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An On-line Narrative of Colorado Wilderness: Self-in-"Cybernetic Space"

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The authors consider a new frontier for the study of wilderness recreation experience, an increasingly common form of blog known as online trip reports. Analysis and discussion in this article is the result of collecting and reflecting upon more than 300 trip reports focused on wilderness areas in the state of Colorado. The authors present a case study of one trip report that demonstrates the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology. While the practice of trip reporting is rather uniform across the cases, the analysis of a single exemplary case reveals that the narrative performance can provide a very personal statement of self and the relationship to wilderness. As Internet presence grows exponentially, online trip reports are expected to play a greater and greater role in the experience of wilderness in cybernetic space.

Keywords: Blog; Narrative; Self; Trip Reports; Wilderness

On August 10, 2008, a teenager left his home in Salt Lake City, Utah and began a journey with his father, brother, and two friends to the Uncompahgre Wilderness Area in Southwest Colorado. After spending the night at an RV resort just outside the wilderness, they awoke early to begin their three-and-a-half day adventure in the Uncompahgre. The boy reported on physical experiences with weather and ground conditions, interactions with other hikers and livestock encountered along the way, and diverse feelings of anticipation, companionship, exhaustion, fear, accomplishment, and remembrance. Perhaps what is most interesting about this report is not the information itself, but the way it was obtained. It is not the result

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of a survey, trip journal, or face-to-face interview. The teen shared these details—packaged in a simple narrative, complete with pictures—in an online trip report on a Website called "summitpost.org" (2012). Summitpost markets itself as "a collaborative content community focused on climbing, mountaineering, hiking and other outdoor activities." The site, its creators note, is "built by its members," who are encouraged to post their trip reports and photos, and in the process, share their knowledge and expertise. Visitors are urged to vote on the postings they see, "The bad submissions get buried," the site explains, "and the good stuff rises to the top" (Summitpost.org, 2010).

In this introductory look at the possibilities for natural resource management of examining the content of such Websites as summitpost.org, we developed a series of initial research questions. We would caution that our research experience was similar to Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, and Dickinson's (2011), who explained, "Working interpretively, focused on participant meanings, we started by viewing our data without any central driving theory" (p. 489). They go on to state that during coding and subsequent analysis, particular questions and potential theoretical answers presented themselves. We eventually formulated the following questions: What is the potential for online trip reports to provide useful information about experience with wilderness areas? How might the study of online wilderness trip reports provide a glimpse of a new form of practice in relation to place that stands at the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology—an evolving recreation experience of cybernetic space? In what direction does this topic and theoretical orientation point us?

In the literature section that follows, we will present a frame for this article, touching on what past scholarship has made of the previously mentioned concepts of wilderness, narrative, self, and new media technology. Although not intended to be an exhaustive review, it begins to address the lack of any sort of deep discussion to date about the intersection of these concepts, at least within the context of natural resource management. We argue this discussion provides a backdrop, guiding us to an appropriate methodology for examining a particular case of recreation experience in cybernetic space, the analysis of which is considered in the discussion section.

Self and Narrative

Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) considered the influence of physical settings on what they called "self-identity" (p. 57). They defined self as all the visual, aural, and verbal labels that delineate each of us as being distinct from someone else. Self is that resultant feeling of *who we are*. At first, as a very young child, this process is rather simple. Children learn to distinguish themselves from their caregivers, who, nonetheless, remain extremely important to their sense of security and well-being. As children develop, their sense of self is further influenced and defined by the growing circle of people, animals, objects, and settings around them, as well as their developing physical, psychological, and social nature. Eventually this expands out to include identification (or anti-identification) with various cultural macro-structures

collectively labeled race, class, gender, ethnicity, religiosity, etc. Proshansky et al. (1983) joined early calls to recognize the role of place in defining the self, a concept they called "place-identity":

> ...it is a sub-structure of the self-identity of the person consisting of, broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives. These cognitions represent memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience which relate to the variety and complexity of physical settings that define the day-to-day existence of every human being. (p. 60)

Proshansky et al. added that our sense of self- and the place-identity subset are not static, but grow and change over time as our physical and social worlds grow and change (see also Bruner & Kalmar, 1998).

