

# Stigmatized places as therapeutic landscapes

The beneficial dimensions of  
river-bottom homeless encampments

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## Abstract

Urban rivers in the United States have frequently been sites of long-term homeless encampments. Recent efforts to ‘restore’ these marginal waterways have focused on removing such camps, an approach that is justified in terms of concern for the health of both waterways and people. This article explores the intersection of landscape health and human health, based on twelve months of ethnographic research on the ecological restoration of the Ventura River in southern California. I argue that river-bottom camps contribute to the health and well-being of residents by helping them resist social exclusion and mitigate experiences of violence and stigma. It is important to recognize this complexity so that logics of exclusion are not unintentionally reproduced in how landscapes are understood, which can legitimate actions, such as camp removals, that cause marginalized communities additional harm. Embracing the complexity of therapeutic landscapes opens up possibilities for more just ways of restoring the health of human and nonhuman natures.

## Keywords

therapeutic landscapes, health, homelessness, ecological restoration, displacement

## Introduction

As I embarked upon my fieldwork on the Ventura River in southern California, I received many well wishes and also warnings. The warnings usually came in the form of cautious directives to carry mace or a pocketknife with me for protection, or to be sure to let someone know when I was going to the river bottom and when to expect me back. A family member admonished me to remain vigilant because ‘bad people are just bad people’, and a state park ranger vehemently advised me not to touch any of the people living down there because they were dirty and carried diseases like hepatitis and MRSA, which could kill me. I carefully considered each of these well-intentioned warnings and, as my fieldwork progressed, ultimately decided to ignore them all.

I am not someone who generally takes exceptional bodily risks. Nor am I an ‘adrenaline junkie’ or particularly naïve. While some of these suggestions appear to be common-sense precautions, I suggest that this is largely because they reflect (and reproduce) the predominant social and cultural understanding in the United States that homeless encampments are unsafe and unhealthy places (see for example Chamard 2009; Hench 2014; Moore 2010; Reutter 2013). Homeless camps are not generally viewed as positive places for the people who live within them or for the broader communities within which they are situated (Smith 1996; Snow and Mulcahy 2001; Wright 1997). In Ventura, people frequently describe the river bottom as a ‘shadow community’ made up of drug users and criminals. According to the stories, which border on urban legends, river-bottom communities are dangerous and dirty places – full of stolen bicycles and surf boards, trash and human feces, needles and narcotics – where people party all night and sleep or panhandle all day. It is rare to come across positive depictions of the river bottom within broader public discourses.

The negative depictions that dominate popular understandings of homeless encampments are also reproduced within academic studies of health and place. Therapeutic landscapes are places that enhance one’s health and well-being (Gesler 1992). These might include places that are traditionally known to be healing, such as spas or hot springs, medical settings, or greenspaces and gardens. In contrast, places can also be understood to harm health. Medical geographers describe homeless encampments as ‘unhealthy places’ (Hodgetts and Stolte 2015; Stolte and Hodgetts 2015) and ‘landscapes of despair’ (Dear and Wolch 1987; DeVerteuil and Evans 2009). Encampments are grouped with other unmanaged rough-sleeping places that homeless people frequent such as public parks, storefronts, and highway overpasses to collectively ‘comprise an unhealthy urban landscape of decline and despair never intended for health maintenance practices or human occupation’ (Stolte and Hodgetts 2015, 144). These ‘untherapeutic’ landscapes are categorized as places unfit for human habitation, and research tends to reproduce this value. Even studies that identify health-promoting aspects of life on the streets articulate that these positive dimensions only arise

when a place is changed from a 'landscape of despair' into a 'landscape of care' (for example, Stolte and Hodgetts 2015). Such inherently unhealthy places, it is imagined, can only be countered through active work against their detrimental nature.

Similarly, negative assumptions about the moral character of homeless people appear to shape understandings about public natural areas that are otherwise perceived as health-promoting landscapes. Because people who are housed tend to perceive the homeless as dangerous elements, the presence of homeless people in public parks and other greenspaces can provoke feelings of fear and insecurity in visitors and reduce perceptions of personal safety (Gearin and Kahle 2006; Finlay et al. 2015; Kruger and Chawla 2005; Wilbur et al. 2002). As a result, homeless people are described as negative elements or 'undesirable users' (McCormack et al. 2010) who diminish the therapeutic value of healthy public greenspaces for other members of the community. Within the therapeutic landscape literature, unmanaged places used by homeless people are considered inherently unhealthy, and the presence of homeless people in parks and other public greenspaces is categorized as health negating.

In contrast, the health geography literature on the therapeutic benefits of indoor spaces of care for homeless people is abundant. This research focuses primarily on the positive value of indoor, managed spaces, such as public libraries (Brewster 2014; Hodgetts et al. 2008), drop-in centers (Cloke et al. 2010; Conradson 2003b; Hodgetts et al. 2007; Johnsen et al. 2005; Llewellyn and Murdoch 1996), community service provider locations (Cloke et al. 2007; Conradson 2003a; Conradson 2003b; Crack et al. 2007; Parr & Philo 2003), shelters (Evans 2011; May et al. 2006), hostels (Stuttaford et al. 2009), and substance abuse treatment programs (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009; Evans et al. 2015; Wilton and DeVerteuil 2006; Love et al. 2012). This split in the therapeutic landscape literature between unhealthy, unmanaged, 'wild' landscapes and health-promoting, indoor, managed spaces reflects broader patterns of social sorting in the United States that divide the homeless into the deviant, undeserving poor and the docile, deserving poor (for example, Mitchell 2011).

