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Eco-heroes out of place and relations: decolonizing the narratives of *Into the Wild* and *Grizzly Man* through Land education

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Eco-heroic quests for environmental communion continue to be represented, mediated, and glorified through film and media narratives. This paper examines two eco-heroic quests in the Alaskan ‘wilderness’ that have been portrayed in two Hollywood motion pictures: the movies *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*. Both films vividly document and re-inscribe heroic status to the stories of Timothy Treadwell (*Grizzly Man*) and Christopher McCandless (*Into the Wild*), their tragic encounters with nature, and the pivotal experiences that gave them both eco-heroic identities in the American imagination. As is often the case for Greek and Shakespearean dramas, each hero met a tragic, unnecessary death in Alaskan ‘wilderness’, but in the process reiterated a settler colonial narrative. We argue that an Indigenous-focused Land education and its counter-narratives of holistic relations are sorely needed. It is Indigenous Land education that can break the cycle of Eurocentric celebrations of solitary heroism, rugged individualism, and ignorance of place. In order to forge Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in our cultural imaginations and to address compounding environmental struggles, we need to turn to Indigenous stories and teachings that are already in place, in deep relation with the Land, water, animals and plants on Indigenous territory. We need to turn to Land education that is currently not in place or acknowledged in environmental education.

Keywords: *Grizzly Man*; *Into the Wild*; Indigenous knowledge; environmental education; decolonizing methodologies; place-based studies; Land education

If this is your land, where are your stories? (Gitskan Elder, land claim meeting, Gitskan territory, northwest British Columbia)

Eco-heroic stories for environmental communion or salvation continue to be represented, glorified, and communicated through film and media narratives. As such, eco-heroic stories are informing place-based educational models, environmental education conceptualizations, and indicate a new ‘field of green’ (McKenzie et al. 2009). This paper examines two eco-heroic quests in the Alaskan ‘wilderness’¹ that have been portrayed in Hollywood motion pictures: the movies *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*. Both films vividly document and inscribe eco-heroic status to the stories of Timothy Treadwell (*Grizzly Man*) and Christopher McCandless (*Into the Wild*) by glorifying wild places. While ‘wilderness’ is an omnipresent character in

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most environmental films or media, assumptions about land as pristine and ‘wild’ ignore the traumatic histories of colonization, including the removal of people from the Land, resulting in displacements and deaths of Indigenous peoples. And in the dominant discourses of environmental film narratives (such as *Into the Wild* and *Grizzly Man*), Alaska (as wilderness) is cleansed of human tragedy and historical contamination in order to be recast as a *place* full of sunlight, pristine nature, and new promise (Cronon 1995, 1996). Yet, all of North America (including Alaska) is not simply a place of trees, animals, and lakes. It is also the *place* of ongoing land-based struggles by Indigenous peoples who are forced to assert their rights to land claims, land entitlement, and self-determination on their own homelands.

Colonization inflicts multiple damages – socially, psychologically, physically, and psychically. In a North American context, colonization has meant damages by one dominant oppressor group, the Euro-settlers, onto the local people of the ‘newly discovered’ land, the Indigenous peoples. Kulchyski (2005) states that colonization is evident when ‘colonial power can be identified with any process that “totalizes,” working to reshape Indigenous peoples and their Lands so that they will come to embody and reflect the colonized’ (17). And, in the history of North American settlement, two colonial damages have occurred simultaneously: environmental damages to the land/animals (through resource extraction, animal extinction, land clearance, and pollution) intertwined inextricably with sociocultural genocide to the Indigenous peoples of the Land.

Graveline (1998) contends that ‘Our degradation as humans is vitally interconnected with the continuing destruction of our Mother Earth, upon whom our existence depends’ (7). Initially, colonization displaced Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, which were in turn cleared for settlement and resource exploitation to feed rapidly growing populations and the consumptive desires of Imperial Europe (Rasmussen 2001). The devastation of the Land jeopardized Indigenous traditional ways of life (e.g. hunting, fishing, gathering medicines, and ceremonies) and Indigenous knowledge, which had sustained the people and the Land for thousands of years (Adams 1999). Environmental education has the power to shift social perceptions and cultural imaginations and needs to actively grapple with this dual issue of colonization: environmental destruction and species extinction with the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples by Eurocentric or cognitive imperialism (Battiste 2005). One cannot be effectively addressed without the other.

