

# *Reinterpreting Ancestral Stories: Tracing Language Learning Traditions through the Latvian Scout Movement*

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A language is an organism. A weightless, discontinuous organism that lives in the minds and bodies of those who speak it—or from the languages point of view, in the bodies and minds of those *through whom it is able to speak*.

In that volume, William F. Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet introduced an autobiographical theory of curriculum, denoted by the Latin root of Curriculum, “*currere*” meaning to run the course, or the running of the course.

Several years ago my academic journey brought me to Australia to investigate some of the methods the Latvian diaspora community has adopted from ancestral teachings and traditions to develop relationships with the landscapes they migrated to after WWII. Along my research journey, I engaged in conversations about the *Latviesu Skauti* or Latvian Scout Movement as a way of connecting with elders and other members of the community. I realized that the movement’s history is informed by Aboriginal cultures and traditions. Comparing various locations the *Skauti* have returned to and paying particular attention to my journey of learning in these places, I realized that one of the primary goals of the movement is to develop a relationship that encompasses survival skills in the natural world and the learning and teaching that ancestral songs embody. In this paper I describe my story of how the LS have explored landscape and identity formation to uncover ways in which educators can provide

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opportunities for students to develop a responsibility for the land which is essential to cultural continuity.

As a beginning of this research, I reunited with Australian-Latvian *Skauts* at a jamboree in Michigan, USA, more than twenty years prior to my recent visit. Juxtaposing these rendez-vous helped me formulate the focus of this paper and retrace my particular understanding of the movement through an interpretive lens. In the first part of this paper, I describe my interpretation of the curriculum of the *Skauti*, beginning with the survival and maintenance of the Latvian language and culture. Then, I explore my development of familiarity with landscapes and examine the need to understand eating and healthy ways of living as medicinal. Next, I describe what David Orr describes as Ecoliteracy as a way of merging ecological understandings with ancestral teachings. I question “What happens to ancestral stories when they are told in places far removed from their conception?” and “How are learners given opportunities to develop relationships with the places they live?” I believe that my work in the field of ecological education movement is to provide opportunities for learners to become familiar with stories and teachings that are aboriginal to the places they visit. Finally, I relate what I have learned through a revisiting of storytelling, landscape displacement and eco-literacy in public systems of schooling, to consider the implications for pedagogy and environmental education.

## Metaphor and Landscape

Language is a tool the mind uses—a word can evoke a whole firing pattern of neurons, lighting up networks of memory and associations. But so, too, can forms, moods, lighting effects, vistas, places and spaces in the landscape.

Due to the complex and multi-locational nature of the story of the Scout movement, it is important to realize that the notion of scouting is reinvented by the cultures that adopt this tradition. The etymology of the term scout can be traced to a “cave formed by jutting rocks.” The image of a cave produces a useful metaphor for my paper as it represents inner landscape as well as inner identity. In contrast, scouts are also described as a form of vessel used for war. Militaristic images help me consider beginnings influences of the movement. The term scout is also employed to describe the act (or persons involved in acts) of watching (1553) and earlier definitions are used in conjunction with watch i.e. “scout-watch” (1400). These definitions point to an older history that moves beyond the belief that the development of the Scout movement can be attributed to the work of a single individual.

Smith (2003) suggests that the work of the hermeneutic researcher involves interpretive activities that become the roots from which this paper emerges. Along my tour of Australia, I visit a Latvian Scout who resides in

Jarlamadanga Burru, an Aboriginal Community in the Western Australian “Outback.” As we spend time together in different Western Australian landscapes, I theorize the development of my relationship with North-American and European landscapes in order to help me re-conceptualize our initial meetings at York University in 1992, as well as mutual experiences as *skauti* in both Australia and Canada. Revisiting traditional stories and songs help me re-conceptualize the processes of initiation for young boys and girls as a universal practice of socialization, as well as, consider the implications of such practices as a global concept. As I compare and contrast Latvian ancestral teachings with Aboriginal Australian teachings in Australian landscapes, I begin to understand how different rituals taking place in systems of education can foster deep relationships with place.