The production of knowledge regarding the relationship between landscapes and health is a power-laden exercise. Logics of exclusion and social sorting present in broader American culture are reproduced in how therapeutic landscapes are understood in relation to people who are homeless. There is almost no research that considers the value that a river bottom provides from the perspective of the homeless community (see Dooling 2009; Palta et al. 2016).<sup>1</sup> In this article, I describe the therapeutic value that river-bottom encampments hold

<sup>1</sup> However, see Bourgois and Schonberg 2009 for an extensive treatment of the out-of-doors homeless and their interactions with public health institutions.

for people who live within them. In contrast to outsiders' characterizations of the river as an unsafe and unhealthy place, I argue that river-bottom camps contribute to the health and well-being of residents by helping them resist social exclusion and mitigate experiences of violence and stigma. Incorporating an anthropological perspective broadens the concept of therapeutic landscapes beyond the physical dimensions of space, which are so often the focus of geographic approaches, to address the political ramifications of how we think about landscapes. Multiple, and potentially conflicting, perspectives on landscapes can simultaneously exist in relation to different social and cultural positions. An anthropological approach that attends to the perspectives of marginalized communities has the potential to reflexively critique, and thus add complexity to, dominant understandings of therapeutic landscapes. After providing an overview of my research context and methods, I show how river bottoms may act as a protective space through four overlapping categories of care: belongings, access to nature, privacy, and relational benefits.

## Background and methods

This article draws upon twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork on the ecological restoration of the Ventura River in southern California. The Ventura River begins as a mountain stream in the steep, undeveloped Los Padres National Forest. When the topography flattens, the river flows through the agricultural Ojai Valley for approximately fifteen miles to the city of Ventura, where it meets the Pacific Ocean. The riverbed in the lower watershed is broad, more than a mile wide in some places, and dry for most of the year except for a few small, braided channels of water. The area is locally known as 'hobo jungle' because of the homeless encampments that have existed in the river bottom since the 1920s (Escario et al. 2008). For much of this time, the members of the public and local agencies avoided the encampments. When environmental groups held river-bottom cleanups, they usually asked the homeless to leave temporarily but left the camps alone so that residents could return once the event was over.

This began to change in 2004 when the California state legislature appropriated \$100 million for the development of river parkways through the California River Parkway Act, which catalyzed local efforts to create a Ventura River Parkway. River parkways in the United States are generally constructed with two main purposes: to restore ecological functioning and to create public access in land adjacent to urban waterways. In an effort to align the Ventura River with these broader values, local environmental groups formed a coalition called Friends of the Ventura River, which sought to reimagine the river as a place of community health and recreation. The presence of homeless people living in the river bottom conflicted with this emerging vision, and, as a result, environmental organizations began to organize around permanently removing the camps. First they attempted to

physically clear the river bottom through trash cleanups and police sweeps, but the trash and the people kept returning. In response, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper, an environmental watchdog group, pursued regulatory action against property owners through the local Water Quality Control Board of the California Environmental Protection Agency (Newman and Rogers 2014; Santa Barbara Channelkeeper 2015). The parties held responsible for the water quality impairments included the City of Ventura, Ventura County, Ventura County Watershed Protection District, California Department of Food and Agriculture, California Department of Transportation, California Department of Parks and Recreation, and multiple private landowners and agricultural dischargers. To avoid the high fines threatened by California's Environmental Protection Agency, many of the agencies began to work together to coordinate camp removals. One private landowner sold their river-bottom property to a local land conservancy that sought to transform the property into a nature preserve with funding from the California River Parkways Act.

In September 2012, the land conservancy began the first coordinated removals of long-term homeless encampments from the property. They worked with local law enforcement and social service organizations to notify the camps thirty days before the initial move outs by visiting the camps, speaking with residents, and leaving flyers with the impending 'eviction' date. Social service case managers attempted to locate affordable housing for people who wished to be housed, but these options were limited. Ventura County spent \$100,000 to temporarily house people in local motel rooms (Willer-Allred 2012); however, people who could not find housing that met their needs were eventually released back to the outdoors. Some people refused assistance and did not want to be housed. Many who were moved from the Ventura River re-established camps on other properties in the river bottom. Others moved to nearby river bottoms or public areas in the vicinity. The land conservancy's ongoing environmental restoration work kept people from resettling that particular property. Conservancy workers patrolled the property weekly to identify and remove returning campers and held bimonthly volunteer cleanup events to throw away debris left by the encampments and to remove *Arundo*, an invasive plant that provided cover around many of the campsites. By January 2014, the land conservancy's property was deemed 'clean' of *Arundo* and homeless encampments. Local municipalities and state agencies subsequently contracted with the land conservancy to begin clearing encampments and *Arundo* from adjacent river-bottom properties. These removals tended to occur in a more haphazard manner than the initial camp removals without the presence of social services. In some instances, people were given less than twenty-four hours notice before the land conservancy brought in dumpsters and threw their belongings away.