To address such linked environmental and cultural damages, it is important to understand the contested histories of the places in which those damages have and continue to occur. Places, according to the environmental place-based theorist Somerville (2007, 2010), are those spaces of contested stories and values, often between settlers and Indigenous peoples. Given that all of North America is the traditional territory of Indigenous peoples, then all of Alaska is contested place, full of complex and traumatic stories of the relationship between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous settlers on Indigenous Land. We suggest that environmental education, whether through films, TV shows, or popular media, needs to confront the contested histories represented in these ‘places’ (such as the Alaskan ‘wilderness’) in order to tell new stories of environmental relations as Land education.

In this paper, we specifically indicate the ways in which media and media analysis can function as Land education through the confrontation of such contested place histories and then reconciliation through new stories that braid Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples into better relations. Our objects of decolonization are two major

motion pictures – *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild* – that we believe continue to impact the cultural and environmental imaginations of North American settler youth with their powerful, yet neo-colonial, stories of American eco-heroes Timothy Treadwell and Christopher McCandless. In both films, these heroes are cultural symbols of urban and societal alienation who find their redemptions and deaths by acting out their fantasies of ‘wilderness’ or eco-quests in Alaska. In their quests, wilderness is personified through national parks or uninhabited places of Alaska – yet, this Alaskan ‘wilderness’ is itself a highly problematic construct, marinated in colonization, displacement of Indigenous peoples, their loss of self-sufficiency rights to hunt/fish and self-determination. It is a historical tragedy that is rarely recognized or accounted for in North American history textbooks, stories or film narratives. We felt compelled to deconstruct the neo-colonialism of these films in order to explore the damages that are replayed or re-embedded onto the North American cultural psyche as stories where Indigenous peoples are absent, erased, or avoided on their Land. We also want to extend the critical readings of these films (e.g. Brinks 2008; Conesa-Sevilla 2008; Schutten 2008) to encourage the birth of new media representations that could address the cultural complexities of de/colonization in eco-film narratives, as well as shift this ‘naturally ready’ education discipline (McKeon 2012) towards Land education.

Through our decolonizing deconstruction of *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*, we are trying to provoke a new kind of environmental education reading of film narratives, one that does not rely on Eurocentric cultural desires for ‘wilderness’ and eco-heroes. In its *place*, we imagine a counter-narrative of how environmental educators would enter into respectful relations with Indigenous peoples to protect Indigenous Land. Our discussion holds relevance for those in environmental education because our central concern is that the Indigenous knowledge, politics, struggles and resilience of Indigenous peoples are quite inseparable from an education for a better planet and sustainable practices. When environmental education ignores or erases Indigenous peoples from places or does not recognize Indigenous Land as critical sites of environmental struggle, the environmental education story loses depth, longevity, and ethical righteousness. Environmental education itself becomes more assimilated or colonized to unsustainable industrial-corporate greed than it was originally conceived to oppose as an educational solution. These films provide useful illustrative entry points into discussing Eurocentric (cognitive) imperialism than still directs environmental stories of wilderness in much environmental education curriculum and can assist the field to reorient itself towards Indigenous Land education.

***Grizzly Man* (Timothy Treadwell)**

Timothy (Dexter) Treadwell, a failed actor and recovering alcoholic living in Malibu, escaped the chaos of his life in the human world to find refuge in what he considered an Eden-like sanctuary in the Alaskan wilderness. An environmental advocate and self-styled ‘defender’ of bears, he spent 13 summers living and interacting with grizzlies in Katmai National Park, which boasts the world’s largest population of Kodiak brown bears (Alaska Bear Tours 2011). Over the course of his last five summers, Treadwell recorded 100 h of video footage, intending to produce a film of his crusade. Herzog’s (2005) documentary of Treadwell is assembled

through interviews of close friends, family, various professionals, and Treadwell's own video footage. Herzog, who edited and narrated the film, chronicles Treadwell's story up until and including Treadwell's death in 2003, when he and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard were killed by one of the bears Treadwell vowed to protect.

