7 THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPES OF STILLNESS

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7.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of therapeutic landscape was introduced by geographer Gesler (1992) in the 1990s and has since become a central focus in the development of qualitative health geography and related fields. The growing body of literature on therapeutic landscapes has contributed significantly to our understanding of the importance of place for health and the role that sense of place plays in positive health experiences (Eyles & Williams, 2008). The concept recognises that physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and environmental factors all interact in the creation of landscapes that are experienced and perceived as therapeutic. The term 'therapeutic' is used broadly to encompass experiences that promote relaxation, restoration, and healing, all of which contribute to a holistic sense of well-being. The therapeutic relationship between a person and a landscape is here understood to be rooted in direct physical, mental, and emotional interaction and engagement with the physical environment.

Building on the recent upswing in interest in the multisensory and non-visual dimensions of restorative places (Bell et al., 2023), this chapter explores the multisensory notion of stillness in relation to therapeutic landscape engagements. It argues that stillness, as both concept and experience, deserves further consideration within work on therapeutic landscapes because it produces insights into how the therapeutic landscape experience is encultured through modes of listening, moving, and connecting with place. In focusing specifically on the role that stillness plays in experiences of restoration in nature-based settings, stillness is interpreted as an affect and, thus, as a state that arises from the relation between the body and the landscape. Exploring this relational quality, the chapter also begins to approach the question of how culture is entangled in this affect.

Stillness can be used to refer both to an external quality of an environment and an to internal state of mind and feeling. In dictionary definitions, the word 'stillness' refers to qualities of being quiet and not moving (Bissell & Fuller, 2013; Connellan et al., 2013; Conradson, 2011; Marler, 2021). As a therapeutic experience, stillness can be defined as an affective relation between body and environment, which affords attention to be focused on the sensations of the body in place, in the here and now, and is associated with feelings of calm, peace, clarity, and of placing the self in a greater perspective. Moments of stillness facilitate restoration and renewal of the mental, emotional, and physical resources we need to cope with the demands of

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daily life. The valorisation and cultivation of green and blue spaces as therapeutic landscapes in Western societies has much to do with their affordances as spaces of stillness. In contemporary Western society, stillness is discursively Othered. Spaces of stillness, it seems, are decreasing, under threat from the encroachments of modern life, urbanisation, industry, technologisation, and noise. As Other, stillness is often longed for as a getaway, a space of respite, "a desire that is only exacerbated by its seeming unattainability" (Bissell & Fuller, 2013, p. 4). However, a valorisation of stillness as a state of mind and body is not a Western invention; it has a presence in many spiritual and religious traditions across the world. For example, in Japanese culture, the concept of 'Ma' refers to the in-between space that creates a sense of stillness and pause in the flow of events. This concept is deeply ingrained in Japanese culture and can be seen in practices such as tea ceremonies and the design of gardens. The notion that stillness is healing is recognised in several spiritual traditions, such as Buddhist and yogic teachings, but is also recognised in Christian traditions of silent contemplation and New Age notions of the sacred. Healing stillness is associated with achieving a sense of the 'sacred ground of being', an internal space of separation from everyday thoughts and feelings that provides a moment of respite, clarity, and deeper meaning that take us out of 'our busy monkey minds'.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. In the first two parts, it posits that stillness is an important characteristic of spaces that offer affective sanctuary and that paying attention to sensory experiences of stillness contributes to the recent research on therapeutic landscapes, emphasising the importance of the senses in the relationship between landscape and well-being. In the third part, the argument is illustrated with empirical examples from an exploration of the therapeutic stillness of nature-based landscapes, drawing on empirical research in The Netherlands (Doughty et al., 2022). Stillness (as an affective relation) is posited as therapeutic when it fosters affinity, communion, and connection with the self, others, and the environment. In the concluding part, the concept of stillness is offered as an entry point for further research on the sensory-symbolic dimensions of therapeutic landscapes and their cultural embeddedness.

7.2 AFFECTIVE SANCTUARY

The term 'affective sanctuary' has more recently entered the therapeutic landscape literature to refer to places that promote emotional well-being by offering a safe haven for individuals to process and regulate their emotions. The notion of affective sanctuary has been explored in various fields, including psychology, architecture, and urban design. In psychology, the use of the concept emphasises emotional safety and support, such as in the relationship between a patient and a therapist (Tsai, 2015). In architectural and urban design, however, the notion of affective sanctuary, even if the term is not in heavy use, references the design of physical spaces that promote mental health and well-being through affordances to relax, for example, through bringing in greenery, comfortable seating, and reducing noise levels (Cushing & Miller, 2020).

