorganizational healing: A paradigm for the advancement of wellness, behavior change, holistic practice, and healing. *Journal of Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 15(5), 475-487.
- Ermine, W. (2002). Aboriginal epistemology. In M. Battiste & J. Barman (Eds.) *First Nation education in Canada: The circle unfolds* (pp. 101-111). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Fisher, A. (2013). *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, (2nd ed.) Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Foster, A., & Linney, G. (2007). *Reconnecting children through outdoor education: A research summary*. Toronto: Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario.
- Foster, S., & Little, M. (1992). *The book of the vision quest: Personal transformation in the wilderness* (revised edition). New York: Fireside.
- Gookin, J. (2006). *NOLS Wilderness educator notebook*. (10th Ed.). Lander, WY: National Outdoor Leadership School.
- Gookin, J., & Leach, S. (2004). *The NOLS leadership educator notebook: A toolbox for leadership educators*. Lander, WY: National Outdoor Leadership School.
- Graveline, F. J. (1998). *Circle works: Transforming eurocentric consciousness*. Halifax: Fernwood.
- Greenwood, D. (2010). Nature, empire, and paradox in environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 15, 9-24.

- Greenwood, D. (2011). Environment, culture and education in the Anthropocene. In M.P. Mueller, D. J. Tippins, & A. J. Stewart (Eds.), *Assessing schools for Generation R (Responsibility): A guide to legislation and school policy*. New York: Springer.
- Greenwood, D. (2012). What is outside outdoor education? Becoming responsive to other places. *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 25, 24-39.
- Gruenewald, D. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(4), 3-12.
- Haberer, A. (2012). *Investigating the human-nature relationships of wilderness leaders*. Unpublished master's thesis. Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario.
- Haig-Brown, C. (2009). *Spontaneous Laughter and Good Marks: Creating Conditions for Success of First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students in the Simcoe County District School Board*. Haig-Brown Research & Consulting. Retrieved from: <http://scdsb.on.ca/media/files/programs-and-services/aboriginal-education/Spontaneous%20Laughter%20and%20Good%20Marks.pdf>. on February 26, 2012.
- Hamilton, M. L., Smith, L., & Worthington, K. (2008). Fitting the methodology with the research: An exploration of narrative, self-study and auto-ethnography. *Studying Teacher Education*, 4(1), 17-28.
- Hart, P. (2002). Narrative, knowing, and emerging methodologies in environmental education Research. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 7 (2), 149-165.
- Harvey, G. (2006a). *Animism: Respecting the living world*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Harvey, G. (2006b). Animals, animists, and academics. *Zygon*, 41(1), 9-20.

- Hughes, S., Pennington, J. L., & Makris, S. (2012). Translating autoethnography across the AERA standards: Towards understanding autoethnographic scholarship as empirical research. *Educational Researcher*, 41(6), 209-219.
- Iseke-Barnes, J. M. (2008). Pedagogies for decolonizing. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 31(1), 123-148.
- Kapyrka, J., & Dockstator, M. (2012). Indigenous knowledges and western knowledges in environmental education: Acknowledging the tensions for the benefits of a “two-worlds” approach. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 17, 113-131.
- Kawagley, A., & Barnhardt, R. (1999). Education Indigenous to place: Western science meets native reality. In G. A. Smith & D. Williams (Eds.), *Ecological education in action: On weaving education, culture, and the environment*. (pp. 117-142). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Korteweg, L. (2010). *The Lakehead Public School Board’s Urban Aboriginal Education Project: Review & Research Study*. Retrieved from http://ontariodirectors.ca/UA_Pilot_Project/files/Lakehead%20RE/UAEP_FINAL_REPO_RT_Review%20and%20Research%20Study_LK_July16.pdf on February 15, 2012.
- Korteweg, L., & Russell, C. (2012). Editorial: Decolonizing + indigenizing = moving environmental education towards reconciliation. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 17, 5-14.
- Kovach, M. (2010). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations and contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Knapp, C. (2012). Place-based education: Listening to the language of the land and people. *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 25(1), 4-12.

