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Retreating to nature: rethinking 'therapeutic landscapes'

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ABSTRACT:

There is a long history of removing oneself from 'society' in order to recuperate or repair. This paper considers a yoga and massage retreat in Southern Spain, and what opportunities this retreat experience might offer for recuperation and the creation of healthy bodies. The paper positions 'nature' as an active participant, and as 'enrolled' in the experiences of the retreat as a 'therapeutic landscape', and questions how and what particular aspects of yoga practice (in intimate relation with place) give rise to therapeutic experiences.

Keywords: retreats, yoga, therapeutic landscape, body, nature.

1: Introduction

There is a long history of removing oneself from everyday life in order to rest and recuperateⁱ. Particular places have ‘achieved lasting reputations for healing’ (Gesler 2003, 2), such as spas, sacred sites and pilgrimage locations. Gesler has reviewed this history using the conceptual device of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ and suggests that there are four aspects that come together to make up a ‘healing place’: the natural, the built environment, the symbolic and the social. In his book *Healing Places* Gesler looks at case studies of different places with a history of therapeutic engagements, working through each of these four aspects in order to interrogate what it is that makes a place have healing properties. This paper, in considering the contemporary ‘trend’ of retreat tourism, looks at the role of ‘nature’ in the creation of new ‘healing places’. In a similar way to which spas in the eighteenth century offered a ‘vacationlike “cure”’ (Shorter 1992, 35) for nervous diseases of the age, retreats offer a loosely holiday-based ‘escape’ from the stresses of everyday life.

There has been an ‘unprecedented intensification in the pursuit of wellness in the history of tourism in recent years’ according to Smith and Kelly (2006a, 1), giving rise to tourists who not only undertake a journey of ‘physical movement’ but also a ‘journey towards greater self-awareness and contentment’ (2006a, 1)ⁱⁱ. Smith (2003) characterises retreat participants as ‘alternative’ tourists because of their active interest in self-improvement and ‘finding their true selves’ in reaction to how ‘Western societies have created a form of materialism that does not always nurture the soul adequately’ (Smith and Kelly 2006b, 16). Some analyses suggest that ‘in modern days the emphasis is more likely to be put on mental rather than physical improvement’ (Seaton and Bennett 1996, in Smith and Kelly 2006b, 16), but if we take note of the wide range of retreats availableⁱⁱⁱ, and the range of different practices encompassed (yoga, massage, colonic irrigation, dieting and detox, meditation, and so on), it seems that transformational narratives and practices are just as firmly directed at and located in bodily registers.

2: Therapeutic landscapes

The ‘therapeutic landscape’ tradition has encouraged a close attention to how the “healing process works itself out in places (or situations, locales, settings and milieus)’ (Gesler 1992 in Smyth 2005, 488). David Conradson’s recent intervention critiques the way in which the therapeutic landscape tradition has tended to equate ‘physical presence within a landscape with the unproblematic receipt of its therapeutic influence’ (2005, 338). In order to recognise the diversity and complexity of relations with place, he suggests that it is important to realise that ‘individuals clearly experience even scenic environments in different ways, in terms ranging from enjoyment through to ambivalence and even anxiety’ (2005, 338). As such, it is necessary to develop a more critical appreciation of the therapeutic landscapes concept in terms of the complexity of (imagined and material) relations between bodies and place in the creation of ‘healing’ or ‘restorative’ modes of being.

Conradson approaches these complex relations of people and place through Nigel Thrift’s ‘ecology of place’ (1998), offering the potential to understand ‘therapeutic landscape experiences’ in a way that is attentive to the ‘relational dimensions of the self-landscape encounter’ (2005, 338). Such a relational perspective usefully approaches the individual, objects and the milieu of place as open, connected, and mutually constitutive. Conradson suggests that the relations constituted between a ‘person and their broader socio-environmental setting’ (2005, 338), and how these differ as people move between places, play a crucial part in the constitution of the self and as such might lead to a therapeutic outcome^{iv}.