Bruner and Kalmar (1998) joined those further developing the self-identity concept, considering it both a product and a producer of narrative—i.e., to possess a coherent self, one needs to both relate to and maintain a coherent narrative (or narratives). Bruner and Kalmar cited Ricour (1984), who argued that a successful narrative requires the following ingredients:

> An *Actor* with some degrees of freedom;
> An *Act* upon which she has embarked, with
> A *Goal* to whose attainment he is committed;
> *Resources* to be deployed in the above,
> All occurring in a *Setting*
> That presupposes the *Legitimacy* of some state of affairs
> Whose violation has placed things in *Jeopardy*. (Ricour, 1984, p. 319)

Somers (1994) pointed out that life is "storied" and "narrative is an ontological condition of social life" (p. 614). Such a perspective, she argued, moves us past an overreliance on identifying interests and norms as predictors of attitudes and behaviors, to the recognition of the role of solidarities and identities. "I act because of who I am," Somers argued, "not because of a rational interest or set of learned values" (p. 608). Freeman (1998) characterized the self-narrative relationship in terms of "spirals of remembrance and return, repetition and reconfiguration..." (p. 47):

> Human life, which simply goes on, this and then that, this and that, and on and on, is what stretches along the line of time from birth until death. Narrative, in turn, steps into the picture to give form to the flux, to make it all seem like there is a point, a purpose, a *meaning*...(p. 29)

That is, experience is often not linear, but a process, as narrative shapes self, and self defines narrative, through time and across space.

Wilderness

In a lengthy 2012 report summarizing 50 years of research on wilderness experience, Cole and Williams (2012) provided a foundation for our own research while helping us understand new territory for investigation. Cole and Williams reviewed three conceptual models for studying wilderness experience: wilderness as object of

motivation and expectancy (i.e., what did wilderness users expect prior to their experience? Ultimately, were they satisfied by the experience? Cole & Hall, 2008); wilderness as lived experience (i.e., what did it actually *feel like* for recreationists while in wilderness? Hall & Cole, 2012; McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998); and wilderness as long-term relationship (i.e., how do people develop a connection to wilderness over time and in reflection? Brooks, Wallace, & Williams, 2006; Brooks & Williams, 2012). Cole and Williams were clear that all three models are, to varying degrees, operating in concert. People develop expectations about a wilderness experience. They *live* the experience, sometimes singly, other times with others. They often encounter unexpected developments and adapt. And before, during, and after wilderness experience, they reflect on their behaviors, cognitions, and emotions, individually, and in concert with others, often over great spans of time. Elsewhere, Williams (1989) has called such experience and reflection "an expression of one's self" (p. 433).

Wilderness, un-developed, and less-developed landscapes have been studied in terms of their role in defining self and narrative. Kelly (1983) has pointed out that experience in such landscapes has become a common pursuit in the self-conception of contemporary, Western humans: "There is something about the [leisure] activity that provides the 'right' context for the working out of identities" (p. 97, quoted in Haggard & Williams, 1992, p. 2). Haggard and Williams (1992) have examined the experience of leisure activities in natural, less developed, environments and concluded that people commonly craft what they call "leisure identity images":

> Through leisure activities we are able to construct situations that provide us with information that we are who we believe ourselves to be, and provide others with information that will allow them to understand us more accurately. (Haggard & Williams, 1992, p. 3)

Wilderness experience, according to Patterson, Watson, Williams, and Roggenbuck (1998), is "motivated by the not very well-defined goal of acquiring stories that ultimately enrich one's life" (p. 423). This process can be complex. Cantrill and Senecah (2001) argued that a sense of self-in-place evolves around narratives related to experience in one's physical setting, social relationships, and broader cultural discourses. Failure to adequately account for this process may result in both ineffective communication and ecosystems management.

At the end of Cole and Williams' (2012) report, they concluded that, thanks to 50 years of research, much is known about wilderness experience. But wilderness experience has and will continue to evolve. We argue that there remains an untapped area worthy of investigation and potentially helpful to land managers: the presentation of a narrative self in the form of wilderness-related online trip reports.