The promotional rhetoric in the movie's advertising portrayed Treadwell as a 'grizzly activist', but this must be called into question. The bear poaching that Treadwell was ostensibly preventing was never a reported problem during the years he was in Alaska: although Treadwell claimed to be saving the bears from poachers seeking trophies, gall bladders, and other parts destined for Asian markets, the reserve is in fact federally protected land and no poaching incidents have been reported there since the 1970s (Lapinski 2005). It has thus been suggested that Treadwell's militant eco-warrior persona was largely a fabrication, created to lend him a heroic stance and rationale for illegally camping in a national park.

Herzog, for his part, has established a career as a classic auteur director who has a penchant to tackle 'madness' in both his fiction and non-fiction films. He is driven to understand and portray what he likes to call an 'ecstatic truth' about people, society, and the environment (Prager 2007). As a filmmaker, his talent lies in recognizing and taking existing materials, such as the 100+ h of film footage by Treadwell, and transforming it into something uniquely intimate, quirky, and sublime. As Herzog narrates in *Grizzly Man* (2005):

Having myself filmed in the wilderness of jungle, I found that beyond a wildlife film, in his [Treadwell's] material lay dormant a story of astonishing beauty and depth. I discovered a story of human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil. As if there was a desire in him to leave the confines of his humanness and bond with the bears. Treadwell reached out and sought a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible borderline.

The strength in Herzog's filmmaking is his passion to portray and interpret personal stories without heavy-handed judgments. Herzog follows the narrative arc of a man who shuns civilization for a more authentic and meaningful existence in the wild with bears, but leaves interpretive doors open for multiple audiences. For example, eco-psychologists approve of the manner in which Treadwell's existential malaise and abusive addictions were 'cured' by the bears, the outdoors, and his devotion to bear protection: 'This is the first clue and reassurance [for] those who are involved in adventure and outdoor education, of the power of raw nature, and its symbol the grizzly, to heal if not transform the psyche' (Conesa-Sevilla 2008, 139). In contrast, cultural critics understand Treadwell quite differently, portraying him as a feral child living a romanticized Garden of Eden fantasy and refusing to accept the responsibilities of adult life:

The dangers and violence in the wilderness may in the end be more a substitute than an alternative to those of Los Angeles; yet they have a longer history of being romanticized, and Treadwell invest[ed] the Alaskan wild with a quality of kindness and nurture able to undo the toxic effects of urban misery. (Brinks 2008, 308)

Yet, whether Treadwell is interpreted as an individual seeking to heal himself or trying to escape from adult responsibilities and relationships, his ecological identity (Thomashow 1995) is worth unpacking to understand its construction and contribution to environmental education thought.

***Into the Wild* (Christopher McCandless)**

Based on a Jon Krakauer book with the same title, Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* (2007) tells the real-life story of Christopher McCandless, a 24-year-old Virginia college graduate who, propelled by a mixture of grandiosity and grievance, decided to leave civilization and head out, alone and unaided, as far away as he could go. In a remote reach of Alaska, he met a tragic end from eating a poisonous plant and subsequently starving to death. The film alternates scenes from an abandoned bus, where McCandless spent his last months attempting to survive as a hunter-gatherer, with episodes of road travels from the preceding year and a half and occasional cuts to his family, consumed by sorrow over his disappearance, back East.

Krakauer (1996), like Herzog, is fascinated with extreme characters seeking out the harshness of nature and risking their lives due to some great drive. Beyond the risks of extreme outdoor adventure, Krakauer perceived a ferocious passion in McCandless to seek ultimate answers, an intense asceticism, and a religious zeal for solitude in nature. Penn's (2007) film tends to glorify McCandless's wanderings of the American west and the Alaskan wilderness through majestic mountain panoramas, slow-motion shots in deep forests, and aerial plunges down river canyons. The film emphasizes McCandless's idealism and inner disappointment with his parents' hypocrisy, which fueled his drive to seek out a wilderness monastery.