As already mentioned, Gesler splits this ‘socio-environmental setting’ into four aspects. This paper focuses upon the natural, whose restorative power has come to be a strong ideology in the ‘urbanized Western world’ (Gesler 2003, 9), with ‘many people’ feeling ‘that they can attain physical, mental and spiritual healing by simply spending time out-of-doors or seeking out remote or isolated places where they can “get away from it all”, surrounded by undisturbed^v

nature' (2003, 8). Although taking a lead from Conradson in terms of thinking 'therapeutic landscapes' through the relational, this paper nonetheless differs by focussing less on psychosocial relations and more on how nature is actively enrolled in relation to bodies to create therapeutic effects in the retreat setting. This works against the 'social contract' that Michel Serres suggests has predominated in recent thought, which leaves the 'world on the sidelines, an enormous collection of things reduced to the status of passive objects to be appropriated' (1995, 36), and instead affords nature^{vi} a role as a performative actor^{vii}, placing the 'natural' as the 'conditions of human nature itself ... [I]t influences human nature, which in turn influences nature. Nature behaves as a subject' (1995, 36).

Empirical instances are used to investigate how simply being in nature can have a direct therapeutic effect, but also how nature is actively enrolled in the creation of therapeutic effect. As such the retreat experience involves not just being in place, but entails specific practices in conjunction with the 'natural', which might give rise to specific processes of embodiment and specific therapeutic configurations. This empirical focus allows an appreciation of the complexities of bodily experiences of landscapes, and also of the different therapeutic 'imaginaries' that can then be mobilised.

3: Retreating to nature.

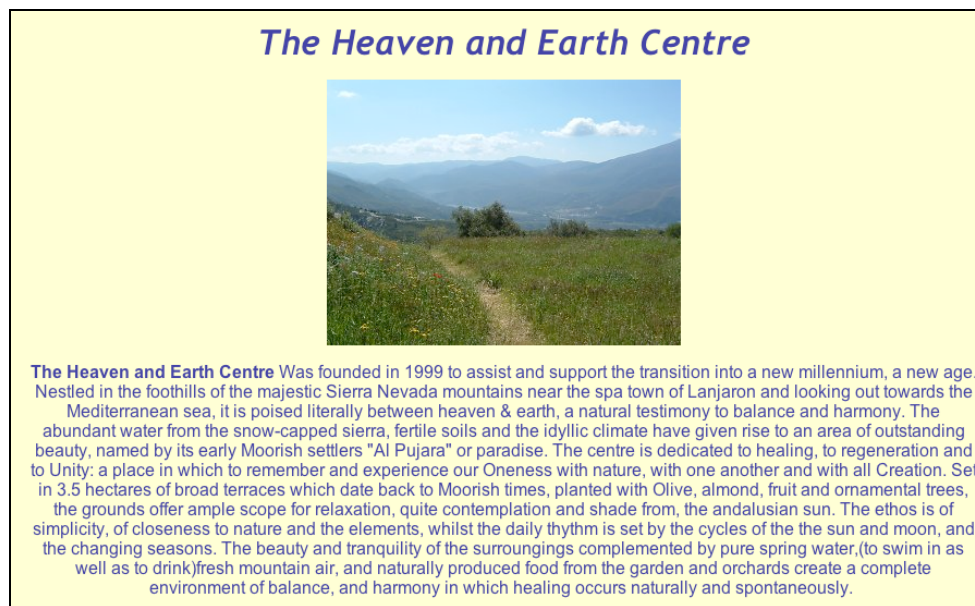


Figure 1: Screenshot showing details of the ‘The Heaven and Earth Centre’ (from www.heavenandearthcentre.com, last accessed 4/3/06)

