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Title	Heroes and Pilgrims: An Autoethnographic exploration of adventure motorcycle travel
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/44522/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/44522/</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1515/tw-2022-0015">https://doi.org/10.1515/tw-2022-0015</a>
Date	2022
Citation	Wragg, Jason orcid iconORCID: 0000-0002-1984-142X (2022) Heroes and Pilgrims: An Autoethnographic exploration of adventure motorcycle travel. Zeitschrift für Tourismuswissenschaft. ISSN 1867-9501
Creators	Wragg, Jason

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/tw-2022-0015>

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Jason Wragg\* (FRGS, FHEA)

# Heroes and Pilgrims: An Autoethnographic exploration of adventure motorcycle travel

<https://doi.org/10.1515/tw-2022-0015>

**Abstract:** This paper sets out to illuminate the lived experience of the adventure motorcyclist during a multi-day trip across the Sarn Helen, a stretch of Roman road that makes up part of the Trans European Trail in Wales, which is now a rough unpaved rural road. The accompanying text first discusses Autoethnography and how creating comics can be used in research. This is followed by an autoethnographic account of the journey, presented as a short comic, and a discussion of my changing philosophical stance which gives meaning to the experience.

Unpaved roads provide a “Heterotopia”, a liminal space that allows for the meaning making of experiences and the negotiation and renegotiation of identities of self. This work draws upon an Autoethnographic methodology to explore the lived experience of adventure motorcycling and utilises the creation of comics as a form of analysis and presentation of data.

Through the application of the Hero’s and Pilgrim’s lens or viewpoint this autoethnographic work highlights how adventurous journeys through heterotopic spaces can provide an ighlyn of identity, sense making, as well as demonstrating both the outward physical journey and the internal emotional journey undertaken.

**Keywords:** Adventure Travel, Pilgrimage, Heterotopia, Autoethnography

The motorcycle is a vehicle, literally and metaphorically, that provides its rider with the freedom to undertake travel. Its long history of adventure travel has been captured in an extensive catalogue of published works from as early as Charles Shepherd’s (1922) 1919 journey Across America, Carl Stearns Clancy’s (in Frazier, 2010) first circumnavigation of the world by motorcycle in 1923, Theresa Wallach’s (Wallach 2001) extensive travels through Africa by motorcycle in 1935 to modern works such as Sam Manicom (2007, 2008a, 2008b, and 2010). More recently McGregor, E. & Boorman, C. (2004 & 2008) brought adventure travel to

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\*Corresponding author: Jason Wragg, University of Central Lancashire, Faculty of Allied Health and Wellbeing, School of Sport and Health Science, PR1 2HE, Preston, UK, ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-1984-142X, E-Mail: [jwragg@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:jwragg@uclan.ac.uk)

the forefront of motorcycle culture with a series of successful books which accompanied their documentaries.

It was these, along with many other accounts, that inspired me to explore the phenomena of adventure travel by motorcycle for my PhD. Towards emphasising the importance of human experience, this autoethnographic narrative forms part of my study, with qualitative fieldwork at its core, that investigates the lived experience of adventure travel by motorcycle.

This paper is epistemologically positioned as a narrative of one man's adventure with motorcycles, and thus it draws upon an Autoethnographic methodology. Rantala, Rokenes & Valkonen (2018), as a result of a review of research approaches in adventure tourism, call for applying Autoethnographic methods to gain insight and understanding of adventure tourism cultures and activities. This might go some way to providing a method for investigating 'The tourist gaze' (Urry & Larsen, 2011). The concept of the gaze argues that the act of looking is a learned ability and is heavily influenced by one's own culture. Autoethnography places that culture at the centre of the study.

In stark contrast to traditional notions of ethnographic field research whereby the researcher is a distanced, 'neutral,' impartial, and 'uninvolved' observer, Autoethnography entails the researcher performing narrative analysis pertaining to themselves; writing about being a researcher–practitioner. Ellis (2004:38) believes that autoethnographies "showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness" and can take varying creative forms.