McCandless traveled with Western classic literature as sources of solace. Narratives of close communion with nature and wilderness were his inspiration: he carried Thoreau's *Walden Pond*, Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, and Leo Tolstoy's writings in his backpack, often referring to this literature in journal entries and correspondence with friends. These Western classics are narratives of autonomy and libertarian independence that only exceptional Western men, such as the authors themselves, might possess in order to thrive in the wilderness. The texts seemed to serve as bibles to quench McCandless's existential thirst, guides in seeking out wilderness as the remedy to his flight from social commitments, and testimonies to his extreme confidence in his own autonomy. They were the books by which he lived and, sadly, died. And, it turned out that McCandless's death was especially needless and tragic as there was an undiscovered park rangers' cabin (within 10 miles of his bus) stocked with emergency supplies.

Film analysis for decolonizing eco-heroic place-based stories

Films are particularly powerful in their capacity for changing or shifting the stories of wilderness/nature in our environmental imaginations and consequently, environmental education. Braun (2002) states that, 'there is no place *outside* such cultural practices [*film*] from which nature [*wilderness*] can be objectively known. Even when our relation to nature seems most immediate, it is profoundly shaped by the narrative, knowledges, and technologies that enable experience' (15, italicized words in brackets added). There is no mention in these movies that this region of Alaska is not in fact the 'wilderness', but rather the homeland and traditional territory of the Alutiiq/Yupik/Inuit peoples who have lived there since time immemorial. The Alutiiq/Yupik/Inuit have lived on the land with all wild animals, including grizzly bears, for thousands of years and have accumulated critically important Indigenous knowledge of how to survive and thrive in this harsh environment and to not become meat (Schutten 2008) or prey of the grizzlies. Their language, stories,

Elders, and ancestors all combine, interconnect, and intertwine with the non-human world of plants, animals, trees, and water to become Land and to be able to teach their children a holistic Land education (see Barnhardt and Kawagley 2005; Battiste 2005; Cajete 1999; Graveline 1998).

Both Treadwell (*Grizzly Man*) and McCandless (*Into the Wild*) arrived in Alaska for communion and purification with the environment, special places, and animals. Each man ran away from an American urban center where he felt sickened or imprisoned by a madness of civilization that would not stop contaminating him, and both sought out extreme conditions in the 'pure wilderness' of Alaska. Treadwell's idea of the zealous spiritual quest for salvation through an animal can be understood as a neo-colonialist representation of how poor or irrelevant conventional religion has become. Having become so estranged from wilderness and the outdoors in urban depravity, it is romanticizing of the animal-other that appears as the new frontier of spirituality and salvation. It was Timothy Treadwell's colonial misery that drove him to the bears to find communion by literally touching them and, at times, physically transforming himself to act as a bear. His only 'constructed' or 'imagined' enemies were White men (park officials and hunters/poachers), and though there was an Indigenous museum and local Indigenous communities nearby, he never spoke about or indicated in his own media that they would have something to offer his fieldwork or advocacy for the bears. The question we grapple with, as environmental and social justice educators, is how Treadwell could spend 13 summers in Katmai National Park and never once communicate with or acknowledge the traditional territory of the Alutiiq people and their knowledge of the Kodiak bear. As a grizzly advocate and self-described educator, was it not Treadwell's passion and commitment to learn as much about the bears as he could, including how they have been understood by the people, the Alutiiq, with whom they have harmoniously shared the same land for thousands of years?

Indigenous Alaskans are strikingly absent from *Into the Wild* (2007), an absence that is echoed in McCandless' hapless attempts to live on the Land. McCandless referred to the day he killed a moose as one of his worst of his life because he could not harvest the meat before it rotted. Using a mere tourist guidebook to model his butchering, he lost the majority of the moose meat to maggots. His lack of knowledge of edible plants was, of course, even worse and dire in consequences: guided by a wild plants book with one small photo and a textual description of the plant in its prime, he mistook a poisonous plant for wild potatoes. When he figured out he had committed a lethal error, he called out and wrote for help from fellow, though absent, human travelers, and it was then that he perhaps realized his other fatal flaw: that he had cut himself off completely from all human relations. As he wrote in his copy of Doctor Zhivago, 'HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED' (Krakauer 1996, 189), a declaration that he finally understood relations or relationality with others as the means for durable contentment. McCandless was the ideal Western, purest Euro-American eco-hero: 'he rejected conformity and materialism in order to discover what was authentic and what was not, to test himself, to experience the raw throb of life without a safety net' (Krakauer 2013). He was well read but imperviously ignorant of an Indigenous worldview or Indigenous knowledge of plants as the critical piece of Alaska's Land. Wilderness was his abstract monastery, devoid of humans, constructed with texts wherein McCandless could think and experience pure autonomy. He was a monk without religion but with fervent conviction that a 'wilderness place' would assuage and cure his existential malaise. He did not pursue