My fieldwork in Ventura began in August 2013 as the land conservancy completed their initial cleanup and began to work on neighboring public lands. I conducted eighty-one

semistructured interviews with environmental workers trying to restore the river bottom, social service workers trying to house the homeless, and people who were homeless and living in the river bottom; my goal was to understand the different perspectives of these groups and how they variously construct the problem. I focus here on the point of view of homeless individuals (instead of ‘studying up’, as advocated in Nader 1972) in order to demonstrate how research produced through engagement with a marginalized community can highlight biases in mainstream academic knowledge and lead to landscape decisions that are potentially more just. I also conducted participant observation during restoration activities, encampment removals, coalition meetings, and housing inspections, and at homeless encampments, which provided access to data derived through direct experience that were difficult to access in other ways. I employed photography to document changing nature/culture interactions and to enact a politics of representation that would counteract dominant ways of representing the homeless. Photographs were made during observation activities at public events and in public spaces. They functioned as visual field notes, were a way to engage with animals, plants, and nonliving entities that could not be interviewed, and helped to capture the diverse perspectives of participants. Photographs were initially taken intuitively, as suggested by Gillian Rose (2012), and were increasingly purposeful as fieldwork progressed. I focused specifically on documenting interactions between people and the landscape by recording ‘communicative events’ (Briggs 1986) rather than producing static representations. For example, I documented how people within the homeless community perceived aspects of the river bottom by carrying my camera with me and photographing objects and views as they were pointed out and described to me. I attempted to frame photographs in a way that communicated the analytical and emotional perspectives of research participants.

In order to understand the construction of human and nonhuman nature through the restoration work, I employed a grounded theory methodology, which is based on the assumption that meaning is socially constructed rather than a natural or static quality of people, objects, or events (Charmaz 2006). I first used Kathy Charmaz’s (2006) process of line-by-line coding to identify initial categories and codes, followed by selective (or focused) coding of the most salient themes to facilitate the emergence of broader patterns and insights across participants and groups. I also wrote theoretical and methodological memos that reflected upon conceptual relationships and analytical insights throughout data collection and analysis.

The conflict over the Ventura River reflects broader tensions between restoring ecological purity and environmental justice concerns. Central to the work of ecological restoration is the idea that landscapes will be return to a healthy ‘natural’ state that existed prior to human disturbance. Such efforts to restore ecological purity have historically been tied to issues of race and class. For example, the establishment of national parks and other nature reserves

has displaced Native Americans from their lands (Mitman 2004) and histories of racial violence and exclusion have dramatically shaped black experiences in and with nature (Finney 2014). Moreover, environmentalists tend to prioritize recreation as the ideal way to know nature, which excludes and devalues other understandings that working-class people such as foresters and fishermen develop through their daily engagement with nature (White 1995). Therefore, the production of therapeutic landscapes tends to displace or exclude particular human communities along with their experiences and knowledge, which suggests that how landscapes are understood and managed is as much a concern for environmental justice as the unequal distribution of toxic waste and pollutants.

In Ventura, efforts to remove camps are largely articulated as concerns for the health of both waterways and people. The next sections show that, in contrast to outsiders' characterizations of the river as an unsafe and unhealthy place, river-bottom encampments function as therapeutic landscapes from the perspective of many people who live within them.

## Belongings

Having a place to keep one's belongings can make a dramatic difference in a person's everyday life. In camps, people often sleep on mattresses instead of directly on the hard ground and they may also have reserves of food, clothing, and survival gear (such as an extra tent or sleeping bag). More established camps might have a formal 'garage' constructed out of *Arundo* stalks or a tent. River-bottom camps afford people a respite from carrying everything they own directly on their person, enabling them, at least sometimes, to attend to daily tasks unencumbered by bags, shopping carts, baby strollers (used as push-carts), and loaded bicycle trailers. In addition to the obvious physical benefits of reduced fatigue and bodily strain, there is a positive psychological value to having access to personal storage. Many of the people I spoke with talked about the efforts they take to avoid being perceived as homeless, which included wearing the 'right clothes' and 'staying clean'. Carting around one's belongings is a stereotypical indicator of homelessness in the United States, and just being seen carrying laundry in public can be a stigmatizing experience for a person without formal housing, as the following excerpt from my field notes illustrates:

*Field notes, 25 November 2013*

James<sup>2</sup> explained some of the trouble he's been having trying to get everything set up to start taking classes at the community college. He needed to complete the college's online orientation, so he went downtown to use the computers at the library, but when he got there he realized he also needed earbuds, which he didn't have. Then, he tried again a few days later once he got some earbuds, but the library computers only let him log on for an hour and he ran out of time. Now, he's going to try to use the computer lab up at the college, which is an hour walk from his camp. But if he goes today, he'll have to bring all of his laundry with him to campus, which he doesn't want to do. James points to a large, green army duffle that is full of folded clothes, and says he hates walking with his laundry on his back because then people can tell he's homeless. When he walks to the church on laundry days, he makes an effort to stay on side streets and paths where it's less likely he'll be seen.

For people living by the river, the ability to leave items in a set location is a way they can avoid the stigma of being homeless in public by passing as a person who is housed. During my fieldwork, some people did utilize other alternatives for storage besides river-bottom camps, such as personal vehicles, rented storage units, and friends' garages. However, these options required access to regular financial resources or local supportive (and stable) social relationships to make them feasible. Falling behind on the rent for a storage unit or being unable to maintain a street-legal vehicle means risking the loss of one's belongings. Until camp removals became more frequent and routine in the river bottom, encampments provided a relatively secure and accessible 'home base' for people for whom other alternatives were not accessible or sustainable.