Retreats are characteristically located in ‘aesthetically pleasing [and] environmentally lush’ surroundings (Smith and Kelly 2006, 3). This research was carried out in September 2004, during a yoga retreat at the ‘Heaven and Earth’ retreat centre, which is situated halfway up a mountain in the Alpujarras mountain range, Southern Spain. This is a region well known for its outstanding natural beauty, and the above website screenshot shows how the benefits of the ‘natural’ are emphasised, both in terms of individual aspects (the soils, the sun, the water, the olive trees) and in terms of a more general ‘natural’ milieu. The area is also well known for its ‘alternative status’, with a number of 150-200 retreat centres located in the area ranging from the larger, more established centres such as ‘Cortijo Romero’, to the smaller, less formalised centres such as the Heaven and Earth Centre. The area also supports a large population of English settlers who sustain a larger than average population of yoga teachers and massage therapists. Lanjaron, the nearest town to the retreat centre, has a Spa, and there is also a Buddhist monastery in the area.

While the practical elements of the yoga retreat are organised by the centre's owner, the retreat itself is normally organised by visiting teachers who are responsible for advertising, planning, and teaching the retreat. The particular retreat chosen for the research was a Thai massage and yoga programme that lasted six days, which was organised by Nicky Smith: a yoga and Thai massage teacher from London. A group of eight people attended the retreat which was advertised in *Yoga and Health*, a UK yoga magazine, and on Nicky's website. The retreat attracted a mix of people from different locations in the UK, a range of different ages, and a variety of levels of experience (from yoga teachers to people who had done no yoga previously)^{viii}.

The morning work began with a seated meditation as the sun rose, followed by a yoga practice, and the afternoon work focussed upon the learning of Thai massage. This retreat was chosen for this research because it offered an intense period of time to focus upon the practices of yoga and Thai massage, in a heightened space of participation (the research was part of a wider research project in which sustained ethnographic research was undertaken during a Thai yoga massage training course and in the Body and Soul area of a music festival [see Lea 2006]). In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with a number of different yoga teachers and Thai massage practitioners. This paper draws heavily upon just one interview with the retreat leader, Nicky Smith, and my participant observation. In this interview I was interested in Nicky's rationale for choosing this retreat centre and her vision for the retreat, in relation to her role as facilitator of the participants' experiences^{ix}. The research is anchored in my experiences, drawing upon my own body's role as 'archive' of experience, and my subsequent reflections upon this archiving: this method is especially appropriate here because of the ways in which the yoga and massage were framed as practices for self-healing^x.

Nicky had a clear sense that simply being in nature was beneficial. At the beginning of our interview when we were considering the specifically therapeutic properties of the Heaven and Earth centre, Nicky told me that on arrival at the centre the natural milieu connected with her body, which registered this and changed as a result:

‘I think it’s something about the closeness to the land...responding to being physically here and how I felt like I arrived and...something inside me dropped. All this stuff that had been really...worrying me, or had felt like really emotional draining or other aspects – it was like they paled into insignificance – I can’t even identify with them now – and it’s like I’m so here and present – it’s like “I was upset about that? Why?”’

(Interview with Nicky)

Nicky here suggests that the relation of ‘closeness to the land’ achieved by simply arriving at the centre has the capacity to shape the body directly, reworking its configuration. This comment was punctuated by a dropping of Nicky’s shoulders (pointing towards a literal ‘dropping’ - a musculoskeletal rearrangement), and an expressive exhalation (pointing towards a more metaphorical or symbolic ‘dropping’ – perhaps just an exhalation, or the feeling of an undoing of a ball of tension in the stomach, or an inexpressible sense of ‘arrival’). The new environmental setting was crucial to this, but it is hard to specify whether it is being “in place”, in this new place, or whether it was the contrast between living in London and coming away to the retreat centre that precipitated the change. Certainly, though, there was a shift in which ‘the physiological experience...intersect[ed] with the physicality of place’ (Probyn 2005, 40). Something about being in the retreat space made a (therapeutic) difference to Nicky’s body.