The term has recently been invoked in literature on therapeutic landscape to describe the emotional and psychological dimensions of therapeutic landscapes (Butterfield & Martin, 2016; Espeso, 2022). Affective sanctuaries within therapeutic

landscapes can include physical spaces, such as parks, gardens, and natural areas, as well as social spaces, such as community centres and support groups.

In a study of the role of the home in panic disorder recovery, Espeso (2022) describes how home for her participants emerges as a therapeutic landscape of retreat and rest, a space of safety in relation to other places that are associated with panic and phobia. Butterfield and Martin (2016) used the term in relation to garden environments that offered cancer patients and staff spaces of emotional retreat. They describe the gardens as offering a space "where the designed environment assumes a form of agency, acting as a calming presence in the individual's encounter with a cancer diagnosis" (Butterfield & Martin, 2016, p. 704). One could contend that affective sanctuary is an important aspect of how therapeutic landscapes promote mental well-being.

Stillness can be seen as a key component of affective sanctuary. Stillness is commonly produced in practices that seek refuge from or to augment the impacts and demands of our everyday environments, and the sense of inner calm that stillness may afford us can be further enhanced by creating physical spaces that promote stillness. Creating affective sanctuaries that incorporate the therapeutic potential of stillness can have significant benefits for mental and physical health; however, the concept needs further conceptualisation and exploration from a cultural perspective.

Affective sanctuary is a Western concept that reflects the individualism of Western societies by prioritising the individual's emotional needs over the community and collective. In contrast, many non-Western cultures prioritise community and interconnectedness, which may lead to a different understanding of affective sanctuary. For example, in African cultures, the idea of 'Ubuntu' emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of community in creating a sense of belonging and safety (Wilson & Williams, n.d.). Traditional ecological knowledge and Indigenous knowledge offer alternative perspectives on the role of nature in affective sanctuary. Many Indigenous cultures view nature as a living being with which humans have a reciprocal relationship. This perspective sees the natural environment not only as a physical space but also as a spiritual and emotional one that can provide a sense of comfort and peace (Isaac et al., 2018; Marques et al., 2022).

Affective sanctuary (if we can indeed still use the term in this context) takes on a more holistic and reciprocal meaning within a Māori worldview. Instead of the Western construct of nature experiences as 'time away', for Māori people of Aotearoa New Zealand, identity is rooted in landscape (McIntosh et al., 2018), and they understand the landscape to be deeply interconnected with the culture, history, and knowledge of their community (Marques, McIntosh, & Campays, 2018; McIntosh et al., 2021). Thus, if we are to still use the term 'affective sanctuary' in this context, it refers to a healing sense of belonging with landscape that includes cultural, spiritual, emotional, physical, and social dimensions in a relationship that is healing for both self and place (Marques, McIntosh, & Hatton, 2018).

7.3 THERAPEUTIC SENSESCAPES

The therapeutic landscape literature highlights the importance of sensory experiences in the constitution of affective sanctuary. Increasingly, studies have foregrounded the role of the senses and of their pre-cognitive dimensions in

encounters with 'nature' in its various forms (Andrews & Duff, 2019; Britton & Foley, 2021; Gorman, 2017; Kaley et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018). For example, there are many references to an 'aural sense of place' that frames 'stillness' in this chapter with words like 'peace', 'quiet', and 'tranquility', contrasted to sources of noise or busy environments (Birch et al., 2020; Boucher et al., 2019; Cheesbrough et al., 2019; Conradson, 2005; Meijering et al., 2015). In contrast to urban spaces, nature is often positioned as quiet (narratives of the 'howling wilderness' notwithstanding); however, just as we understand that nature is really teeming with sound, the aural experience of stillness does not require actual silence if that were even possible. Specific sounds that are frequently discussed in relation to therapeutic encounters with 'natural environments' include a rich variety of water sounds. Flowing, babbling, lapping, and crashing, the sounds of water have a prominent place in the therapeutic imaginary (Bell et al., 2023), as well as wind and birdsong (Bates et al., 2020; Britton & Foley, 2021; Lackey et al., 2021; Lengen et al., 2008). Thus, the 'quiet' of nature is attentively listened to, cared for, narrated, and valued (Meyer, 2021). It recalls Hildegard Westerkamp's *Whisper Study* (1975) based around the whispered sentence: 'when there is no sound, hearing is most alert'.