New Media Technology

Cronon (1995) provided a summary for those who possess a dark view of the intersection of wilderness experience and new media technology, an idea he called "nature as virtual reality":

> We live in a time when the proliferation of networked computers, the power of morphing and fractal geometry, the ever more persuasive illusions of Industrial Light and Magic, the anarchic world of the Internet, and so many other features of the electronic universe make it increasingly possible to inhabit a cultural space whose analogues in nature seem ever more tenuous. (p. 45)

Hine (2000) summarized such views when she discussed three assumed impacts (good and bad) of the Internet on human society, including: new ways to conceive of time and space; fundamental communicational changes, particularly mass communication; and "a questioning of dualism such as the real and the virtual, truth and fiction, the authentic and the fabricated, technology and nature, and representation and reality" (p. 5). It is important to keep these statements in perspective. For example, Cronon made his dire statements (i.e., "illusions," "anarchic," "tenuous") in the relative Middle Ages of Internet history. Even Hine, publishing in 2000, could not be said to have advanced far beyond that. Theirs could only be wild guesses. Since that time, we have seen much we could not have imagined then, and we have gained new insights and perspectives not possible just 17 years ago.

Blogs, e.g., have been an important online communicational element that, despite challenges from recent social media (e.g., Facebook, Linked In, and Twitter), reveal more possibilities with every passing year. A shortened version of the term Weblogs, blogs perhaps inevitably emerged as a communication form in the 1990s by combining the personal Webpage, or homepage, with the interactive capabilities first experienced in online news groups and discussion boards (Schmidt, 2007). In a gestalt sort of way, merging these elements resulted in a higher value than the sum of its parts. Blogs allowed the individual the control and protected space of the personal homepage, while being open to dialog with others. Blog visitors are essentially given the opportunity to eavesdrop on an open diary and are encouraged to comment and add to an ongoing discussion on the topic and blog content (Schmidt, 2007). In an organic sense, blog posts and discussions sometimes evolve to form a distinct identity known as a "blog community," linked by a common interest in the topic, conversation, and stimulating characteristics of particular, unique blogs (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008).

That is not to say that blogs are an anything-goes free-for-all (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Schmidt, 2007). Like any communicational form and community, successful blogs (in terms of deep and/or wide followings) elicit various levels of structure seen as authentic, even inevitable, by their followers. The result has been not just new *objects* of communication, but new "communicative events," or *processes,* of meaningful narrative and self, open to participation and observation:

> Blogs (and social networking sites in general) illustrate the fusion of key elements of human desire—to express one's identity, to create community, to structure one's past and present experiences temporally—with the main technological features of 21st century digital communication (speed, reach, anonymity, interactivity, broadband, wide user base). In this sense, blogs can serve as a lens to observe the way in which people currently use digital technologies and, in return, transform some of the traditional cultural norms...(Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008, p. 67)

Internet-based communication can be more than merely a *reflection* of unmediated experience with nature. Internet-based communication can present a meaningful experience *in-and-of-itself.* Mitra (2008) examined blogs and related communication posted to the Internet site "Desipundit: The Best of the Indian Blogosphere." Desipundit compiles blogs by people who originated in India. Mitra argued that blogs can be more productive (in terms of meaningful narratives) than Websites, which are usually managed by larger institutions that tend to be heavier handed in content control. Blogs, she wrote, can also be more meaningfully productive than social media, such as Facebook, which, while highly interactive, are often not as public (i.e., due to the restriction of friend/linked/follower lists). Thus, with the exception of celebrity, well-known business, and institutional sites, social media do not usually have the same potential for wide dispersal. On blogs, Mitra writes, "people can find the voices of others who either represent similar anxieties or offer tales of a familiar real place that can often be comforting" (p. 471).