Although the framings of the retreat constructed in Figure One in conjunction with this interview extract offer little room to imagine that anything other than a ‘good’ or ‘positive’ practice could occur at the Heaven and Earth centre^{xi}, it is important to heed Thrift’s statement that ‘whilst places may be designed to elicit particular practices (including particular subject positions and emotional responses), all kinds of other practices may in fact be going on within them which they were never designed to admit’ (1998, 310-11). In order to apprehend the

complexity and range of possible relations between body and place, the following research ‘instances’ look at the *practiced relations* between bodies and nature.

Instance One: the yoga platform.

The yoga platform was the area in which we sat in the morning, meditating for half an hour to start the day. It was also where we practiced yoga and then Thai massage in the afternoon. At the time of the retreat the floor was covered with matting, but this did not disguise the contours of the stone floor underneath, with blocks radiating out in a circular pattern from a central point to make a threshing platform (Era) for the smallholding.



Figure 2: the uneven floor of the yoga platform (photograph by author)

The unevenness of the stone floor necessitated bodily explorations of balance not usually encountered on the smooth floor of a yoga studio at home: the proprioceptively challenging environment thus set our bodies in motion in particular ways. This bodily negotiation of balance was noted, and cognitive attention was forced to the small surfaces of connection, of touch, between feet and ground^{xiii}. This engagement was played out through attempts to stay upright

while balancing on one leg, with both body and mind continually moving and minutely adjusting. Asanas (yoga postures) usually within reach were suddenly pulled away because the balance was so difficult.

Nicky verbally directed our attention to this question of balance at the same time as did the felt interactions between floor and foot. She harnessed the difficulties to draw our attention to the olive tree that stood across from the yoga platform, and how it rooted down into the earth, leaning to one side because of the prevailing wind.

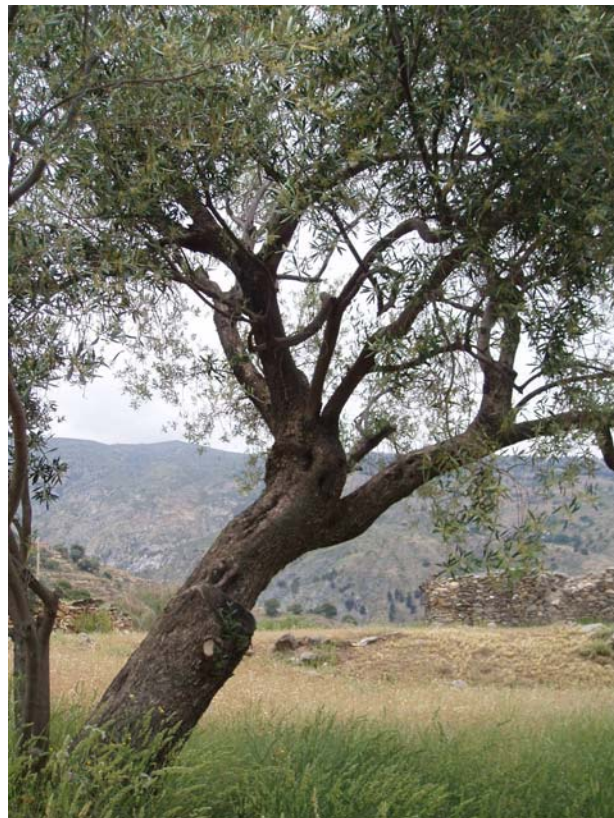


Figure 3: the olive tree (photograph by author)

She pointed out both its solidity and flexibility, the way it had grown strong while adapting to its surroundings. She went on to suggest that, before we can begin to balance, we need to explore our connections with the earth both imaginatively and physically. She read out a passage from Vanda Scaravelli's teachings on yoga: 'the function of the body is to collect energy from the

ground. By grasping the gravity of the earth we become connected to the soil, from which plants and trees receive their nourishment' (Scaravelli 1991, 41). This underlined a radical connectivity in which the boundary between body and earth was undone. Nicky's description of the connection was one in which there was something in the earth holding onto our feet but still allowing us to move. This opened up a space of imagination in which we could understand and experience the connection in a way that would root us into the earth in the same way as the olive tree – flexibly yet solidly. Despite this help that Nicky offered, the challenge that the floor offered was at times a source of irritation and frustration for a number of the group.