a new social world but a strict individualist code of self-reliance – no personal *relations* with animals, family, people, spirits, or community. As a highlighted passage from his copy of Doctor Zhivago suggests, he sought to commit himself to ‘something absolute’, such as ‘life or truth or beauty’, instead of ‘man-made rules’ (Krakauer 1996, 102). Clearly, this commitment is not reflective of an Indigenous worldview in any territory or a central teaching of Land education. Rather, it is a Eurocentric mindset that is distinctly *out of place* in Alaska and other Indigenous Lands. And it is a mindset that ultimately cost McCandless his life.

We question these films and their compromised approach or avoidance of Indigenous peoples in the film stories. Herzog (2005), for example, asserts that there is a ‘line between bear and human’, and that line is ‘something that has always been respected by native communities of Alaska’. Yet instead of articulating what that ‘line’ is, or investigating the construction of ‘nature/environment’ by Indigenous peoples, he cuts to Sven Haarkanson, Alutiiq museum director, who notes that Treadwell died while trying to *be* a bear. Haarkanson explains:

For us on the island, you don’t do that. You don’t invade on their territory ... For him to act like a bear the way he did, to me it was the ultimate in disrespecting the bear and what the bear represents ... I think he did more damage to the bear, because when you habituate the bears to humans, they think they are safe. He tried to be a bear, to act like a bear and for us on the island you don’t do that ... If I look at him from my culture, Timothy Treadwell crossed a boundary that we have lived with for 7000 years; it’s an unspoken, an unknown boundary, but when we know we crossed it, we pay the price.

Herzog’s reference to Haarkanson appears inclusive of an Indigenous Alaskan perspective at best, or another ‘angle’ for understanding Treadwell’s tormented quest, a token statement at worst. The existence of Indigenous knowledge in Alaska of how to survive on the Land and in sustainable relations with animals demonstrates an American cultural ignorance that was, ironically, the way of life that both men were desperately trying to eschew. These eco-heroes’ greatest quest, to rid themselves of their civilization or cultural contamination, became their greatest liability in the wilderness. Both men were unaware or imperviously ignorant of local Indigenous peoples (McCandless), unwilling to acknowledge or learn local Indigenous knowledge of bear/human relations (Treadwell), when doing so might have saved each man from tragic failure.

When we armchair travel into these Alaskan *places* as if they were politically neutral, environmentally pristine and spiritually divine, we are buying into and perpetuating neo-colonial narratives of ‘wilderness’. *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild* create representations of places that are untainted by Western or settler exploits of injustice, domination and colonialism. The romanticized beauty and goodness of the Alaskan wilderness as special *place* then somehow absolves us of any guilt about the appropriation of Land from the Indigenous peoples of Alaska and the concurrent contamination of their traditional practices, Indigenous language and knowledge systems. By ignoring or denying the presence and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in Alaska, Treadwell and McCandless were continuing to exert a type of neo-colonial oppression and ignorance upon the Land and the Indigenous people of the Land. The American view of wilderness as special *place* and eco-heroic identities as a cultural project that articulates itself through film are intimately and inextricably linked to what the films, and Treadwell and McCandless ignored: Indigenous presence

(Bordo 1992), Indigenous homelands or traditional territory, and Indigenous knowledge.

Land education is Indigenous knowledge in relation to Land

Borne out of more than 7000 years of relations, observations, experiences, and knowledge with animal communities (including the Kodiak grizzly bear), Indigenous and Inuit Alaskans know their place and the place of animals in both spiritual and material spheres. As Alaskan scholar Ray Barnhardt and Yupik scholar Oscar Kawagley (2005) emphasize, ‘Indigenous knowledge rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place offers lessons that can benefit everyone, from educator to scientist, as we search for a more satisfying and sustainable way to live on the planet’ (9). Through ongoing deep respect and reverence, Indigenous Alaskans have figured out and related through stories and teachings, the psychic, spiritual, and concrete practices of Land education that maintains harmony and peaceful co-existence of human and more-than-human beings (Brant Castellano 2000; Cajete 1994; LaDuke 1997; Smith 2000).