Although there has been a good deal of debate implicating the Scouting movement in a process of colonialism through Baden-Powell’s British movement, other cultures that were introduced to it developed scouting practices in different and diverse ways. Specifically, I look at how the Latvian diaspora community engages in scouting after WWII as a method of re-constructing cultural traditions through ancestral teachings that are embodied in stories, songs and landscape learning. After WWII, many members of the Latvian Scout Movement found themselves in *displaced person* camps in Germany. Latvian scouting activities continued after the war ended because job opportunities required a relocation to Western Europe, North America, Australia and beyond. Scouting was outlawed in Latvia and replaced by the *Pioneer* movement. Since the 1950s, Latvian scouting in exile became a movement of resistance to colonialism for the diaspora community around in the world.

Researching stories of cultural continuity through my own travel has enabled me to develop important understandings about the relationship between my *skauti* identify-formation and unfamiliar Australian landscapes. Through the hermeneutic imagination, I create (David, 1991). Through my journal entries and poems I explore personal understandings about ancestral places but also develop a deeper respect for other places I encounter. My research requires that I travel across Australia by bus and by train in order to learn about the Australian-Latvian Communities. Unfortunately, scouting meetings no longer take place with the frequency that they once did. My understanding of differences between Australian and Canadian Latvian scouts is informed by participating in camping activities with ex-scouts and by recording my interpretations in my travelogue.

Camping on the shores of the west coast near Broome, I begin to understand how different the experience of the Latvian diaspora scouting movement is in Australia. This contrast helps me conceptualize the magnitude of effect between learning about Latvian landscape in ancestral spaces and those encountered as a result of the displacement that occurred after Soviet occupation during WWII.

I compare my experience of landscape learning through other camping experiences in Canada, Latvia and Australia. I document my journey through photographs, poems and journal entries paying particular attention to the numinous nature of unfamiliar landscapes.

The experience of allowing myself to focus on these stories teaches me a great deal about the importance and possibility of place. My traveling experiences also foster my desire to engage with mytho-poetic stories that resonate from these places. Bruce Chatwin's (1985) interpretive text, *The Songlines*, paints a vivid picture of Australian Aboriginal culture and beliefs about land ownership and land loss. In the following travel journal entry, I interpret my dialogue with Aboriginal elders about the hardships they have endured.

After speaking with one of the Elders I learn that a good deal of sacred cultural information is not discussed with outsiders due to the oppressing effects of colonist laws that are still being felt today. The interpretive meaning of the story shared with younger listeners and outsiders is far less intricately complex than the story elders know. It is difficult for me to imagine the devastating effects that colonialism has had on Aboriginal communities throughout Australia.

According to Chatwin (1985), *Songlines* are a way of remembering landscapes. They are a system of mapping a particular landscape through song. In addition, *Songlines* are a way of representing the responsibility and title to land:

In Aboriginal belief, an unsung land is a dead land: since, if the songs are forgotten, the land itself will die."

I explore the way in which songs form a basis for trade-routes among landscapes as well as for remembering about the importance of myth and tradition relative to identity formation. The story of the mistreatment of Australian Aboriginals by the ruling powers at the turn of the century is one that is only beginning to be shared. Traditions and rituals are a way of connecting with ancestral knowledge. I learn that in order for ancestral stories to survive they must be re-told in the language of their conception.

As I travel across Australia, I realize that what I have learned by participating in the Toronto Latvian community moves me toward natural landscapes where most of the Latvian diaspora community currently lives. The more I listen to *Tautas Dziesmas* (or songs of the people), *Tautas Dejas* (dances of the people), the more I am more aware of the effect *Skauti* activities have had on my identity formation. The singing of ancestral stories and teachings are some of the rituals that connect me with land and help me interrupt an ever-increasing monoculture of globalization. The re-enactment of *Skauti* rituals are what Joseph Campbell describes as becoming a part of the myth. By re-constructing histories new understandings are formed.