Since the restoration work began in 2012, camp removals happen often and with little or no warning. One implication of this shift is that people can lose important belongings, which require a significant amount of resources and effort to replace. While they may seem insignificant to an outsider, some items are irreplaceable. One day in November, I saw a man named Theo at a drop-in program at local church. Theo is a Vietnam veteran and one of the well-respected older men in the river bottom. While talking with him, I learned that state park rangers and land conservancy workers removed his camp and threw all of his belongings into a dumpster. My field notes from that day capture some of Theo's losses:

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

*Field notes, 04 November 2013*

Ruby is sitting in the smoking circle with Theo and another man. I go over to them and sit down in an empty chair. I ask Theo how he's doing. He says quietly, 'Not too good'. He tells me the park rangers threw away all of his stuff. He went back and was at least able to recover his sleeping bag because the dumpster was still there. I am surprised because there wasn't much time between the noticing [when the land conservancy notified the camps that they would be clearing the area] and the dumpster. I was with the land conservancy workers when they began noticing the camps (including Theo's) on state park property just the week before. Theo tells me he lost the last photograph he had left of his wife and begins to cry.<sup>3</sup> He says he wishes he could stop thinking about her. He's crying so hard. I put my hand on his shoulder. He holds my hand, then hugs me hard. We sit around the circle briefly in silence. Theo asks if I smoke as he offers me the cigarette from behind his ear. I don't smoke. He puts it back, saying this is the smoking-only section. At Theo's prompt, I realize that people are waiting to smoke and I am breaking etiquette by taking up one of the seats. I ask if I can join him for lunch. He looks at me and just says, 'Please'. His voice is weepy. I tell him I will and leave for another interview.

About an hour later, as I am walking back across the courtyard after the interview, I hear Theo call out, 'Hey! You! Don't go anywhere'. I stop. He shuffles over and hands me a bouquet of flowers. I am not sure if they are actually for me. I ask him a few times, 'For me? Really?' Theo pleads, 'Stop it' (simultaneously seeming embarrassed and pleased) and explains, 'I don't know what it is, but I think when people talk to you, they feel better'. I am very touched by his gesture. He says he knows the park rangers have a job to do and that they're only doing their job, but he doesn't understand why they won't listen to him. He tries to keep his camp clean so they'll let him stay but they still won't. 'I'm not a bum!' he loudly exclaims as he turns and runs into the men's restroom, crying.

Theo's story highlights the profound emotional lives of people who are homeless and the deep personal value that their belongings can hold. Belongings in encampments can be sentimental as well as functional, which can go unrecognized when the perceived needs of homeless people are reduced to bare necessities. Theo's words and actions convey a sensitivity to the physical and emotional needs of others that I recognized in many of the

<sup>3</sup> Theo revealed during an interview that his wife was killed in a car accident about twenty years ago. He was driving the car when they were hit head-on by a drunk driver. He spoke of his wife a great deal during our interview.

homeless people that I met, once I became known as a safe and trusted person. Even in the face of the pain he experiences, Theo acknowledges that the park rangers have a responsibility to do a job (and thus, their actions are not necessarily reflective of personal or individual choices). In response, he initiates an effort to work with them to keep the river bottom clean by attending to his camp (not a small undertaking when one is without basic sanitation and trash removal). Theo's anger is not in response to the environmental efforts to clean up the river, but rather to the fact that the work does not currently allow him to escape being identified and removed as trash.

Belongings are not always portable; they can also become attached to place and embedded within the landscape itself. One of the most poignant experiences of my first time in the Santa Clara river bottom was when I came across the burial site for Riley and Ginger, two dogs from the camps. Figure 1 illustrates how the graves were carefully constructed and elaborately decorated with personal artifacts, wooden crosses, plants, stone markers, and homemade headstones. Once I learned to recognize them, I began to notice others: one next to a camp on a small embankment next to the 101 freeway, another during a volunteer day picking up trash in the Ventura River for the land conservancy. Joy and Henry pointed out the small group of stones in their camp that mark the resting place for Joy's fish, Blue. Henry had also constructed an elaborate grave for their dog after he was hit by a car, and Joy described the funeral the river-bottom community held for him. These intangible belongings illustrate how encampments are also places of ritual and memory. The social and emotional lives of people in the river bottom can become connected to particular places within the landscape. As a result, leaving may be difficult and painful, especially when one is made to leave against their will.



Figure 1. Dog burial site in the river bottom

## Access to nature

An appreciation of nature is not something people generally consider when thinking about the experiences of people who are homeless. However, I was struck by how often people in the river bottom wanted to talk about the nature that surrounded their camps. During interviews and conversations, stories quickly emerged about birds, rats, and possums coming by daily for meals, a person searching for snakes in the underbrush, coyotes howling in the dark, and a mountain lion passing through one of the more isolated camps. These unsolicited stories more often than not described everyday experiences, degraded landscapes, and interactions with animals and plants that many people would label as pests. People in the river bottom tended to see value in these stigmatized dimensions rather than seeing them as unhealthy parts of an ecological system in need of restoration.

By connecting with aspects of nature that reflected their own marginalized subject position, people in the river bottom were able to recuperate from and resist the violence and dehumanization that they so often experienced in their interactions with people. Virginia, a white woman in her early fifties, described living in the river bottom as peaceful, seeing the camp as a place where she can escape the violence she experiences in public and within institutional settings. She called herself a 'shape shifter', and demonstrated her ability to switch between the entities living inside her during our interview as her voice and demeanor alternated between wide-eyed and childlike to gruff and paternal. One time, she deliberately switched in the middle of telling me a story, and then asked me if I noticed how she had changed. Virginia explained that she is sensitive to interpersonal contact because people can

trigger her and make her ‘change’ entities without her consent. When I asked Virginia how the river bottom compared to other places where she could stay, she described the peacefulness she feels there: ‘The river bottom is so peaceful. It is unbelievable. I need to have tranquility. Peace and quiet and tranquility. Party if you want to, but no fightin’ and stuff like that’.

