Landscapes of Experience: Young people, the outdoors, and the power of unfamiliar encounters

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Unfamiliar Landscapes is a collection of texts from academics and practitioners that explores the relationship between young people and unfamiliar landscapes. The book challenges established norms and encourages a more inclusive approach to outdoor engagement for young people. In this review essay I reflect on my own experiences of the outdoors focusing on themes prominent within the book: the importance of engaging diverse groups in the outdoors, landscapes as sensed across multiple registers, and the role of adults in mediating young people's relationships with landscapes. The book provides an invaluable contribution to current debates in a range of disciplines and contexts highlighting the importance of understanding young people's varied experiences and how they engage with unfamiliar landscapes.

**Keywords**

Young people, outdoors, unfamiliar
I appreciated *Unfamiliar Landscapes* by Thomas Aneurin Smith, Hannah Pitt, and Ria Ann Dunkley in part because of its varied offering. Divided into six themes — outdoor education, heritage spaces, embodied difference, wellbeing, digital and sonic encounters, reflections — the book combines research-based articles with conversation-style pieces and reflective essays, includes contributions from academics and practitioners from a range of disciplines and backgrounds, and incorporates examples from the Global North and the Global South.

As such, the book provides a thought-provoking and wide-ranging exploration of the relationships between young people and what the editors conceive as ‘unfamiliar landscapes’, shedding light on the social, cultural, and environmental factors that shape these experiences in a variety of contexts. It challenges established norms, encouraging a more inclusive approach to outdoor engagement for young people. It demonstrates how becoming familiar with unfamiliar landscapes is often associated with ideals of adventure, personal challenge, morality (Nadia von Benzon), and discomfort (Lewis Winks), which can be deeply embedded in gender (Jo Hickman Dunne), race (Jacqueline L. Scott), and class-based (Tuva Beyer Broch) norms (Ria Ann Dunkley and Thomas Aneurin Smith, Chapter 9). It highlights the relative absence of young people (and adolescents) in discussions about nature and draws attention to the ways in which they are often marginalised in, or excluded from, outdoor settings (Thomas Aneurin Smith and Hannah Pitt). And it emphasises that these issues are not only about direct forms of prejudice (which highlight the ‘unfamiliar’ backgrounds, language, appearance, or movements of many young people) but also concern how particular activities and experiences are valued in outdoor landscapes, reinforcing the positioning of young people *per se* as ‘unfamiliar’ bodies in these environments.

What struck me more than anything, though, was the way in which the book resonated with, and consequently made me think more deeply about, my own experiences; as someone who spent large swathes of their childhood outside, as a researcher interested in human wellbeing and nature connection, as an advocate of experiential learning, and as the mother of a teenage girl and a pre-teen boy. It is an academically-facing book, but it is arguably also so much more than this.

My parents and grandparents were campers; I camped in farm fields across North West England every weekend between March and November from five days until 17 years old. I was a Camping and Caravanning Club Youth member working my way through the Junior and Senior Youth Tests which covered countryside conduct, map reading, where and how best to pitch one’s tent, stove-lighting and cooking, waste disposal, and first aid. I spent hours climbing trees, paddling in streams, scraping the pith from soft rushes (*Juncus effusus*), and playing hide and seek in bracken. When not camping at the weekend, I was horse-riding, spending all day at the local stables. Our house had a garden with a nature pond that I dug out with my dad, there was a field behind that I could wander in with our dog, and a canal beyond that. My granddad managed a prison farm close by and I was allowed to pat the cows, watch calves being born, and scoop creamy milk straight from the pasturing vat. I have always been cognisant of my privilege in this respect, but Toby Clark’s comments (in Ria Ann Dunkley and Thomas Aneurin Smith, Chapter 21) on social privilege and education struck a particular chord, reminding me of when I told my high school Careers Advisor that I wanted to be a Countryside Ranger. Their response: ‘You have to wait for someone to die before a job like that becomes available’. Surely a lesson in how to squash a working-class child’s ambitions if ever there was one. Clark underlines the importance of engaging diverse groups in outdoor and nature conservation experiences, and his reflections sensitised me to the ways in which my youth cultivated not just my love of nature and the countryside, but also my sense of entitlement to, and comfort in, rural outdoor
spaces. If it were not for camping and parental predilections my experience of the outdoors would be far more limited.