In her study of a yoga and massage retreat in Spain, Lea (2008) reflects on the value of quiet spaces to open up attention to the body and foreground its connection to the world. Dance practitioner Marler (2021) makes a similar argument when she writes that in bodily stillness, micro-level responses in the body come to the fore of our awareness, such as blood flow, heartbeat, breath, and proprioception. Space opens up for us to notice minute changes in the body. This is a form of somatic listening, involving all of our senses and perceptual processes, which simultaneously maps our internal landscapes with the external surroundings. Somatic listening, Marler poses, can offer a way to establish a sense of deep connection or intimacy with others or the world. She writes (2021, unpaginated):

> I have found that taking the time to listen through my body's somatic capacities allows me to notice the processes apparent within my own body, and to value my relationship to immediate environments. Stillness and its contemplative nature, coupled with tactile sensing as the primary approach for orientation, enables me a strategy to engage more meaningfully with the 'vibrant matter' of the world.

What is variously called expanded, whole-body, or somatic listening understands listening as a process in which body, mind, and culture participate. Whole body listening involves "ears, eyes, beating hearts, feelings, skin, pores, tingly, hair-raising moments and more besides", as Bennett (2010, p. 9) writes. Following this argument, listening emerges as haptic, and it foregrounds the affective power of sound to register in and through the body as a whole. This is most easily exemplified by the more tangible visceral affects engendered by loud or sudden sounds that startle us, bringing to mind Thrift's (2008, p. 7) description of affect as a "roiling mass of nerve volleys [which] prepare the body for action in such a way that intentions or

decisions are made before the conscious self is even aware of them". Quiet sounds, in contrast, resonate through our bodies in more subtle ways.

7.4 STILLNESS AS A KEY ASPECT OF AFFECTIVE SANCTUARY AND THERAPEUTIC SENSESCAPES

Therapeutic landscapes of stillness are spaces that offer affordances for a focus at the scale of the body (Conradson, 2011), slow movement, and opportunities for pausing and contemplating, listening to, smelling, and interacting with plants or animals. It is notable that therapeutic landscape experiences, as detailed in the existing literature, for the most part, involve slow mobilities. With the rare exception of accounts of running (Van Ingen, 2004), healing engagements with landscapes tend to involve slower forms of mobility, such as walking (Doughty, 2013; Ireland et al., 2019; Pollard et al., 2020), gardening (Biglin, 2020), bathing and swimming (Foley, 2016), and simply 'spending time' in less built-up environments such as parkland, rural walkscapes, coastlines, and other sparsely inhabited or uninhabited landscapes. Stillness, as a restorative experience, points to the mental, emotional, and physical benefits of enjoying moments of embodied presence that provide temporary relief from the stresses and pressures of contemporary life. Restorative stillness may involve both a physical and mental distancing from the bustle of urban life and from everyday demands, often involving an immersion in nature's slower rhythms.

In a study carried out in The Netherlands during the pandemic (Doughty et al., 2022), therapeutic landscapes emerged as spaces of stillness where multisensory experiences of sounds, sights, scents, and textures facilitated moments of mindful presence and intimate connection with nature. Thirty participants across The Netherlands were asked to send narrated photos and videos of their nature engagements over a three-month period. The interviews and the rich audio-visual material contained many references to experiences of stillness. Nearby green spaces provided a sense of affective sanctuary from the circumstances of the pandemic through their quality of stillness, which allowed people to immerse themselves in the sensory present. For example, one participant liked to walk in a nearby woods:

> it provides a sense of peace, it's a really nice place to just walk calmly and not be occupied with work or internship or all the regulations and the whole COVID-19 crisis around you because the forest hasn't changed since all of this happened, so it's kind of a place where everything still feels okay.
>
> (male participant, The Netherlands, 28 May 2020)

Another participant similarly walked regularly in a nearby woods, and the way that she sometimes forced herself to go out for a walk to process her emotions and improve her mood further illustrates how green spaces are utilised as affective sanctuaries to allow people to process their emotions:

> If, for example, I have a whole day where—as I mentioned earlier, I sometimes feel a bit listless due to having little contact with others, then there are times when

> I really force myself to go to the forest simply because I know that I will feel better afterwards.
>
> (female participant, The Netherlands, 2 June 2020)

In the interviews and across the audio-visual data, various types of nature sounds and tactile experiences were noted by participants, including birds chirping, leaves rustling in a light breeze, water flowing and frogs croaking, and cows mooing (Doughty et al., 2022). Touch facilitated an intimate connection with nature and the earth and a sense of being 'grounded' that reverberated through the body, in experiences such as walking barefoot on grass or soil, and lying or rolling in the grass, or feeling the wind on one's face, all examples of experiences shared by our participants. Images of intimate details of flora and fauna illustrate the importance of such sensory immersion (Figures 7.1).