Mitra (2008) described how the blogs she studied shared the notion of particular places in India as a starting point. Without prior direct experiences with real places, the interactivity in and around the Desipundit blogs would probably not have been possible. But once this community of communication is established, then the door is open to a new experience—a sense of traveling and dwelling "in the space discursively created by the blog" (p. 471):

> The combination of the real and the virtual is critical to understanding the way in which the internet has evolved since its inception. In the beginning there was significant emphasis placed on the notion of cyberspace, which was almost constructed to be an entity distinct from life as we knew it. Interestingly, however, cyberspace remained yet another space that was created from the discourse that resided in the digital realm, but was created by real people living in real spaces from where they were speaking. This conjunction of the real and the virtual actually ended up producing a synthetic new space whose existence is predicated by the presence of the voices of real people operating within the virtual. (p. 460)

Mitra calls the realm where discourses of the real and the virtual blend together "cybernetic space" (p. 460). Cybernetic space could not exist without either analog or digital experience. Humans may exist in various locations along a continuum between the opposite poles of experience with a real world and experience with an online world, but it is important to understand that most people, especially bloggers, engaged in the trip reports we studied, blend both realms.

The Sample

In the larger study, of which this article serves as an introductory report, we investigated online communication related to four wilderness areas in Colorado, including the Uncompahgre Wilderness, a visit to which prompted the aforementioned teenager's trip report. The four areas were chosen for their relative diversity. The Indian Peaks Wilderness is one of the most popular and heavily used wilderness areas in the state. The Holy Cross Wilderness is more distant from population areas

in the state and less heavily used. Uncompahgre is the most remote of the four wilderness areas we focused upon, with fewer visitors than Holy Cross. Finally, the Flat Tops Wilderness (as its name implies) is far less rugged than the others. We hoped it might offer a wider range of reported wilderness experiences.

Because in the broader study, we were interested in capturing narratives of self based on experience with un-developed landscapes, we avoided wilderness-related Internet communication linked to institutions communicating information, such as government Websites (e.g., USDA Forest Service, Colorado State Forest Service, and National Park Service), nongovernmental organizations promoting environmental policy agendas (e.g., the Wilderness Society and Nature Conservancy), and business-related tourist promotion and product/service advertising (e.g., outfitters, nature photographers, and sporting goods stores).

We utilized Google's search engine to locate trip reports, including the teen's highlighted earlier. We included the name of the wilderness area (such as "Uncompahgre"), the term "trip report," and then various recreational activities common in wilderness areas, including: hiking, backpacking, climbing, camping, horseback riding, fishing, and hunting. Later the terms "motorcycle," "driving," and even "drugs" were included when it was realized that some posting trip reports were associating these activities with wilderness. Our search ultimately resulted in locating 322 separate trip reports located and analyzed between March of 2009 and January of 2010, and later over September and October of 2010.

Methods

To understand the meaningful nature of human communication, researchers should focus their studies on human performance within context (Cronkhite, 1986). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) made the case that qualitative research methods are particularly well suited to achieving this goal, enabling researchers to account for both "the performances and practices of human communication" (p. 4). By performances they meant "creative, local, and collaborative interaction events" (p. 4). Practices, they argued, "form the generic and routine dimension of communicative acts" (p. 4). Researchers must account for performances within structures of practice, a much more nuanced and subtle assumption of human relations than simply viewing communication in terms of conduits for information transfer.

Our broader study utilized mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative). Given the complex nature of making sense of experience at the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology, we will describe our qualitative approach and its potential to help us understand one case from our data-set (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In the larger study, we utilized Patterson and Williams' (2002) ideographic/ nomothetic approach from contemporary hermeneutics. Ideographic research focuses at the individual case level, the idea being that once one has figured out as much as one can at that level, then the focus moves to the next case. Eventually, a number of cases can be compared (nomothetically), but this cross-case analysis occurs later in the research process. Patterson and Williams explained, "...only at a

larger stage and only where and when the ideographic analysis indicates it is appropriate" (p. 26).

Stake (1998) was helpful for the selection of the ideographic case we highlight here. He would call our analysis an "instrumental case study," in which a specific case is investigated "to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else" (p. 88). Stake advised taking on ". . . that case from which we feel we can learn the most" (p. 101). In our situation, one trip report emerged in our initial coding as loaded with themes relevant to our evolving foundational theories so it was targeted for initial analysis.