When I asked her how the river bottom feels more peaceful, Virginia described sensory elements connected to nature and invited me to experience it directly:

It’s sweet because you feel nature. You feel the energy from nature, from the ground, the ocean, the air itself. You know, the air down there is different from the air above. And another thing, there’s no electricity down there. It’s *different*, trust me. Do you want to come down to my spot with me?

When I arrived in Virginia’s camp, shown in Figure 2, she asked me to lie down on her mattress while she described the calm, steady purr of the cars on the 101 almost overhead and the sound of the wind passing through the *Arundo* grasses surrounding us. She wanted me to feel what it was like to sleep in the river bottom; to me, it was like there was a white noise machine drowning out all the chatter. Then we tore up pieces of pita bread to feed the birds, who Virginia said were ‘so sweet’, and before I left she brought me to the place where she goes to look at the stars.



Figure 2. The location of Virginia’s camp (after it was cleared by the restoration work)

The peacefulness Virginia described emerges from her experience of the river bottom as a place of protection from the violence she faces in more exposed public places and within managed, institutional settings. The sense of freedom nature provides her is calm and hence, calming. The dark is quiet; the birds are ‘sweet’. The ‘noise’ of sound and light and people are attenuated. The cars on the freeway and the wind in the *Arundo* are consistent and nonthreatening; they can be counted on. The birds accept care, but are not demanding; they do not judge her. Through her relationship with nature in the river bottom, Virginia resists being naturalized as a psychological curiosity and experiences the freedom to be a person, to be human.

When people like Virginia experience physical and psychological violence from institutions (such as prisons and mental health care facilities), it can foster very real and rational distrust and insecurity. Many veterans have not only been subjected to physical and psychological violence through military institutions but also have been in the position of enacting that violence on other people. For veterans, living outdoors can be experienced as a kind of freedom, as a means to fight the dehumanization they have experienced through war, and as a right they have earned through their sacrifice. When I asked Theo, a Vietnam veteran, what he considered to be the best part of living in the river bottom, he explained:

I fought for my freedom. I fought for your freedom. I fought for everybody's freedom and they treat it like it's nothing, man. I've been to Vietnam. I had to do things I didn't want to do. God knows I – [crying] I did a lot of things I didn't want to do; we all did things that we – man ain't supposed to kill, [that's] the way I look at it, and dammit, they shouldn't make us do somethin' like that. And, it seems like it's all worthless. Everything I did over there is for nothing. The people I seen, the friends I had over there, they died for nothing. I was seventeen years old, scared – man, I was so scared. I didn't think I'd ever make it back home. I had a mental discharge because I had a nervous breakdown. It was only after I'd been there a year. I still feel like I'm affected by it. Mental health [workers] around here keep on wanting to talk to me. I don't want to talk to them. I don't want to be reminded of things there. They tell me, 'you really need help'. No, I don't! All I need to be done is to be left *alone*.

Theo's response connects living in the river bottom with the freedom he feels he has fought for (and earned) through his military service, which required him to experience and enact violence. When I asked Theo what makes him feel safe, he was completely silent at first. Then he asked me to repeat the question twice before he responded:

That's a good one. – Heh. – Living down there I can only take it as 'momentarily at ease'. [pause] When I can hear the birds sing. When I can see animals around me, wild animals, that makes me feel safe. It makes me feel at peace. . . . Let the birds sing!

Like Virginia, Theo connects an internal feeling of safety (being 'momentarily at ease') with the external, natural world in the river bottom. He focuses specifically on singing birds and animals that are not domesticated or beholden to people. The wild animals and birds are symbolically free, which Theo communicates through the phrase, 'let the birds sing', an adaptation of the phrase, 'let freedom ring'. The freedom that Theo observes in nature helps him to feel, at least for a moment, that he is also free, safe from being commanded to commit unsafe acts against his will. From this perspective, it makes sense that Theo would resist leaving the river bottom.

Although the river bottom is a place that people find peaceful and positive for their well-being relative to other alternatives that they are able to access, life in the river bottom is neither idyllic nor easy. In the following example, Henry invites me to see his 'waterfall', which demonstrates how access to nature can help people get away from the stress of daily life in the river-bottom community:

*Field notes, 20 December 2013*

I'm not sure what's in store, but Henry and I have left the river bottom, crossed a busy road, and are now headed towards the ocean. At the edge of the pavement, Henry slips between some vegetation and a chain-link fence and disappears down a narrow path. A sign on the fence warns, 'No trespassing'. I can't see anything except for the plants, the path, and the fence, and at this point I've only known Henry for two days. I pause. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. But ultimately my curiosity about the mysterious waterfall wins out and I, too, fade into the shadows. We walk. The eucalyptus trees are fragrant; the fence is ever-present on our right. Then, my ears catch the faint but unmistakable sound of falling water. Waterfall? It keeps getting louder until, at the end of the path, a torrent of water suddenly emerges in front of us. This is Henry's waterfall: the discharge from the city's wastewater treatment plant. We climb down a mountain of large boulders and sit at the edge of the pond created by the effluent. [Figure 3 demonstrates the beauty of the wastewater outflow from Henry's perspective.]

*Henry:* This is where I come to get away from Joy and get away from my camp. This is where my peace is, right here. This is where I get away from [the city officials]. Get away from all the trouble. Get away from the river-bottom people. This is where I come. This is where I come. I mean look at it. This is free. Totally free. But you

know, you're not supposed to be able to come and enjoy this place here. The laws won't let you. Why? Isn't this nice?