I still contemplate what my life would be like if I were a ranger (or forest school teacher, or field centre manager, or outward-bound instructor) perhaps more often than I should... but instead I have devoted my working life to exploring what motivates other people to go outdoors and how interactions with non-human nature make people ‘feel’. My research has included work on camping (Morris and Orton-Johnson, 2022), naturism (Morris, 2009), community gardens, art installations in rural (Morris and Cant, 2006) and so-called ‘wilderness’ areas (Morris, 2011), rewilding childhood, and, most recently, how nature photography might be used to explore the self-identity of young women with adolescent idiopathic scoliosis (Baker, Morris, Tsirikos, Fotakopoulou and Parrott, forthcoming). I do believe that outdoor experiences can have personal, educational, and therapeutic benefits, and was duly awed by Amanda L. Hooykaas’s account of engaging young people from disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods in new and unfamiliar places through wilderness expeditions. Yet, I also believe that we should not idealise certain environments over others in this respect; indeed, it is possible to have meaningful outdoor experiences in the city. It was pleasing, then, to see the book challenge traditional notions of outdoor landscapes (as green, nature-based, rural, and/or physical spaces) by including chapters on urban (Hannah Sender, Yazan Nagi, and Diana Bou Talea), managed (Francesca Boyd), watery (Easkey Britton, Sarah O’Malley, and Sara Hunt), digital (Sharon Watson) and sonic (Catherine Wilkinson and Samantha Wilkinson) landscapes. Perhaps the only noticeable omission was imaginative landscapes; I can still remember, for example, the thrill of recognising place names from The Dark is Rising sequence by Susan Cooper, who - along with my other childhood favourite Alan Garner author of The Weirdstone of Brisingamen (1957) and Elidor (1965) - incorporated real landscapes into her fiction, as I travelled to university by train alongside the Dyfi Estuary in Wales.

Likewise, the book makes an important contribution to work on landscapes, not as solely visual encounters but as felt across multiple registers. My abiding memories of childhood camping include the chill of dew-soaked grass on bare feet, the crunch of a frozen tent door, the smell of waterproofed canvas, the beat of wind and rain on my tent, and the piquancy of black peas with vinegar eaten round the campfire. I am in no doubt that these reminiscences fuelled my pedagogical leanings toward immersive experiences. In my undergraduate Honours option course, ‘Geography and the Senses’, students participate in a range of activities (standing in the darkness of underground vaults, tasting beer during the brewing process, silent disco-dancing through the streets) all designed to connect ‘the theory’ to the ‘real world’ in personally meaningful ways (Morris, 2020). Elizabeth Rahman’s chapter investigating the exploration of caves in Fuerteventura as part of an anthropology-archaeology field course was therefore emboldening, precisely because it emphasised how unfamiliar environments can promote alternative modalities of learning and demonstrated the significance and transformative power of unfamiliarity in outdoor education.

The book also highlights the role of adults, including educational and outdoor practitioners, parents, and guides, in mediating young people’s relationships with landscapes. My confidence unravels here. I know that the desire to spend time outdoors as an adult is strongly linked to the amount of time one spent outdoors as a child. I am also aware of arguments which claim that today’s young people are disconnected from real-world nature and lack nature-literacy. So, when they were little, I did my utmost to make sure that my children were outdoors as much as possible. We camped for weeks on end during the summer, we spent hours wandering through woods, we dammed streams, and admired multiple worms, weeds, and fungi on the pavement to school. We are fortunate to have a garden and they were encouraged to help with digging a nature pond and planting seeds. They still
love camping, and are proud to have completed their Senior (teen) and Junior (pre-teen) Youth Tests, but as they have grown older digital technology has begun to dominate their everyday attention, quelling their desire to leave the house (even into the garden). This makes me anxious and I fret that I should be doing more whilst at the same time encouraging them to become independent. In this respect, the chapters by Alun Morgan and Denise Freeman and by Ria Ann Dunkley and Thomas Aneurin Smith provided a salutary reminder that technology is not ‘all bad’ and can be used to create positive encounters with place. The former authors focus on a residential geography field trip in Swanage, exploring how young people informally engage with the unfamiliar landscape, using smartphones to record their experiences and fostering connections with their surroundings. In so doing, the authors highlight both the value of experiential learning beyond academic success and the role of technology in connecting students to unfamiliar landscapes. The latter authors explore how the use of technology and mobile apps can make unfamiliar landscapes - in this case a remote Welsh landscape with Roman remains - more familiar to families during outdoor visits, opening them up to wider audiences and promoting childhood agency. Together, these two chapters demonstrate that prioritising specific forms of interaction with the outdoors over others can limit our awareness of diverse experiences and hinder efforts to foster more inclusive connections with the natural world.