Following Chang's (2008) argument that autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation and autobiographical in its content, this paper focuses on observations, field-notes and reflections from the field during my own motorcycle travels, positioned as a visual-autoethnographic narrative. To provide an authentic representation of the actions, dialogues, and emotions of the lived experience autoethnography relies upon what Geertz (1973) coins as "thick description".

Utilising the idea of Thiessen (2019), who published her autoethnographic work 'Duckpond' coining the concept of an Autoethnographic comic, this work has used the creation of a short comic to analyse and present its findings. As Cromer & Clark (2007) argue, comics offer a new pedagogical approach that can contribute to and support traditional academic texts. Writing comics as a visual approach to presenting data makes for excellent critical analysis, allowing for wider concepts to be demonstrated through developed characters and a visual medium to illuminate environmental and non-character elements. The feeling of experience, or verisimilitude, is what the writer is after (Rinehart 1998:204), not the truth as a realist narrative but rather a sensual, magical, truth. Verisimilitude

requires an aesthetic narrative structure that evokes the experience of “being there” (see Diversi 1998; Frank 2000; Rinehart 1998) and in making scenes and characters vivid through imagery and movement the comic can achieve an aesthetic structure in ways that other forms cannot. People can literally “see” themselves in a comic, meaning the reader is drawn into the feeling of the experience and a stronger connection can be made.

Field data is presented through a combination of the storytelling imagination of a fiction writer and the aesthetics of a comic, a depiction of a world that could be, to evoke experience and meaning. Ethnographic fiction lies at the crossroads between fiction and nonfiction, a literary hybrid that, while falling into neither category, must negotiate and account for the parameters of each (Narayan 2008). For Hecht (2006:8), ethnographic fiction is:

*An approach to the study and evocation of social life and the world of the mind that emerges from rigorous observation, makes use of certain conventions of ethnographic fieldwork and writing, but also employs literary devices. It is inspired by observation over the long run, based on recognizable scenarios, and treats a particular moment. It is not, however, restricted by these things; it takes liberties with reality.*

Ethnographic fiction is not dissimilar to creative nonfiction in that “events that actually happened [are] being shaped and dramatized using fictional techniques” (Sparkes 2002:5), a definition that resonates with Geertz’s (1988:141) term *faction*, “imaginative writing about real people in real places.” Ethnographic fiction works through what Denzin (1997:12) termed an “evocative epistemology” enabling readers to “imaginatively feel their way into the experiences that are described by the author”.

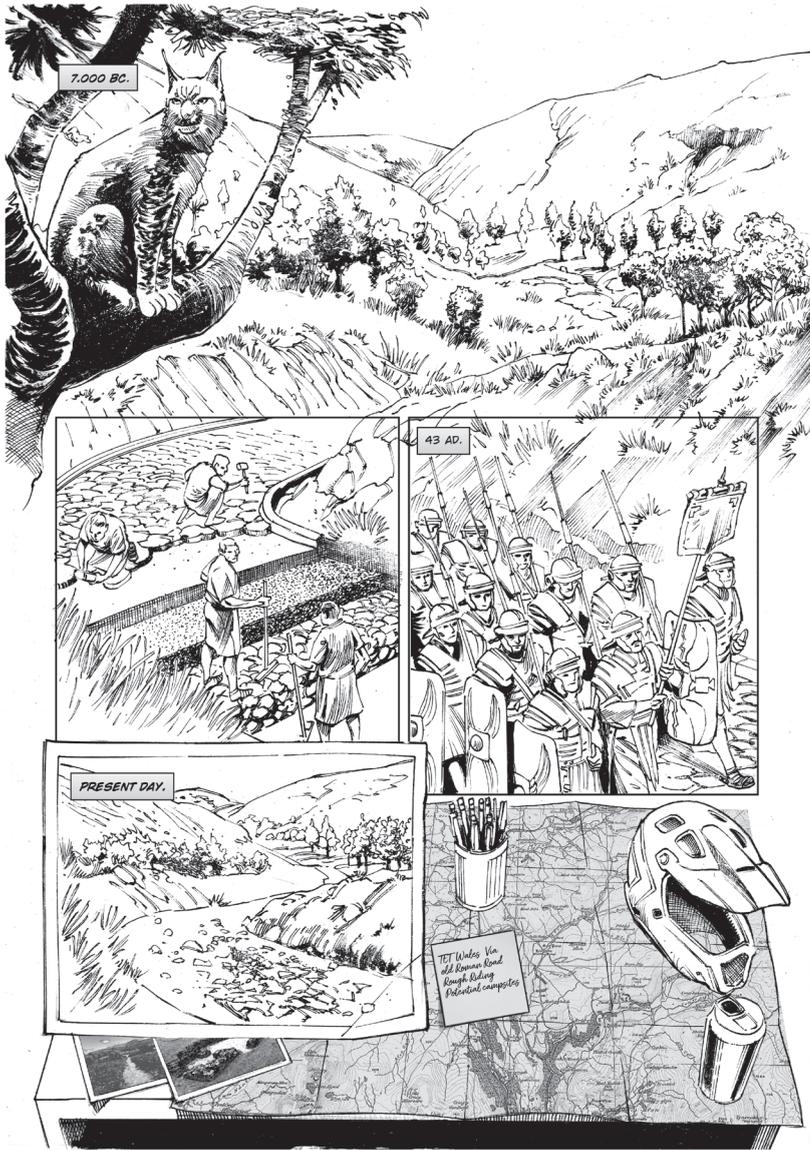
Comics as a sequential art form utilise the power of ethnographic research to tell a story in an aesthetically pleasing way that can bring to life ethnographic fiction.