Just as discovering Aboriginal traditions situated in the landscape of North America has been a way of revisiting Latvian Traditions, as remembered and retold after the displacement of the Baltic States after WW II, so too is my discovery of Australian *Skauti*. I am able to reinterpret my North American and Latvian experiences in relation to Australian encounters. In my travelogue, I record the ways in which I become familiar with landscape with an aim to rediscover what the Aboriginal cultures have not forgotten: knowing a landscape is an important part of language and identity. My travelogue also documents historical elements of the scout movement that include archival scouting texts in juxtaposition with current post-critical theories of curriculum theorizing.

## Mediating a Culture of Consumerism

There is no clear distinction anywhere on the earth's surface between living and nonliving matter. There is merely a hierarchy of intensity going from the "material" environment of the rocks and the atmosphere to the living cells.

I feel that the reason my grandparents only spoke with me in the Latvian language was to give me the opportunity to envision the world through an ancestral cultural lens. When I visit Latvian landscapes, I often wonder what it would be like to live there on a more permanent basis. I listen to sounds around me, and childhood memories surface, making me feel as though I am "home" again. I realize that scout elders have played an important role in shaping who I have become as Canadian and a Latvian.

Language learning methods permeate scouting activities shifting from a literary to an oral culture. With the degree to which Indigenous languages are disappearing it is important for people to understand traditions that are embedded in local languages around the world. On the train from Melbourne to Sydney, I re-read *Staburaga Berni* and I interpret my reading of this text in the following passage:

One of the stories that we learned through was Valdis' *Staburaga Berni*. This is a story about two brothers who growing up in Latvian landscapes near a cliff that was flooded after the Soviet occupation. My grandfather rereads this text many times as a way of revisiting his own memory of that place. For our elders, much of the story's descriptive content would have been part of quotidian life. As I re-read the text, I can still remember the scout group sitting in a circle and communally participating in the process of re-creating the story.

This way, even at a very young age, I became a part of a communal process of interpreting this text, which embodies a relationship with ancestral language and landscape learning. Becoming indoctrinated into a society of readers is another survival skill that I learned as a Latvian scout. Reading my grandfather's text about the importance of developing a relationship with landscape once again helps to deepen my understanding of the work of reading as a way

of learning about ancestral knowledge. As a young child, most of my scout learning took place in the context of oral tradition of storytelling. Stories were not only told around campfires but through all aspects of scout activities.

My re-reading and re-interpretation of my grandfather's text in Australian landscapes, reminds me of the two motifs associated with scouting: a) learning about the outdoors, and b) becoming part of seasonal camping expeditions. Camping provides me with an understanding of the importance of a harmonization with wilderness. It facilitates imagining an ancestral world in ways that cannot be understood without the added dimension of traveling outside of human-constructed environments.

Another survival strategy is one that uses text as a way of telling stories far removed from ancestral places. Latvian culture is reconstructed through texts using archived teachings. I re-familiarize my understanding of the *skauti* in North America by reading the Latvian Scouting text *Zelta Padomina* as "Golden Advice". It is a collection of activities that leaders can draw from, as well as a workbook that we could learn from.

Sharing a copy of this manual among each member of the movement from scouts to the central organizers is a manner of giving ownership to all members. Talking with one of my scout Elders, I am excited to explain what I have been thinking about in relation to this work. The act of having an informal discussion reminds me of hikes, camping trips and other activities we were both a part of. I realize how different our stories are as I slip between my role as teacher, grad student, leader and *vecskauts* or old-scout.

A scouting elder provides me with a copy of an old scouting manual, titled, *Panakuma Tekas* that belonged to another Elders in the scout movement. He also lends me a more recent *Venturer* handbook that I have not seen before. It reminds me that most of our activities were part of an oral tradition. I am offered a binder of Latvian songs, stories, and themes of discussions and debates. As I read these texts, I realize that much of the artifice of being a scout leader is to make what is "rehearsed" seem natural and "off the cuff." The *skautu* curriculum stems from the *tautas dziesmas*, meaning "songs of the people." Reading these works is an onerous task because I am out of practice in my translation, but as I become immersed in ancestral language, my translation of the texts becomes less cumbersome because I move between English and Latvian phrases to re-interpret my ideas.