*Jenn:* It's beautiful.

*Henry:* The sound. Tranquility.

The tranquility that Henry finds at his waterfall demonstrates the restorative aspect of nature for people in the river bottom. This therapeutic value is constructed through embodied political and relational work rather than through a romanticized notion of sublime beauty or 'naturalness'. Nonhuman elements that would typically be classified by mainstream ecological restoration projects as unnatural or out-of-place also have positive value. The cars on the freeway and the stalks of *Arundo* are restorative aspects of the river bottom to Virginia, who values their consistent, rhythmic, nonthreatening presence instead of seeing them as sound or biological pollution. The discharge from a water treatment plant is a waterfall to Henry, reducing his stress and connecting him to his former life as a commercial fisherman. 'Nature' in the river-bottom community acts as a form of self-determination and care through which people can resist the conditions of bare life and the very real violence they experience in interventions intended 'for their own good'.



Figure 3. The view from Henry's waterfall

## Privacy

Consider for a moment what it would be like if all of the walls in your home were transparent, if anyone and everyone could observe any aspect of your life, from the mundane to the extraordinary. This is what it is like to be homeless. When people live in public spaces, the private aspects of their lives are on display. Things like sleeping, changing clothes, arguing with a family member, crying, recovering from a stomach virus, sex, and urinating are all normal human behaviors and aspects of a person's social and physical health. Yet, people who engage in these private actions in public spaces can be shamed and pathologized regardless of whether they have access to alternatives, which compounds the stigma homeless people already experience and ignores the lack of viable options they have. Many of the people I spoke with described the river bottom as a place where they have dignity because they have privacy. The first layer of privacy in the river bottom comes from the plants, which function as informal walls that impede visibility and delineate camp boundaries. This vegetative cover attenuates the vulnerability that people who are homeless can feel in the broader community. Theo described how camping in the river bottom afforded him with a sense of personal safety and freedom: 'I'm too visual. I like to be – unvisual? When I'm down in the river bottom, I'm behind all the bamboo so people don't see me. I hate hiding like a common criminal but that's what they try to make you feel like. Maybe I am trying to hide from society. I guess I am'.

Residents also created separate living quarters within individual camps. More established camps had separate room-like areas that provided additional privacy, which I described after visiting Henry and Joy's camp:

*Field notes, 08 July 2014*

I meet Henry and Joy at their camp to take them to Sears so they can look for a new tent. Henry was in the hospital and the dogs tore up the door to their tent while they were gone. When I walk into the camp, Joy reaches into a bucket of ice and hands me a can of Coke. Henry emerges from the tent wearing only a pair of boxers. Joy tells me he hasn't wanted to leave the camp since he's been back from the hospital. Without looking at me, Henry apologizes for not being dressed and begins brushing his teeth in the 'bathroom' area of their camp. I avert my eyes, trying to respect his private space even though there are no walls. Joy and I sit on the mat in front of their tent, talking and drinking our sodas. Henry occasionally interjects random comments as the foam from his toothpaste starts to completely surround his mouth. Joy prods him to hurry up as he begins to shave the gray, shaggy beard that has sprouted since the last time I saw him. Henry glances in the mirror taped to the tree in front of him and responds that he needs to clean up because he doesn't want 'Jennifer to think I'm dirty like all them other people down here'. When he is finished shaving, Henry

continues to talk to us as he crawls back into the tent. A heavy, green blanket covers the gaping hole in the front made by the dogs. He appears fully dressed a few minutes later wearing a pair of khaki shorts, a cotton button-down shirt, and a pageboy cap. Joy tells him he looks cute.

In encampments, people can create designated places for hygiene activities. By having a setup for brushing his teeth and shaving, Henry is able to clean up when he arises without having to travel through public areas in search of a restroom that he will be permitted to use. Camps also allow people to store clean, potable water for drinking and cooking, as well as for personal hygiene. Every morning Joy rides her bicycle to a local business that allows her to fill up her water bottles (reused two-liter soda bottles) so that she and Henry have clean water for the day. This keeps them from going without water or attempting to use water from other sources, such as the river that contains bacteria and other pathogens and pollutants. Henry and Joy also had a shower setup before it was thrown away during the last river-bottom sweep by the city. By hanging a solar-heated camping shower from a tree branch and placing a wooden pallet on the ground underneath to keep the mud off, which you can see in Figure 4, they could take showers with water warmed by the California sun without having to travel to the coin-operated public showers at the state park campground or rely on the limited hours (and case management requirement) of local homeless service organizations.

Having private places within encampments for showering and other personal hygiene allows people to engage in such activities more frequently, providing physical health benefits. However, there is also a psychosocial benefit to being able to get clean, as there is a moral value attached to cleanliness that constructs it as civilized, proper, and even human. When people who are homeless become physically dirty it reinforces the societal view that they are symbolically 'dirty' people, and thus immoral, uncivilized, improper, and inhuman. Henry's comment that he doesn't want me to think he's 'dirty like all them other people' demonstrates his awareness of this moral construction, and he reproduces the stigma in order to reduce his own identification with being dirty. Like Henry, many of the homeless people I spoke with made an effort to differentiate themselves as 'clean' individuals as a way to demonstrate their value as a person and project their personhood or humanity. For example, Theo once boasted during an interview, 'I'm the cleanest hobo I know'. Makeshift latrines were another way that people tried to separate themselves literally and symbolically from dirtiness and waste. Henry, Joy, Virginia, and Theo all described to me, unprompted, how they urinate and defecate into containers and plastic bags instead of directly on the ground. The privacy afforded by the river bottom enhanced the health of people in encampments by allowing them to temporarily 'wash off' the stigma of dirtiness that is normally associated with homelessness, thus mitigating their sense of social exclusion.