After case selection, we followed Lindlof and Taylor's (2011) strategies for material and document analysis. One develops a "thick description" (p. 224, also see Geertz, 1973) of the text's semiotic qualities; from there, linking those qualities to larger contexts of cultural significance, such as the theoretical positions outlined earlier. From a practical standpoint, all of this took the form of the authors gathering and analyzing trip reports, interspersed with a number of research meetings (12 total) in which we discussed the process of data gathering, coding, and analysis. This ensured a reasonable amount of uniformity in interpretation.

Discussion

As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) advised, we must describe the practices and performances of communication. Practice, what we see as the structure of communicative acts, seems rather straightforward in trip reports. There is a title, location, activity date, and often other details, such as miles traveled in the wilderness area, elevation gained, and total time expended. This is typically followed by something of an introductory statement elaborating the trip goals and other perfunctory remarks about anticipation and preparation. Photos of important elements of the journey usually accompany a chronological textual blow-by-blow recounting of the trip. Often the ending offers something of a reflection on the part of the author as she or he assesses the level of success, lessons learned, and plans for the future. Many of these posts include commentary at the end from people who have read the reports, and from the authors themselves. It is not unusual for outside commenters to seem to know the authors, but it is also just as common for those commenting to not know the author. Very little negative commentary takes place. Most of the statements are congratulatory for succeeding in the face of a difficult challenge, and/or for having done a good job producing the report. Other commenters will include new information about the wilderness area based on their own experience there. And occasionally, commenters will engage in good-natured teasing directed at the author, making light of something they have reported. Rarely is the teasing intended to be hurtful.

We can assume that those who create and/or utilize trip reports hold expectations about how they will be practiced or structured (again, see discussion of the structural expectations of blogs, Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Hine, 2000; Schmidt, 2007).

We assume elements of practice/structure can influence narrative meanings. The usual physical facts at the beginning suggest a concrete accounting for time, space, and movement—a mimicking of legitimate scientific reporting. The linear nature of the layout (they read like a single document on a screen with seldom any utilization of the nonlinearity made possible by online communication) encourages a top-to-bottom chronology, with a clear beginning, middle, and end.[1] The ability to embed images must prompt a great deal of camera retrieval and picture taking at key moments along the way, which undoubtedly affects the course of events, perhaps later influencing the flow of the story (i.e., if there's an image, one is more likely to mention/highlight this point in the trip). Finally, the ability to include comments at the end leaves an open-ended quality to the reports as outsiders re-hash existing details, or add new ones, which can all be monitored and added to by the author (see Proshansky et al.'s interesting discussion of "mediating change functions"—the tendency for people to try to control the way other people think and act in spatial settings, 1983, p. 71).

But perhaps the more interesting aspect of the trip reports occurs in their textual *performance*, as Lindlof and Taylor (2011) explained, the unique, often collaborative communication event. The most distinctive elements of meaning are not so much determined by the shell of the text (i.e., practice) but the meat—the nut—that lies within (i.e., performance). Because there is not the space here to properly summarize narrative analysis of the 322 trip reports, we return to one example that we believe demonstrates the interpretive potential of these reports, as discussed earlier, exhibiting evidence of the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology.

"Eamigo13" (his screen name—from hereon, simply "Amigo") is the name of the teenage boy discussed earlier. Amigo is from Utah. He posted a trip report detailing his three-and-a-half day backpacking excursion to the Uncompahgre Wilderness area in August of 2010 (Eamigo13, 2010). Amigo offers something of an archetype for all trip reports as he presents the classic structures of practice. After his no-nonsense title, "Backpacking the Uncompahgre Wilderness Area," his "Background" section serves as an introduction explaining that he had been struck a couple of years prior by photos of peaks in the Southern San Juan mountain chain, particularly Uncompahgre and Wetterhorn Peaks. He discovered the images on summitpost.org. Amigo reported hoping to "one day" visit this wilderness. His father had wanted Amigo to help plan their vacation in 2010 and Amigo suggested Uncompahgre Wilderness as a destination. He showed his dad the images; his father was sold. Amigo's younger brother joined them on the trip. Eventually, they invited another father–son duo to form a five-person group. Amigo was pleased that his trip "came a few years earlier than expected."