Unlike the eco-heroes of the two films, an Indigenous worldview does not recognize individual identity as separate or distinct from family and community. As McGregor (2009) describes:

Traditionally, Anishnaabe people understood their relationship with Creation and assumed the responsibilities given to them by the Creator. The relationship with Creation and its beings [land, animals, non-animate entities] was meant to be maintained and enhanced, and the knowledge that would ensure this was passed on for generations over thousands of years. The responsibilities assumed by individuals, communities and nations as a result of having this knowledge ensured the continuation of Creation (what academics now refer to as ‘sustainability’). (33)

In other words, Indigenous knowledge can be characterized as a collective, in-relation, accumulative process of responsibilities of ancient wisdom and spiritual teachings, as a life-long learning path or embedded way of being in/on/with the land. Or, as Battiste (2005) explains:

All Indigenous knowledge flows from the same source: the relationship of Indigenous peoples with the global flux, their kinship with other living creatures, the life energies as embodied in their environments, and their kinship with the spirit forces of the earth. (128)

Globally, Indigenous peoples regard the Land as a totality with people, trees, animals, water, rocks, and spirits/ancestors all embedded into this entity. Connection to, or embeddedness in, the Land is at the core and very essence of Indigenous belief structures (Battiste and Henderson 2000; Grand Chief Beardy 2009; LaDuke 1999). This remains true despite dispossession, displacement, and genocide of Indigenous cultures since colonization (Godlewska, Moore, and Bednasek 2010) and needs to have profound implications for a new settler understanding of relationship to *place*. Environmental scholars and researchers cannot begin to articulate a position about place without confronting the historical trauma and current complex political realities of the Indigenous – non-Indigenous relationship on Indigenous Land (Somerville 2010).

Place-based and environmental education learning from Indigenous Land education

Place-based theorist Gruenewald (2003) has argued that reinhabitation through environmental place-based theories means learning how to live well in place, how ‘to identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments’ (9). Thomashow (1995) describes ecological identities and narratives as emerging from the ways people perceive themselves *in relation* to place, as manifested in character, values, action, sense of self, and direct experiences with nature. Or, as Orr (1992) describes it: ‘Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness’ (130). In the film narratives of *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*, McCandless and Treadwell could be interpreted as place-based eco-heroes who learned how to live well in place, identifying and recovering spaces and places of animals and forests. Certainly, McCandless and Treadwell were successful at a sense of care and appreciation of the animals and the beauty of these Alaskan wild *places*.

Yet, a deep failure to recognize Indigenous presence and Indigenous knowledge embedded in this Land were also evident. With these two film narratives, we question how an eco-heroic quest story can be focused on place and yet remain a colonizing, imperviously ignorant narrative – or, how living to re-inhabit a place (wilderness) can be interpreted as both heroic and damaging.

In our view, Greenwood (2010) presents a limited approach to environmental education through the processes he terms *reinhabitation* and *decolonization* because it does not yet take into account Land education or the Indigenous knowledge of these places:

Decolonization involves learning to recognize disruption and injury in person-place relationships, and learning to address their causes. ... Reinhabitation involves maintaining, restoring, and creating ways of living that are more in tune with the ecological limits of a place, practices that are less dependent on a globalized consumer culture that values profits and conveniences more than people and places. (19)

In the heroic narratives of *Grizzly Man* (Treadwell) and *Into the Wild* (McCandless), we see two eco-heroes living a ‘good inhabitation’ of place, according to most place-based and environmental educators, but simultaneously, being completely unaware of any notion of de/colonization for the Indigenous peoples of that Land, on Indigenous traditional territory, holding, and maintaining Indigenous language, knowledges, and practices.

With the powerful depictions in the two films come decolonizing and re-inhabitation (place-based) responsibilities. We acknowledge that both films detail the tragic endings of each eco-hero’s death, yet we worry that Treadwell and McCandless remain as role models or exemplars for desperate young White males to copy-cat or model their own treatment of urban alienation and ‘nature deficit disorder’ (Louv 2005). We should not celebrate or idealize the stories of Treadwell and McCandless through film, except as cautionary tales of doom when disrespecting Indigenous knowledge and perpetuating a neo-colonial mindset of the White settler eco-hero in a mythological place called ‘wilderness’. On the contrary, what needs to be *in place*, and the subject of artistic representation and deep cultural re-storying, is the commitment and dual address of reconciling socio-cultural human rights and ecological injustices.