Figure 4. Henry pointing out the location of his camp shower

## Relational benefits

A flyer on the door of the Ventura City Hall reads ‘Volunteer Training for the 2014 Homeless Persons Count’. Next to this statement there is a photograph of a person bundled in jeans and a heavy winter coat sitting on a sidewalk. Her knees are folded up toward her chest with her arms crossed above them. One of her hands draws the hood over her face so that all her distinguishing characteristics are hidden by the armor of her body and the coat, leaving me to infer gender from the purse-like bag that rests on the ground nearby.

This is a familiar image of homelessness in the United States, where people who are homeless are often represented as solitary, isolated, and forlorn individuals who exist outside of society or social relations (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015; Hodgetts et al. 2005; Schneider and Remillard 2010; Widdowfield 2001). However, in contrast to these pervasively individualizing images, everyday life for homeless people can be profoundly social. Relationships with each other, organizations, government agencies, businesses, and trusted people are essential to survival. The river bottom is a place where social relations are forged and where people work together to protect each other (in the context of limited formal police protection), to procure resources like food and water, and to provide social and emotional support. The community formed in the river bottom enhances the resilience of its

members by reducing isolation and providing backup for people who otherwise have limited family support and are typically excluded from the broader communities within which they live.

In contrast to depictions of the river bottom as an out of control, lawless place, there are important social codes and values that promote order and help to create a safe community. For example, it is important to announce your presence loudly when approaching someone's camp. This is the equivalent of knocking on the front door of a house, as Henry explains: 'I always holler before I go in. Whenever you come to my gate, you holler before you ask if you can come in. Just as respect for everybody down here'. Something as simple as announcing your presence plays an important role in cultivating respect and building trust. People in the river bottom live lives in which their personal and physical boundaries are frequently violated. Even if no harm is meant, walking directly into a camp unannounced is perceived as a potentially threatening act because you have already disregarded a boundary. Announcing one's presence allows the person in the camp to permit or deny your entrance.

There is also a strong ethic of sharing among people who are homeless. If you have something, you share it because you will probably need something in the near future, and want to ensure people will share with you. Ruby, a Latina in her early twenties, described her experience of sharing in the river bottom:

People, they're more loving than you think. I just try to stay in their good graces. We're all in this together. Many different people will say that. When it comes to our needs such as smokin' cigarettes or a bottle or whatever, we gotta be there for one another. Unless you are stingy, then you're not part of it.

Ruby's examples are of sharing cigarettes or alcohol, but I witnessed numerous other instances of sharing and working together to pool resources and support. For example, I was in the river bottom with Henry and Joy when we ran into a friend of theirs, Rich, with his dog. Even though they hadn't seen each other in months, Rich immediately asked if they were hungry or if their dog needed food. Rich had just picked up some leftover pizza and dog food and was bringing them back to his camp on the flatbed trailer behind his bike. His first reaction upon seeing Henry and Joy was to offer to share what he had. Upon talking further, the salience of this value in his life became clear. Rich has been homeless since 2003 and used to live in the Ventura river bottom until the big land conservancy move-out in 2012. When he lost his camp, Rich moved to the Santa Clara river bottom on the other side of the city. Rich described the vulnerability he experienced by being disconnected from the supportive relationships he had established by the Ventura River:

For a long time I had a hard time out here because I didn't know anything over here. I really didn't know anybody, so it was really hard for me. For six months, it was really hard for me. If it weren't for the church back then, I would've starved to death. I know I would've. It's a good thing 'cuz I would've died. I know I would've. Many times I've been down since then, but now almost anytime I asked anybody, 'Hey, you got something to eat? I'm hungry', they would feed me. It's more like a community down here with us once we get to know each other. They don't have worry about me goin' into their home and don't have to watch me every second 'cuz they're afraid I might steal somethin'. Once they learn that I ain't gonna do that shit, then it's a lot different but everybody's standoff-ish [at first].

Relationships are so important to survival that Rich is certain he would have starved without outside support from a church program (one that has since been shut down by the city). Now that he has developed new relationships in the river bottom, Rich is able to find the support he needs. Building trust and gaining acceptance among homeless people takes time, which makes sense given the high degree of vulnerability that they have with each other. Rich became accepted by the people living by the Santa Clara River. However, many were not. I was frequently told stories about the violence that broke out among the people living by the Santa Clara River after people had migrated over from the Ventura River. Luke, a white man in his mid-fifties who grew up in Ventura, described what it was like when he moved from the Ventura River to the Santa Clara: 'I stayed out down at the east end of the city, but everybody was getting beat up bad and stuff stolen. I mean, 2x4s to the head while they're sleeping. I'm like, "I can't do this"'.

Luke moved back to the Ventura River farther north, beyond where people usually live. In order to find a safe place to stay, he is now very isolated. There is only one other camp near him and he is very careful not to do anything that will bring attention to his camp, like build a fire for cooking. For a while, Luke left his camp at 5 AM and rode his bike to the church where he volunteered in the kitchen. Once the city shut down the church's homeless outreach program, Luke became almost completely isolated, staying up in his camp, and I rarely saw him.

Many long-term river-bottom residents described how the restoration work and camp removals have upset the safety and stability within the community, as this excerpt from my interview with Blaze illustrates:

*Jenn:* What was it like living in the river bottom?