Amigo demonstrates more common wilderness trip report practices when he presents a heading, "The Plan," followed by an outlined schedule of events and goals. A pair of images embedded near the start of the report represents another routine practice. The first picture shows a smiling boy, standing next to an "Uncompahgre National Forest" sign, in a grove of young leafy aspens along the road. Though he

never identifies himself, we assume this is Amigo, exhibiting the classic entrance sign photo. The next image is a map indicating their daily hikes in color-coded routes. From this point Amigo presents entries describing trip activities. Some are titled "Journal Entry," all are dated, some indicate a time. It is apparent that Amigo wrote his reports in true journal form, writing during his trip, either having an electronic device, or jotting with pen and paper to be transcribed later. These dated entries are augmented with images from the trip: mountain peaks, meadows, campsites, tents, trip mates smiling, trip mates looking tired, trip mates hunkered down in the rain, trip mates atop a peak, and the view from the top.

Again, it is the *performance* of self in the trip report narrative that is most revealing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Already, we know that Amigo is a teenage boy who utilizes at least *some* of his Web surfing time checking out wilderness trip report sites. We are told he feels a deep connection to wilderness. He wants to do more than just look at images and read stories, he wants a face-to-nature experience, and he would like to share that experience with others. His image next to the entrance sign is a performative statement, connecting himself to Uncompahgre. But it is Amigo's words that perhaps carry the most meaning. In an entry dated August 11, 2010, Amigo writes:

> I am currently sitting with my back leaning against a log with Wetterhorn soaring right above me and Coxcomb looming on the left. I am finally in the Uncompahgre Wilderness on a trip that started at least a year ago when I came across some stunning pictures on summitpost.org. It's not a pristine forested area, but a rugged mountain range with a rolling alpine tundra. It is AWESOME!

From here Amigo recounts early morning wakeups, hiking the trail, losing the trail, finding it again, altitude sickness, rain, wind, fatigue, sleeping in to gain more energy, changing plans to account for starting so late, marveling at thousands of feet of climbing, and comparing campsites.

At times Amigo and his team seem to struggle with the unexpected discomforts of strenuous hiking, climbing, and camping at altitude. He presents a story of working to find positive outcomes by setting a good example:

> I can't go to sleep so I might as well write some more. I'll write a little compare/contrast of today and yesterday. Physically today was a lot harder. We did a lot more climbing, a lot more mileage, but for the most part, we had higher spirits. Yesterday Brian was grumpily trudging along behind us, complaining about altitude sickness, while today he was practically running for parts of the hike. I think DJ and Michael were better prepared mentally for what lay ahead today allowing them to go farther and faster. Personally I felt a lot happier today, Yesterday night I felt really bad after trying too hard to persuade everyone to do Redcliff and by the end felt like I had forced them to agree and felt bad for dragging them along on my trip. Today I approached things differently. I was more open to others' ideas and less stubborn about doing things my way. My attitude made all the difference.

We can sense complexity in Amigo's words. He no doubt imagined a script for this wilderness experience and he intended for it to play out according to his expectations. He specifically refers to it as "my trip." But his trip included others. When the reality

did not follow the ideal, he had to negotiate with these others, and his negative feelings.

Amigo is white, male, about 16 years old (he mentions driving most of the way to Uncompahgre), he lives in the western USA, and, judging from his name brand outdoor clothing and gear, probably belongs to at least an upper middle income family. Proshansky et al. (1983) made clear that these attributes can all be linked to narratives of self in relation to place:

> Attached to the physical settings that substantively define place-identity are not only the general social properties that come from the broad uniformities in a culture, but also those that serve to distinguish different groups in the culture— racial, ethnic, age, sex, social class, religious, etc. This means that place-identities of different ethnic, social, national and religious groups in a given culture should reveal not only different uses and experiences with space and place, but corresponding variations in the social values, meanings, and ideas which underlie the use of those spaces. The inextricable relationship between a social setting and physical setting is evidenced in place-identity through the merger of the individual's personally held images, feelings, memories, and ideas about a given setting or settings with the relevant attitudes, values and behavior tendencies that express the sociocultural and demographic characteristics of the individual. (p. 64)