## Eco-literacy a Path Towards Ancestral Knowledge

*Every natural human language has a literature. But in its own unprinted way, every non-human language has a literature too. If something speaks well, literature is what it has to say. (If you prefer a more self-centred definition, we can also put it this way: any well-told story turns to literature when you pay close attention.)*

It is my experience that eco-literacy is a way of raising an awareness of the need for future generations to develop the understanding that a sustainable relationship with place is an essential aspect of survival for marginalized languages. Australian and North American Aboriginal cultures have a history of traditions that stem back thousands and possibly hundreds of thousands of years. To follow their teachings and traditions is a way to help younger members become accustomed to the places they live. Along my travels, I focus on the evolution of the Latvian Scout movement and the ways in which Elders have used the framework of scouting as a way of providing opportunities for re-constructing ancestral learning and teaching.

It is my experience that Movements of Scouting are informed by Indigenous traditions providing an opportunity to trace and reconstruct deeper histories of life in non-urban environments. Seasonally inspired meetings are an integral part of language and cultural development. They involve the creation of personalized stories that map a relationship with place. Learning ancestral languages is a process that resists forces of globalization. The structure of the Latvian Scouting movement becomes an opportunity for community leaders to foster relationships with the natural world through ancient songs, dances and stories. Reconstructing the oral tradition of learning is synonymous with (re)discovering ancestral ontologies and epistemologies. Latvian scouting activities in their deepest conceptualization are akin with ancestral learning.

Scouting leaders teach through their personal experiences. This is evidenced as Lord Baden-Powell's militarily career influenced his conceptualization of the Boy-Scout movement. Similarly, Ernest Thompson Seton's concept of "character building" through a participation in what he termed "Woodcraft Indians" in North America illustrates the ambiguous origins of this movement.

I recall reading *The Boy-Man: The Life of Lord Baden Powell* reminds me of the stories I was told as young scout. One story often retold was that the history of Powell's work with youth stems back to the Boer War where young boys in the war effort couriered maps indicating key positions disguised as butterfly sketches. As I further investigate beginnings of this movement, I realize that the stories I was told as a young scout were part of a mythologizing of who I was to *uzaugu* or grow into. Though this movement clearly has a militaristic beginning, with a slow decline in numbers, especially in the last few decades, the desire to grow a Latvian diaspora community fostered a philosophy, that the direction the movement would take would be directed by the needs of the members themselves. This philosophy is more closely to Seton's writings regarding the development of the movement.

The scouting organization is dedicated to a curriculum of outdoor education. However, the concept of socializing boys and girls in a particular way of

understanding the places they live point to far deeper origins that stretch back thousands of years.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of *Scouting* became a way of organizing outdoor education. Group leaders like Baden-Powell and Seton, among others, re-invented opportunities to learn beyond classroom environments of public education systems. In Great Britain, Baden-Powell was able to write books on the subject partly because he enjoyed both financial and political support. He was sponsored to write a handbook and made hundreds of speeches to promote his organization. Jeal's (1990) biographical work regarding Powell's life suggests that in order to gain support for the movement, his story received a good deal of orchestration, rather than being a factual account of personal experiences. These stories continue to be retold as a part of the myth of the movement.

Through the process of learning that comes with growing up, the meanings one can evoke from a story change. My experience of going into the countryside was synonymous with the survivalist tradition of an Indigenous culture's intricate understanding of the land they were born into. As a Latvian scout I remember learning about how Baden-Powell's vision of the Boy Scout movement is providing city boys develop an awareness of indigenous environments. Reinterpreting this story helps to develop my awareness of the individual scout groups are as diverse as the stories learners are asked to engage with. Reinterpreting my experience as a Latvian Scout, I realize that survival was a key interest most of my friends and I shared and that interest was fostered by the leaders as a way of bringing young learners together to learn about their diaspora culture.