*Blaze:* I haven't lived there in four years. When I lived in there, it was a tight-knit community. We didn't steal from each other. We didn't take advantage of each other. Nowadays, they do that.

*Jenn:* Why did that change?

*Blaze:* All the OGs, old guys, old men, and whatnot, guys we trust. The OGs at the river bottom, they're all dying off and there's no one to leave an example to the others about how to live.

*Jenn:* Do you know anything about the work going on in the river bottoms?

*Blaze:* The clean up? It makes it look better but that's about it. It don't make it act better. You know what I mean? The people inside, it don't change their actions. Actually, yeah it does, it makes it worse.

*Jenn:* How so?

*Blaze:* Because they're taking everything they have down there.

Theo described a similar dynamic when I asked him about his vision for the people living in the river bottom: "That we can come together and live in harmony. Help each other. I miss that. At one time it was really that way. [I hope] that they open it up and let people live free, that they can let people have a taste of real freedom again. All they have to do is clean up after themselves.

Even though the camp removals have such a negative impact on the social relationships within the river-bottom community, the restoration workers remain largely unaware of the effect of their work. They see their actions as supporting people to move out of the river bottom and into permanent housing. However, because affordable housing options in southern California are limited, people are often housed in motel rooms, single-occupancy rooms, and low-rent private rentals that may be shared with people who are strangers. These housing options can be highly isolating for people who are used to living within and relying upon the relational community of the river bottom.

## Conclusion

Although river-bottom homeless encampments might seem like dangerous and dirty places, this article demonstrates that, from the perspective of people living within them, they hold much therapeutic value. River-bottom landscapes and communities have the potential to contribute to the health and well-being of residents by helping them resist social exclusion and mitigate experiences of violence and stigma. In the river bottom, access to nature, social support, and flexible living conditions provide people with a greater sense of safety and self-determination compared to other housing alternatives that they can access. These dimensions are particularly important for people who have had significant experiences of trauma coupled with constraints on their autonomy, for example, through military service, incarceration, or abuse. For people with these experiences, and for many others who are marginalized, people and social institutions are associated with violence and are perceived as unsafe unless and until proven otherwise. Therefore it may be even more important to recognize and promote the self-determination of people living in homeless encampments.

Urban ecologist Sarah Dooling (2009) draws on Giorgio Agamben's (1998) work to show how city planners and park officials construct the river bottom as a state of exception that excludes the homeless from full citizenship and subjects them to the conditions of bare life. When life in the river bottom is considered a place of bare life, then anything else must be better; any option must be an improvement (or at least just as bad): a motel room, a shared house with other homeless people, a shelter, the park downtown, another town. This legitimates a paternalistic rationale that any actions taken 'for a person's own good' will be better than their existing conditions. When people who are homeless resist these interventions of 'care' (that may in fact cause harm), they are considered deviant and in need of discipline and accountability. For example, in Ventura a person who resists removal from the river bottom (by returning to the site, reconstructing camps, and refusing housing assistance) is categorized as 'service resistant'; one city worker described a returning river-bottom dweller as 'not your warm-and-fuzzy homeless person'. The presumption of deviance legitimates increasingly harsh attitudes and actions towards people and encampments in the name of improving their health, the health of the river, and the health of the broader community. This is why it is important to understand the value of such places, even the places that appear to be so beyond value, so that interventions meant to

help do not inadvertently cause additional violence and so that actions that cause harm (intentionally or not) can be recognized and halted.<sup>4</sup>

On a practical level, the insights from this research provide new understandings of the needs and values of people experiencing homelessness. Currently, national initiatives to 'end homelessness' prioritize placing people indoors in independent, often private, housing supplemented through housing vouchers. In places such as southern California, where housing stock is limited and costs are high, 'housing' the homeless may entail moving them to other areas of the country or providing housing in expensive motel rooms or in shared apartments with other homeless people whom they may not know. These options may be experienced as unsafe by people with a high requirement for personal space and flexibility. Moreover, river-bottom life is a highly social experience where people depend upon each other and upon the physical environment for support and survival. From this perspective, being 'service resistant' makes sense.

This research expands the concept of therapeutic landscapes by highlighting how landscapes that seem without value from one perspective may be therapeutically important in another. It is important to recognize this complexity so that logics of exclusion are not unintentionally reproduced in how landscapes are understood, which can legitimate actions, such as camp removals, that cause marginalized people additional harm. Although river-bottom encampments are viewed as unhealthy and unsafe places within broader American culture, they are health-enhancing landscapes from the perspective of people who live within them. Stigmatized landscapes can be therapeutic landscapes, and can operate as spaces of resistance where people who are homeless may develop relationships with each other and with nature, and where they can shed the stigmatizing gaze of the broader community.

How one sees or understands landscapes is reflective of values that are socially and culturally constructed. People in the river-bottom community sought out degraded places and took pleasure in marginalized animals and plants that reflected their own position, and they received therapeutic benefits from aspects typically deemed to have little value. The ability of landscapes to enhance health, then, is not entirely an essential quality of the landscape itself; it is also socially constructed and related to perspective. Researchers interested in understanding the potential for landscapes to promote health should also be sensitive to the political ramifications of whose knowledge and experiences are deemed legitimate and taken

<sup>4</sup> This concept of violence draws on Philippe Bourgois' (2009, 2000) theoretical framework of invisible violence, which consists of three overlapping categories: structural violence, symbolic violence, and normalized violence.

into account. Embracing the complexity of therapeutic landscapes opens up possibilities for more just ways of restoring the health of human and nonhuman natures.

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