Instance Two: yoga practice

Lying down flat on the yoga platform during a yoga session, my attention was drawn to my back, and the way that it lay, supported in parts, but also 'stuck into' by the rocks that made up the floor. The unevenness of the floor, felt distinctly even through the layer of rush matting and my yoga mat, gave me a heightened awareness of my back, again offering a different quality of awareness than the perfectly smooth floor of the yoga studio that I usually attend. In drawing my focus to the back of my body, it also contrasted with my everyday patterns of awareness, located mostly in the sensory organs at the front of my body. Feeling my back resting back against the floor, and becoming aware of the heaviness of the back of my head, legs and arms, drew my attention to, and allowed me to make contact with, these areas of my body. In this way my attention was focussed in quite a different way upon the different surfaces and depths of my body, and upon the ways in which they were connecting and disconnecting with the world.

The not entirely comfortable rocky floor afforded me a different kind of exploration of my body, opening up a particular surface of attention which made it possible for me to work directly upon and within this area. As my sensitivity grew to the muscles in my lower back, I began to explore how to move my body, how to place it against the ground so as to lengthen those muscles.

Connecting with these muscles also then fed into standing postures, allowing me to sense the

position of my pelvis, imagining what it might look like, and registering what it felt like if I tucked it in (which immediately effected a change in the front of my body, opening it up from pubis up to sternum and shifting my standing posture).

In both of these cases Nicky began to use the ‘differences’ offered by being in ‘nature’ as part of her teaching: mobilising the specific ways in which the particularities of the location came together with embodied practices in order to refigure the participant’s understandings and experiences of their bodies. What these instances suggest is that the specificities of place, and in this case the agency of the ‘natural’, complicate practices. In the first empirical instance the habitual body-world relation of particular yoga postures was completely thrown. Although frustrating, Nicky used this ‘thrown-ness’ as a learning experience and an opportunity to develop the balancing processes and capacities of the body. In the second instance, although uncomfortable, the rocky floor allowed me to experience my body (and its connection to the world) differently, opening up the possibility of a change in postural alignment. This, for Nicky, was using the ‘natural’ environment to attain the real point of the retreat:

‘the real healing potential...comes when...you can use [yoga] as a way of meeting yourself, so discovering a sensation in a part of a body you didn’t know you could get to’ (Interview with Nicky).

This ‘discovery’, although it could have healing or therapeutic properties, may not be a ‘positive’ experience. Nicky told me that her experiences of ‘meeting herself’ had often resulted in deeply held emotions being unlocked and released. Similarly, not all of their encounters with ‘nature’ were positive for all the retreat participants: in addition to the (physically and mentally) uncomfortable yoga practice, the ‘natural’ experiences afforded by the retreat centre were ones of trying to regulate body temperature in the Spanish sun, and insect bites and irritating flies during the yoga practice.

To summarise, there might not always be a straightforwardly 'good' relation between body and ('natural') place, the 'healing' journey may not always be seen as a directly 'positive' one, and different 'therapeutic imaginations' might be quite diverse. The paper now moves to consider more closely Nicky's sense of how the therapeutic is manifested in the retreat space, and what this means in considering the retreat through 'therapeutic landscape experiences'.

3: Connective practices.