In this way, place-identities tend to be associated, more likely than not, with the cultural power to define and maintain meaning (Williams & Van Patten, 2006). It is not unusual in the early twenty-first century for those connected to these meaningful narratives to turn to particular imaginings of nature as a context for self, to produce what Haggard and Williams (1992) called "leisure identity images" (p. 3). When this effort does not go according to plan, conflict may occur (Jacob & Schreyer, 1980), as Amigo saw. The conflict/negotiation undoubtedly took place in the Uncompahgre wilderness. But it was *performed* (or a version of it was performed) online, in a trip report, for all of the Internet-connected world to potentially see—a self-conscious show of self. This included the narratives of coming together in a communal sense, the story of a time before the conflict, a time after, and finally, resolution (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; and see Bruner & Kalmar, 1998, for more on the role of conflict in the stimulation of narrative).

After another no-nonsense heading—"Trip Summary"—Amigo ends with these rather routine statements: "The trip was a great experience for all of us. We hiked 28 miles in three days, had a total ascent of 14,000 feet, climbed our first fourteener, and most importantly, had fun!" But perhaps the more meaningful summary came a little earlier in the report, written at 14,321 feet:

> The top of Uncompahgre is truly spectacular. We were able to see for miles and miles in every direction and think we even saw the La Sals to the west, clear in Utah! The view south was spectacular with mountains continuing as far as the eye could see. We could barely make out Montrose to the Northwest, but that was the only sign of civilization one could see. There is nowhere I have been in the Wasatch Mountains where I live that can even compare. The Wasatch Mountains are beautiful, no doubt, but whenever you get to the top of a mountain, you can see miles and miles of urbanized country in the Salt Lake and Utah Valleys.

We believe further study of a communication form such as online wilderness trip reports will help us better understand such statements. Already, we can see evidence of the theoretical ideas behind the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology discussed earlier. Amigo presents and performs a sense of self (Proshansky et al., 1983), and more specifically a social self-in-place (Cantrill & Senecah, 2001) in his images and stories of his team of fellow travelers in Uncompahgre. Returning to Ricour's (1984) classic ingredients of a narrative, we have Amigo—the self—the actor—performing freely. We see him embarking on an act, the journey he leads to Uncompahgre. He has set goals for himself. Amigo deploys resources, all within a setting. And finally, he is tested, and succeeds. As Somers (1994) argued, one loses her/his sense of self if there is no narrative with which to ascribe meaning. When Amigo compares the view from the top of Uncompahgre Peak to that of the Wasatch Range, are we witnessing the creation of a nascent sense of place—the beginnings of a deep connection between a boy and the Uncompahgre Wilderness? Did he really think those thoughts then? Does it only matter that he organized his impressions, memories, and reflections—his narrative— for this trip report? What happens to Amigo's self in that process?

Amigo's story supports Cole and Williams' (2012) claim that, for at least the past 50 years, wilderness in the USA has been a location of recreational experience related to projects of self and narrative. We can see all three models of wilderness experience in the practice and performance of Amigo's trip report. Amigo describes great expectations for his planned Uncompahgre experience, and he assesses the extent to which his goals were met. By writing at least parts of his report "in progress," he offered a sense of wilderness as lived experience. The trip report itself provides us with evidence of reflection and a probable long-term relationship with Uncompahgre, perhaps not always in person, but surely in spirit.

And that brings us to the final avenue of our intersection—new media technology. Do we most value Amigo's report for the way it *represents* real wilderness experience? Or, does it present a meaningful experience *in-and-of-itself*? As Mitra (2008) said, such trip reports do depend upon a physical place known to others. As discussed, a community of communication can be established around the online presentations of life in these physical places. But this act enables a new arena, a "conjunction of the real and the virtual," dependent on experience in a physical space, yet something different, what Mitra called a "cybernetic space," blending the real and virtual (p. 460).