Across the interview and audio-visual material, there were accounts of restorative moments of stillness that involved a heightened sensory and emotional awareness of the present moment and the immediate environment, which were felt to help distance from everyday demands. Examples that illustrated details of these therapeutic sensescapes included audio recordings and photographs. Alongside the expected beautiful vistas were many close-ups of the ground, illustrating the textures underfoot, and studies of insects going about their business or documentation of the light-play on leaves, colourful flowers, and interesting fungi. One

7.1
Photo submitted by a female participant on 27 June 2020, with the annotation "I also find this lovely; almost like a flower that grows out of the tree".

7.2
Photo sent in by female participant on 10 June 2020.

participant shared a photo of a flowering thistle plant with a bumblebee and several ladybirds sitting on it and wrote in her annotation: "being outdoors is not just about emptying your mind, but about taking in all kinds of impressions. With all this green, the scents and flavours, you can't get stuck in your problems, you're naturally distracted" (Figure 7.2).

7.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Stillness as a concept and empirical actuality is interesting for the literature on therapeutic landscape because it names a key modality of therapeutic engagement with landscape. This chapter explored the therapeutic modality of stillness through the notions of affective sanctuary and therapeutic sensescape. Exploring stillness foregrounds the role of the non-visual senses in relations between place and well-being and presents cultural and sensory histories that shape contemporary encounters with therapeutic landscapes (Bell et al., 2023).

Further research that leverages stillness to explore contemporary therapeutic geographies could involve the application of a range of theories and methodologies that are sensitive to sensory and embodied experience, as well as tracing the manifestations of 'therapeutic stillness' across a broad range of cultural practices and societal narratives. 'Stillness' has become something of a buzzword that features in several different fields of practice to draw linkages between place and well-being. Tracing stillness across these various spaces and discourses can bring work on therapeutic landscapes into conversation with other research traditions, such as health- and wellness-related fields, urban planning, nature conservation, heritage management, and tourism, and provides an opportunity to engage with

theoretical work arising out of the sensory and affective turns, and the growing field of sound studies.

There is much potential for further research employing the framework of therapeutic landscapes to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nature and importance of stillness in experiences of affective sanctuary and the role of the senses, affect, and emotion therein. For example, the literature that constitutes the field of sonic geography (Paiva, 2018) is only starting to make an impact on studies of therapeutic landscapes, and there is much potential to expand on how therapeutic engagements with places may involve tuning out or tuning in or reworking their sounds (Bell et al., 2023; Duffy & Waitt, 2013). For example, in a study on what well-being means for people in relation to the non-visual aspects of nature, Bates et al. (2020) found that the most common responses included reference to birdsong and running water, such as waves or rivers. They came to understand these references as a type of 'cultural script': "Without denying that these repeated 'scripts' may reflect genuine positive experiences of certain natural sensescapes, they also reveal broader cultures of well-being—that is, embedded expectations of what is presumed to be of value" (Bates et al., 2020, p. 3). However, Bates et al. also found that responses to questions that focused on real experiences in people's lives, such as happy memories of particular environments, went beyond these 'scripts' to demonstrate the importance of personal memories, associations, and preferences. It is a sensitive task to acknowledge how collective affects mediate and inform practices and experiences of well-being while not neglecting to account for the ways that the felt realities of material life exceed these cultural scripts.

The evolving framework of therapeutic landscape provides us with an understanding of landscape as a context of experience in relation to health. Contexts are complex outcomes of dimensions that are experiential, representational, imagined, emergent through embodied practice, and anchored in culture. The challenge for researchers in this field is to bring about an understanding of how health and well-being is emergent in and through these complex contexts of experience, giving attention to both place-specific and more overarching themes. Dominant Western narratives around nature as a restorative space have historically marginalised and erased the knowledge and perspectives that constitute non-Western therapeutic landscapes. Since the early days of the field, there have been contributions that place culture at the centre of analysis, but these have tended to be at the margins of the literature, which is still, to a large extent, limited to an Anglo-European scope. However, the concept of therapeutic landscape lends itself well to approaches that address non-Western peoples not through a 'deficit model' but as "active creators and bearers of knowledge and (experiential) expertise, who bring this into their diverse health engagements and encounters" (Leach et al., 2008, p. 2166).

There is a key line of argument within the literature, often credited to a paper by Conradson (2005) arguing for a relational conception of place, that contends the 'therapeutic' should not be understood as a 'property' of landscape but rather as a negotiation of place that embodies cultural, social, and personal narratives of well-being. This is a promising starting point for exploring how therapeutic 'sensescapes'

connect with spaces and practices that offer the affective sanctuary of stillness and how these are embedded within cultural relationships with landscape.

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