As already outlined, Nicky was very aware of the potential for nature to create therapeutic or healing modalities. This was expressed in terms of the materially therapeutic possibilities of nature, and also in the imaginative therapeutic geographies (using imaginations of nature to work embodiment in particular ways). Part of her imagination of the therapeutic potential of the retreat was how taking the body away from the 'everyday' opened up attention to the body itself, foregrounding its connections to the world:

“This annual retreat is an opportunity to re-connect with the quietness and stillness within ourselves, qualities that are often overshadowed by the demands of our busy everyday lives...The focus of the retreat will be on deepening and developing our innate ability to listen more attentively and respond more sensitively to the wisdom of our bodies”

(www.nickysmith.co.uk, last accessed 8/6/06)

The 'natural' environment offered a space of encounter possibly not available within the 'clutter' of everyday life (because of work, routines, stress and commitments). During the retreat the emphasis was less on 'doing' or 'achieving', and more about having time to be a 'little bit more exploratory about not having time pressures or goal pressures – “we've got to get this” and you know we could just take more time' (Interview with Nicky). As well as putting the body into an unfamiliar (natural) environment, the time was offered to pay attention to what this relation with

nature *did* to the body. ‘Nature’ for Nicky offered a possibility to come back into the body, sensing its responses and intelligences^{xiii}, and paying attention to what it is and how it is capable of change. Being in the retreat environment allowed the kind of focussed attention to the small spaces of connection between body and environment demonstrated in the research ‘instances’ above^{xiv}, and gave rise to a ‘connective imaginary’ through which the retreat participants could sense their (specifically interconnected) place in the world and be ‘in touch with the raw energy of the world, of yourself as part of that world unfolding’ (Dewsbury and Thrift 2005, 158):

‘it’s that place where it’s just like “ah – I’m part of this world and this planet” and there’s a sense of importance to life...there’s something that touches you – oh it’s life and I can’t put my finger on it – and I think that it’s important – whatever we do – no matter what job we do – that to come to these places where we can reconnect with that essence, that specialness, that spark, that joy of just being alive!’

(Interview with Nicky)

The sense of being immersed in the world or of radical connectivity made the ‘natural’ environment one that could support individuals and let them go ‘deeper’ in a therapeutic experience:

‘being out in nature I think is being in an environment that holds you, that supports you through what can be a really intense experience – if you’re new to bodywork...it really shakes the foundations...and I think it’s very important to provide people with a lot of support for that because it can be very – it lets people go deeper’

(Interview with Nicky)

It is not enough just to be in a natural environment to embark upon the retreat 'journey'^{xv}: instead, the participants have to work with the practices on offer to construct creatively the right 'journey' for them. What Nicky wanted was for participants to work with the resources that place offers in order to effect change. As Lorraine (2005, 163) argues, we must engage actively in the flow of the world: that 'it is never a matter of simply opening oneself to all of the forces of the universe, but always of creatively evolving one's powers...in life in concert with surrounding forces'. If we are not guided to certain conclusions, then it follows that we must actively and artistically use the resources offered by place in order to mould and shape the body, and create different somatic relations. Experiencing nature, and in turn experiencing ourselves during a retreat, is just one mode of this 'creative evolution', leading to an experimentation with other modes of being.

4: Conclusions

In interrogating the relation between places and bodies, this paper contributes to the literature on how places might offer therapeutic or healing resources, and begins to consider the geographies of retreats. Specifically, the paper looks more closely at Gesler's category of 'the natural' in order to ask what happens when 'nature' becomes a performative actor, thus contributing to the therapeutic effects of landscape. It also expands Conradson's 'relational self' by considering the significance of bodily registers, underlining the importance of the smallest spaces of connection between body and world in processes of subject formation and the creation of a therapeutic effect. The paper has just addressed one retreat, but there is clearly a need for attention to other retreat practices and formats^{xvi}. This will give a clearer understanding of the range of therapeutic imaginations in existence, how these create different possibilities for processes of subject formation, and what might be the place-specific potentials for creating therapeutic landscape experiences.