Conclusions

Returning to our first research question (with italics included to show emphasis): What is the *potential* for online trip reports to provide useful information about recreation experience with wilderness areas? We believe our analysis of Amigo's case serves as a vehicle, demonstrating the possibilities of the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology. There were a variety of other trip report narratives from the broader study we could have chosen, including a man who has moved away from climbing wilderness 14ers for the comparative peace and solitude

of bagging the less popular 13ers.[2] There was also the brother who organized yearly outings (this one to the Flat Tops Wilderness area) seemingly to enable the playing of continuous practical jokes on his siblings from beginning to end. And we were struck by the woman who climbed Mount Jasper in the Indian Peaks by herself. "Overall this was a very wonderful and fun snow climb," she summarized, "and I had it all to myself!" Solo climbing was almost unheard of for women who posted trip reports, and few men attempted it either. Amigo's report was not qualitatively better or more representative than these, but in our analysis meetings his story simply struck us early on as exhibiting the intersection of the concepts of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology. The alternative trip reports just mentioned, and scores of others, could demonstrate the same thing, but we believe we demonstrated the meaningful potential of wilderness trip reports through analysis of Amigo's narrative.

As our second research question made clear, the discussion reported here was intended to provide a *glimpse* of a new form of practice in relation to place that stands at the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology. In their discussion of self and narrative, Bruner and Kalmar (1998) contended, ". . . the demands of dialogic discourse provide the social microclimate in which Self is constructed" (p. 318). We believe online wilderness trip reports function as (sometimes demanding) dialogic microclimates, as producers work to remember, reflect, and organize their narratives, putting their experiences in an order, attaching their meanings about wilderness places in the form of words and images, located in Web environments. In the effort of reflection we may come to value wilderness places all the more. Proshansky et al. (1983) made the case that when our most appreciated places are threatened, we may suddenly be confronted with potential loss, or at least what we consider a negative change. It is at this moment that we may come to realize our deep attachment. "What was routine and in the background suddenly becomes the 'figure' in the thinking of those using the setting," Proshansky et al. wrote (p. 75). Is it possible that something like wilderness trip reports play a similar role, augmenting reflection? To what extent did Amigo's conflict with his trip mates and resulting story further solidify his connection to the idea of the Uncompahgre (again, see Bruner & Kalmar, 1998)?

And did the act of communicating online somehow contribute to Amigo's feeling of conflict? It must add a new dimension of reflection. Cantrill (1998) reasoned that "the environmental self" is the result of such "associative pathways" that "grow out of one's exposure to the natural world (including both polluted as well as pristine settings) and visions of the environment harvested from the mass media and interpersonal networks" (pp. 303–304). But think of the potential for contemporary new media technology to provide experiences unheard of in the "mass media" days of 1998, the year of Cantrill's publication. The "cybernetic space" that Mitra (2008) examined is the site of simultaneous mass, community, and one-to-one communication, and it grows exponentially with each passing month.

Our third research question asked in what direction this topic and theoretical orientation points us. In terms of bearing, accounting for this sort of experience is exactly what we, as researchers and land managers, are supposed to do. Milstein et al.

(2011) charged that our job is to identify and describe new voices, narratives, and ways of being that move us beyond our usual understandings, to challenge core assumptions and practices. Furthermore, Somers (1994) dared us to avoid prior categorizations and known narratives, instead looking elsewhere, uncovering "... actors' places in the multiple (often competing) symbolic and material narratives in which they were invented or with which they identified" (p. 632). We argue these "alternative public narratives" (p. 631) are available online. Online trip reports have the potential to further provide us with what Knuffke (2007) called a "new vernacular" (p. 55). Ultimately, we hope readers will now recognize the possibilities of online wilderness trip reports—a practice existing at the intersection of self, narrative, wilderness, and new media technology—creating an emerging dimension of existence, blending both the Internet and wilderness, a meaningful new experience in cybernetic space.

Notes

[1]   It should be noted that some trip reports feature a formal "Table of Contents" near the top where linked headings offer readers the opportunity to jump to particular locations.

[2]   "14ers" and "13ers" are shortened references to mountain peaks of at least 14,000 and 13,000 feet above sea level.

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