- Lichtman, M. (2010). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide* (2nd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Lowan, G. (2009). Exploring place from an Aboriginal perspective: Considerations of outdoor and environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 14, 42-58.
- Lowan, G. E. (2011). *Navigating the wilderness between us: Exploring ecological métissage as an emerging vision for environmental education in Canada*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Calgary, Calgary.
- Lowan-Trudeau, G. (2012). Methodological Metissage: An interpretive Indigenous approach to environmental education research. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 113-130.
- Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature deficit disorder*. Toronto: Algonquin.
- Loynes, C. (1998). Adventure in a bun. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 21(1), 35-39.
- Loynes, C. (2002). The generative paradigm. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 2(2), 113-125.
- Naess, A. (1973). The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement: A summary. *Inquiry*, 16, 95-100.
- Newberry, L. (2012). Canoe pedagogy and colonial history: Exploring contested spaces of outdoor environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 12, 30-45.
- Nicol, R. (2013). Returning to the richness of experience: Is autoethnography a useful approach for outdoor educators in promoting pro-environmental behaviour? *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 13(1), 3-17.

- Maher, P. (2012). A place-based pedagogy: Putting theory into practice on Haida Gwaii. *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 25(1), 13-17.
- Martinez, D. (2004). The soul of the Indian: Lakota philosophy and the vision quest. *Wicazo sa review*, 19(2), 79-104.
- Miles, J. C., & Priest, S. (1999). *Adventure programming*. State College, PA: Venture.
- Miller, J. (2000). *Education and the soul: Towards a spiritual curriculum*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- McKeon, M. (2012). Two-eyed seeing in to environmental education: Revealing its “natural” readiness to indigenize. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 17, 131-147.
- Orr, D. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Palmer, P. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Piersol, L. (2010). Tracking self into place. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 15, 198-209.
- Plotkin, B. (2003). *Soulcraft: Crossing into the mysteries of nature and psyche*. Novato: New World Library.
- Plotkin, B. (2008). *Nature and the human soul: A road map to discovering our place in the world*. Lane Cove, Australia: Finch Publishing.
- Plotkin, B. (2012). *Wild mind: A field guide to the human psyche*. Novato: New World Library.

- Polkinghorne, D. E. (2007). Validity issues in narrative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(4), 471-486.
- Pontius, J. B. (2014). *Hunting animal(s): An auto-ethnographic inquiry into hunting as a source of ecological consciousness*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.
- Priest, S. (1994). Important components of outdoor leadership. *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 5(4), 13-16.
- Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (1997). *Effective leadership in adventure programming*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Puk, T. G., & Behm, D. (2003). The diluted curriculum: The role of government in developing ecological literacy as the first imperative in Ontario secondary schools. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 8, 217-232
- Puk, T. (2006). *Ecological consciousness: Understanding our place in the natural order*. Unpublished manuscript, Thunder Bay, Canada.
- Richardson, L. (2005). *Writing: A method of inquiry*. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, (3rd ed.) (651-659). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Ridington, R. (1982). Telling secrets: Stories of the vision quest. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 2(2), 213-219.
- Root, E. (2009). This land is our land? This land is your land. Exploring the decolonizing journeys of white outdoor environmental educators. Unpublished master's thesis. Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario.

- Root, E. (2010). This land is our land? This land is your land: Exploring the decolonizing journeys of white outdoor environmental educators. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 14*, 103-119.
- Scully, A. (2012). Decolonization, reinhabitation and reconciliation: Aboriginal and place-based education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 17*, 148-159.
- Shepard, P. (1982). *Nature and madness*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Sheridan, J. (1998). Twice upon a time. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 3*, 116-135.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. New York: Zed Books.
- Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms and communities*. Great Barrington: Orion Society.
- Stanchfield, J. (2007). *Tips and tools: The art of experiential group facilitation*. Oklahoma City: Wood 'N' Barnes.
- Suzuki, D. (2002). *The sacred balance: Rediscovering our place in nature*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Tompkins, J. (2002). Learning to see what they can't: Decolonizing perspectives on Indigenous education in the racial context of rural Nova Scotia. *McGill Journal of education, 37*(3), 405-422.
- Van Matre, S. (1990). *Earth Education: A new beginning*. Greenville, NC: The Institute for Earth Education.
- Wackernagel, M., & Rees, W. (1996) *Our ecological footprint. Reducing human impact on the Earth*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.

Wattchow, B., & Brown, M. (2011). *A pedagogy of place: Outdoor education for a changing world*. Victoria, Australia: Monash University Press.

Wilson, B. (2008). *How an augmented Taoist alchemic model of self-discovery, delivered through adventure education, provides individuals with the foundational skills necessary to become leaders*. Unpublished master's thesis. Royal Roads University, Victoria, B.C.

Wilson, E. O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wilson, E. O. (2002). *The future of life*. New York: Random House.