In our unpacking the representations in *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*, it is evident that Treadwell and McCandless imparted colonial Western values onto their relationship with nature while knowing little of the social histories of ‘disruption and injury’ (Greenwood 2010) of the lands on which they travelled. For Treadwell and McCandless, travelling to Alaska was a balm for the deep existential dissatisfaction they felt in urban American society, yet in seeking wild salvation by abandoning their *relations* – their commitments, families, and social lives – in Malibu (Treadwell) and Virginia (McCandless), to live on little more than their wits in Alaska, these film portrayals continue to glorify narratives of settler eco-heroes who were dangerously *out of place* or disconnected from the Land, tragically ignorant of the Indigenous peoples who understand and continue to be *in relation* with that Land. When we watch these eco-quest films and do not deconstruct their colonial meanings, we are equally participating in hegemonic narratives that sustain the settler mythology of the Alaskan ‘wilderness’ as non-Indigenous or White places.

Land education is learning from Indigenous continuous relation with the Land

There are two principles of *being* for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) people:

- (1) Our special relationship with the Creator.
 - (2) Our special relationship with the land.
- That is who we are as Indigenous (NAN) people.

(Stan Beardy, NAN Grand Chief, Treaty #9 Conference, February 2011, Lakehead University)

Frustrated at what they perceived as a selfishness and human-centered hypocrisy in the world, and turning toward extreme nature as its antithesis, Treadwell and McCandless discovered in Alaska a *place* to reinvent themselves. Yet the act of abandoning their communities, families, and social lives – their *relations* – needs to be critiqued and deconstructed, rather than passively consumed or celebrated. While we applaud the films for bringing environmental stories and eco-heroic narratives to mass audiences (especially those audiences who live unsustainable, disconnected, or alienated lives in urban centers and suburbs), we do think there are more important Indigenous stories of land that deserve to be told as Land education for all – stories that demonstrate sustainable, eco-centric ways of living, embedded in social and natural communities holistically in relation and since time immemorial.

We understand how powerful these films are in demonstrating the intense disconnectedness of young White North American men as they question the lack of nature or place connectedness in their lives, along with a lack of meaning. Certainly, youth can feel out of place in the cities where they have grown up, and many dream of Alaska’s wilderness as a promise for a new beginning or an existence with deeper meanings. There are Indigenous people, however, to contend with in this Alaskan wilderness, living on the very Land now coded as desirable for urban White youth as their ‘wilderness’ that will cure their existential angst. The absence or erasure of Indigenous peoples, along with their rich consciousness of Land (their accumulated Indigenous knowledge over millennia), only perpetuates the false Western ideal of rugged individualism and the Eurocentric man vs. nature binary. In decolonizing these film narratives, we hope that a ‘Land education’ approach focused upon epistemological and cosmological *relations* between all peoples, land, water, and

flora and fauna will take *the place* of (Eurocentric) place-based environmental education. In the face of mass audience settler seduction by these types of place-based film narratives, and as non-Indigenous environmental educators, we wish to be ‘idle no more’ in our responses and actions (see #idle no more).

We must not forget that Indigenous peoples *are* the Land, because they have the stories, the language, and the eco-centric (harmonious) practices of Land education. Films and movies can begin to acknowledge, celebrate and embed these Land education images in our Western cultural imaginary. They can remind us that we cannot be an eco-hero in any place unless we share and respect the Land, the common stories, the experiences, and respectful relationships with the resident Indigenous peoples. It is these Indigenous peoples who are the eco-heroes in their Land, and non-Indigenous people have never been in *a place* where we needed their stories, good relations and Land education more than right now.

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Note

1. See Cronon’s pivotal essay (1996) that traces the historical consciousness of ‘wilderness’ and ‘frontier’ as culturally constructed (Eurocentric) ideals that became the embodiment of affluent White (male) desire for freedom and liberation from social constraints.

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