Ernest Thompson Seton takes up the idea of scouting in North America. Unfortunately, his conceptualization of the organization does not gain the same popularity and recognition that Baden-Powell's does. The story about the origins of a scouting movement told by Seton says a lot about the time period in which he lives. He writes about his experience of entering a classroom to confront the same boys who have been painting his gate. Rather than calling the police, he invites the perpetrators as well as their friends and anyone else who expresses a willingness to join them to camp on his property. His story is dated but it illustrates his desire to contribute to society by providing a locale for outdoor education. The historical overview of Baden-Powell and Seton's youth work helps me to better understand my own relationship with scouting as I reinterpret tradition songs in landscapes I am becoming familiar with through returning to throughout the course of my life.

The following poem explores my experience of traveling back to Australia through visiting travel-log journal entries as well as I research the Latvian scouting tradition. This English version emerged through a dialogue between both English and Latvian languages, as well as with the photograph that follow.

## Star Maps

Australian travel-log voices shuffle through notes  
star-map stories record faces and bodies of relationships  
as I look for home  
sea sounds whirl dreams night songs through  
salt-water and sky  
blue flames heat fruit in rice-pudding between tent flaps  
wine-stained lips sip cold sun-dried tea  
kangaroos rest on distant fields  
venom-tainted creatures inspect presences  
olive tanks glide behind logging rigs  
whisps of smoke float from the log-burning stove flames  
warm northern November air  
I slip beyond Algonquin ancestral shores through curtains  
that divide shadows beyond evening starless lines  
beyond cloud silhouettes

## Implications for Environmental Education

Thus represented and enacted—daily, monthly, seasonally, annually—places and their meanings are continually woven into the fabric of social life, anchoring it to features of the landscape and blanketing it with layers of significance that few can fail to appreciate.

Field trips seem to be thought of as something outside or less than “real” learning. They should not be treated as a reward for good behavior, a break from the work of learning or an excuse to play. As I write, I realize that movement is an essential part of the cognitive process. As a student I remember spending a week with our class at a camp. At one of the schools I worked at, we spent some time investigating possible field trip sites around Toronto. It reminded me of field trips that I went on. Yearbooks in one of the departments I worked with showed different sites that teacher’s we worked with had yearly trips to. When discussed, beyond the problem for funding are questions of time and responsibility. When I teach within the Ontario public system of education, I hear stories about what goes wrong and what may happen on a well-planned field trip. The expectations based new curriculum makes little reference to outdoor education. Similarly, there is little room for opportunities for “organic” learning that allows for students to explore rural environments. The primary concern of teachers is shifting towards standardized testing which is resulting in a return to the practice of “teaching to the test.”

In an ever increasingly urbanized population, how can students become aware of the more-than-human experiences less populated landscapes

offer when these experiences are considered to be too dangerous and in places most students have never been? What if a part of the curriculum became spending several weeks of each year in an environment that is not artificially constructed? It is important for educators to think about these complex questions if there is hope for helping students develop a sense of environmental sustainability. Inevitably, human survival will depend on creating ways that do not destroy habitat that they live within. It is ludicrous for educators to foster the belief that somehow, we have an inherent right to be able to destroy landscapes for the pursuit of capital. What students experience in terms of creation of waste from excess packaging to activity “hand-outs” in a throw away culture of newspapers and magazines, does not foster an awareness of ecologically sustainable practices.

Though much of what I have written for the purposes of this paper has been about landscape, it is difficult not to think about the scout movement as a way of socializing people in a particular way. It is interesting to think about the influences of this movement and how it has been taken up by different cultures if not only because of the dramatic changes North American Landscapes have undergone during the past hundred years. How will these landscapes affect the way that we think? How will our students approach the role that they play on the possibility of creating a society that is economically and ecologically sustainable? The following is a poem that I began several years ago. Recent changes were a creative part of my reflective process through thinking about culture and environment as it relates to education.

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