It has been widely reported that the age at which, and the distance over which, young people are now allowed to roam freely outdoors is drastically reduced compared to their great-grandparents. They are also spending less recreational time outdoors. In summer, my daughter camps with ‘the Youth’ on the other side of the field, she spends her days roaming the beach and her nights sitting outside her tent with friends. She wears the same clothes for days (and nights) and rarely brushes her waist-length hair. But at home in Edinburgh her use of local greenspaces is limited. Partly due to peer-pressure, societal expectations of femininity seem more acute here than at the campsite. Climbing trees in the local park during school lunch hour, for example, was recently vetoed by several of my daughter’s friends and now the group (much to her chagrin) spend their breaks mooching around the gym hall. And partly – I cringe to admit – because of our parental anxiety; fear not just of ‘the unknown’ but also of being accused of ‘poor parenting’ if we allow her to wander anywhere other than the shopping centre. It was heartening then to read Sara MacBride-Stewart’s chapter discussing gender, particularly norms related to young women’s safety, access, and outdoor activities, and addressing how young women participating in geocaching in Wales challenged normative femininity and the complex ways in which they navigate gendered constraints. I found her review of the ways in which organisations like National Parks can support non-normative identities particularly insightful, but felt not an insignificant amount of regret that these young women often had to rely on relationships with boys to access unfamiliar spaces and engage in outdoor activities. Phoebe Smith and Dwayne Fields (in Hannah Pitt and Thomas Aneurin Smith) likewise emphasize the importance of breaking down barriers to the outdoors and I applaud their call for outdoor education (including safety and challenges) to be incorporated into school curricula. They stress that the real issue is not the ‘unfamiliar’ landscape but social conditioning, including gender stereotypes and the lack of diverse representation in outdoor advertisements. Of course, I can only speak from my own experience but outdoor education in Scottish state schools seems to depend (funding aside) on the enthusiasm, experience, and capabilities of the teachers and, if these are lacking for whatever reason, this aspect of education – from outdoor learning in the school grounds to initiatives like Duke of Edinburgh Award – will always be side-lined if not formalised.

In the book’s closing chapters, Peter Kraftl and Thomas Aneurin Smith, Hannah Pitt, and Ria Ann Dunkley provide critical reflections on the preceding contributions. Their combined appraisal of the term ‘unfamiliar landscape’, which I had found a slightly awkward fit at times, was particularly welcome. Kraftl questions whether unfamiliarity is inherent to specific places or if it is something
individuals ‘bring with them to landscape’, proposing that it might be more productive to use the term ‘defamiliarising’, which arguably promotes a less dualistic understanding than unfamiliar/familiar and acknowledges the reciprocity between the ‘everyday’ and the ‘extraordinary’. Smith et al. contemplate whether labelling landscapes as unfamiliar does more harm than good for young people, particularly those who may feel excluded or struggle to access them, by masking underlying social norms and power structures (e.g., inequality, exclusion, and poverty) and unwritten rules (e.g., comportment, attire, expertise) that limit young people’s access to outdoor spaces.

In summary, *Unfamiliar Landscapes* provides an invaluable contribution to academic and practitioner debates highlighting the importance of understanding young people’s diverse experiences and how they engage with unfamiliar landscapes. It questions the tendency to promote specific types of outdoor experiences and emphasises the need to prioritise what matters to young people rather than imposing predefined solutions. In so doing, it also discusses the importance of considering the emotional resonance and therapeutic needs of individuals in specific spaces. I would highly recommend the book for researchers and professionals interested in young people and outdoor education/recreation, but also feel it would be relevant to a range of interests in human geography, anthropology, sport science, education, medical humanities, and landscape architecture. The collection’s themes mirrored my own diverse experiences in the natural world, making it a particularly enjoyable read. A significant number of the chapters mirrored my own experiences in the great outdoors, creating a sense of familiarity, and I have no doubt that other readers will feel the same.