Close attention to empirical instances suggests that retreats offer the opportunity to open up a different mode of inhabiting place and relating to our (bodily) selves. Maintaining a focus upon 'nature' as a performative actor allows the retreat to be conceived of as a possible locus of 'the generation of new trajectories and new configurations' (Massey 2005, 141). However, these new configurations are not guaranteed to be therapeutic: rather, a 'successful' retreat is about working in conjunction with the place, and the ways in which the 'fabric of the world and its making-sense architecture' might 'support' and 'enhance' (Dewsbury 2003, 1913) our engagements with our 'selves'. Place, in conjunction with different embodied and bodily practices, can have purchase in inventing different possibilities of living, since micro-scale engagements between epidermal surfaces and rocks, or foot and floor, might precipitate particular processes of subject formation and therapeutic landscape experiences^{xvii}.

Crucially what this paper underlines is that the retreat experience does not tell us how we *should* live, but rather acts to problematise our existent modes of dwelling: 'alterations in dwelling may be produced by potentials in the combinations of materials, alterations in the texture of the weave' (Harrison 2000, 511). This problematisation is distributed across our embodied engagements with place, as places necessitate active 'invention; they pose a challenge. They implicate us, perforce, in the lives of human others^{xviii}, and in our relations with nonhumans they ask how we shall respond to our temporary meeting-up with these particular rocks and stones and trees' (Massey 2005, 141). Although I have perhaps mobilised too uncritically the distinction made by the retreat leader between the possibilities offered in everyday life and those of the retreat, or between the urban and rural ('nature based') experiences, what the paper underlines is how particular conjunctions of places and bodies act to disrupt our habitual ways of 'knowing (enacting) the everyday', and open up the possibility for 'new forms of dwelling, new forms of socialisation, and so new forms of life' (Harrison 2000, 511).

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ENDNOTES:

ⁱ And of *being removed*: see Philo (2004) for a discussion of the moral geographies implicated in the ‘deliberate placing of an asylum in a peaceful rural location’ (2004: 473). The nineteenth century saw an ‘argument which largely won the day (discursively if not always in practice)...insisting that the eighteenth-century equation of towns, infirmaries and lunatic hospitals be replaced in the nineteenth century by a deliberate “retreat” to the countryside’ (2004: 496). Also see Moon et al (2006) for a discussion on the therapeutic role that removal to the countryside plays in contemporary asylum geographies.

ⁱⁱ This ‘recent history’ of wellness tourism needs a wider contextualisation in terms of much longer histories of pilgrimage and other journeys, at the heart of which lie narratives of religious knowledge, personal fulfilment, and the formation of a different ‘self’.

ⁱⁱⁱ Organisationally, retreats cover a spectrum from low-cost ad-hoc ashram participation in India through to high profit ‘lifestyle operated’ holidays in Europe.

^{iv} Conradson’s approach is indicative of moves being made by geographers who use the relation as a unit of analysis (see for example Harrison 2006, Lorimer 2006, Massey 2005, Rose and Wylie 2006, Thrift 1996, Whatmore 2006 for a diversity of perspectives upon the value and troubles of relational geographies). These approaches variously consider the implication of a whole host of inhuman, non-human and more-than-human entities in the creation of place.

^v A condition that relies upon a process of ‘purification’, which creates ‘two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other’ (Latour 1993: 10-11). This enactment of a separation between nature and society is twinned by a contradictory movement of ‘translation’ in which mixtures are created between ‘entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture’ 1993:10). Although the notion of ‘undisturbed’ nature might be crucial in the popular imaginary, it is important to note that society and nature are always mixed in complex assemblages (a point which underpins the arguments in this paper).

^{vi} Neither this paper nor Gesler consider nature in terms of the hugely influential and geographically significant literature dealing with the social construction of nature (see Braun and Castree 1998, Demeritt 2002 and Whatmore 2002 for example). In doing this I do not want to underestimate the rich textures, difficulty of capture or intellectual traditions of debate around the term ‘nature’. Rather I am interested in how nature is understood in ‘lay’ terms and enrolled as an experiential category in the retreat space.

^{vii} See also Parr (2007) for a considered discussion of how nature is socially ‘made’ as ‘therapeutic’. This paper usefully considers nature as an active, but not straightforwardly positive, agent in the ‘working relationships’ that are created between ‘people with severe and enduring mental-health problems’ and particular types of nature spaces’ (Parr 2007, 539), and underlines the need for careful assessment of ‘the “power” ascribed to nature ... so that the positivity of most depictions ... is not taken solely as read’ (2007, 539).

^{viii} The retreat cost £350 with travel additional to this. Although reasonably priced in comparison to many other similar retreats, this is obviously a substantial sum. The purpose of the research was not to conduct a socio-economic profiling of the participants (although this of course would be a very interesting and useful project), so I am loathe to try to categorise the participants. There was an even gender split, and, apart from one couple, all the participants had come on their own. Most of the participants were of paid working age.

^{ix} Although of course, this is not to say that the individual’s experiences actually tally with Nicky’s vision.

^x See Lea (2007) for a consideration of the ways in which yoga, practiced in this spatio-temporal context, is a practice of the self. This form of ‘modern postural yoga’ may well be ill at ease with the ‘Eastern’ cosmological imaginations at work in more ‘traditional’ forms of yoga. However, this focus upon the self underlines the ways in which individual narratives are a crucial reference point in the contemporary practices of yoga. A similar argument can be made with reference to Thai massage: this is an experience which effects a form of self-healing as it entails a intensely self-centric experience, and offers an opportunity to get to know the self (in relation). Of course this focus upon one individual narrative is problematic if our interest is in triangulating retreat-based experiences. As such, a further direction for research might be the gathering of a number of narratives of the individuals attending the retreat.

^{xi} Although of course a yoga retreat is not everybody’s idea of a positive or healthy environment.

^{xii} The process of balancing in yoga underlines the interconnections of mind and body. Learning to balance is not just a physical process, located in golgi receptors and muscular responses. It is also tied up in a process of mental and emotional training: learning not to think too much about the process of balancing by focussing upon breathing, and perhaps fixing visual focus on a static point on the wall or floor in front of you. Getting frustrated, or thinking too much about the process of balancing invariably makes it more difficult. Learning to balance (like much of learning yoga) is never a linear process: what might be an easy pose at one point in your practice might be virtually impossible at another point.

^{xiii} See Thrift (2005) for a discussion of what forms this intelligence might take.

^{xiv} This sense that the small-scale and the intimate really matter, and have the potential to make a therapeutic difference, was something to which Nicky referred throughout her teaching and our interview.

^{xv} This metaphor of journeying overemphasises a ‘forwards’ direction. The intricacies of practice presented in this paper suggest that this ‘forwards’ direction is complicated by a number of set-backs and meanders.

^{xvi} For example, Buddhist retreats, completely silent retreats, individual retreats.

^{xvii} Another interesting route of study would be to ask how far these small-scale changes somehow ‘endure’ or ‘map up’ into everyday life, or even just in terms of leaving the retreat centre and embarking on the journey home.

^{xviii} Here Massey suggests another direction for research into retreats: the intense inter-personal relationships that are part of the creation of a therapeutic landscape experience. This was something I did not explicitly consider during the interview with Nicky. Certainly, though, the personal journey of the retreat is embarked upon in a wider situation of collective human sociality. Although part of the retreat was focussed upon ‘unhooking’ from usual obligations of being with other people (a period of silence lasting from waking up through to eating brunch), much of the rest of the retreat (from partner work in the yoga and massage, through to washing up after meals) was undertaken in close relation. Some of these interpersonal engagements were hugely helpful, but there were obviously small-scale irritations and petty upsets. It would be interesting to trace these interpersonal engagements, and the politics of them, through retreat spaces.