*“In a culture dominated by the written word, it’s time we pay more attention to how much can be learned through the process of drawing and how the unique properties of juxtaposed sequential art are a powerful tool to communicate concepts and evoke empathy in the reader.”*  
(Thiessen, 2015)

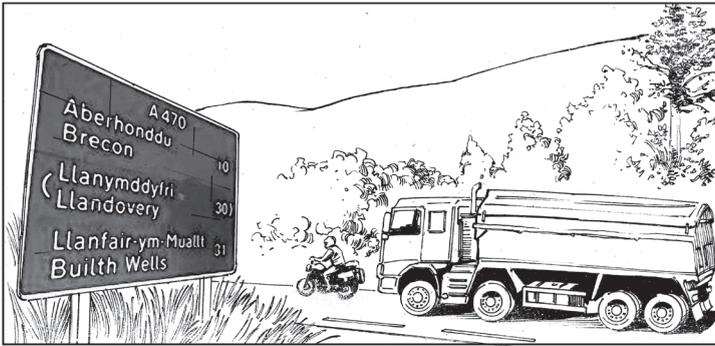
I started creating “Heroes and Pilgrims” as a short comic representation, driven by fieldwork data to capture the experience of riding along the Sarn Helen in Wales. Data was collected during this trip through film, photography, and a detailed field journal. The latter has become a vital data collection tool during my PhD, not only capturing and reporting on factual events, but also my thoughts, feelings and emotions throughout.

After reflecting on the experience, an initial analysis and coding of the journal and reflexive notes identified a key theme which was a shifting of philosophy for understanding the experience. In the next stage a rough written narrative was created sifting through data from the fieldwork including fieldnotes, images, video footage and voice recordings to create a comic script and storyboard. Once the data had been mapped out to support the narrative and its script, a draft of the comic design was created setting out the number and size of panels, along with images and dialogue which were referenced against field data. I found *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures* by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden (2008) a resource that enabled me to think about how to use my data to present this life world. The script and design draft were utilised to communicate with Elias Martins, the artist I worked with, and through reflective and reflexive dialogue with Elias the visual representation of the experience and research was created. Working with an artist functioned as another layer of analysis and the relationship was that of a critical friend who was challenging me to revisit my narrative and the data, ensuring that the visual representation achieved what I set it out to do. The process of creating a comic forced me to distil the most important understandings out of my experiences and, like writing a text or editing a film, it helped to make meaning out of messy reality (Thiessen 2019:35). As Sousanis (2012) put it, drawing comics functioned as a kind of research, the very act of working spatially and visual-verbally facilitated creative discoveries otherwise obscured when limited to a sheet of lined paper.

What follows is a visual representation of the fieldwork and research in a short comic form.

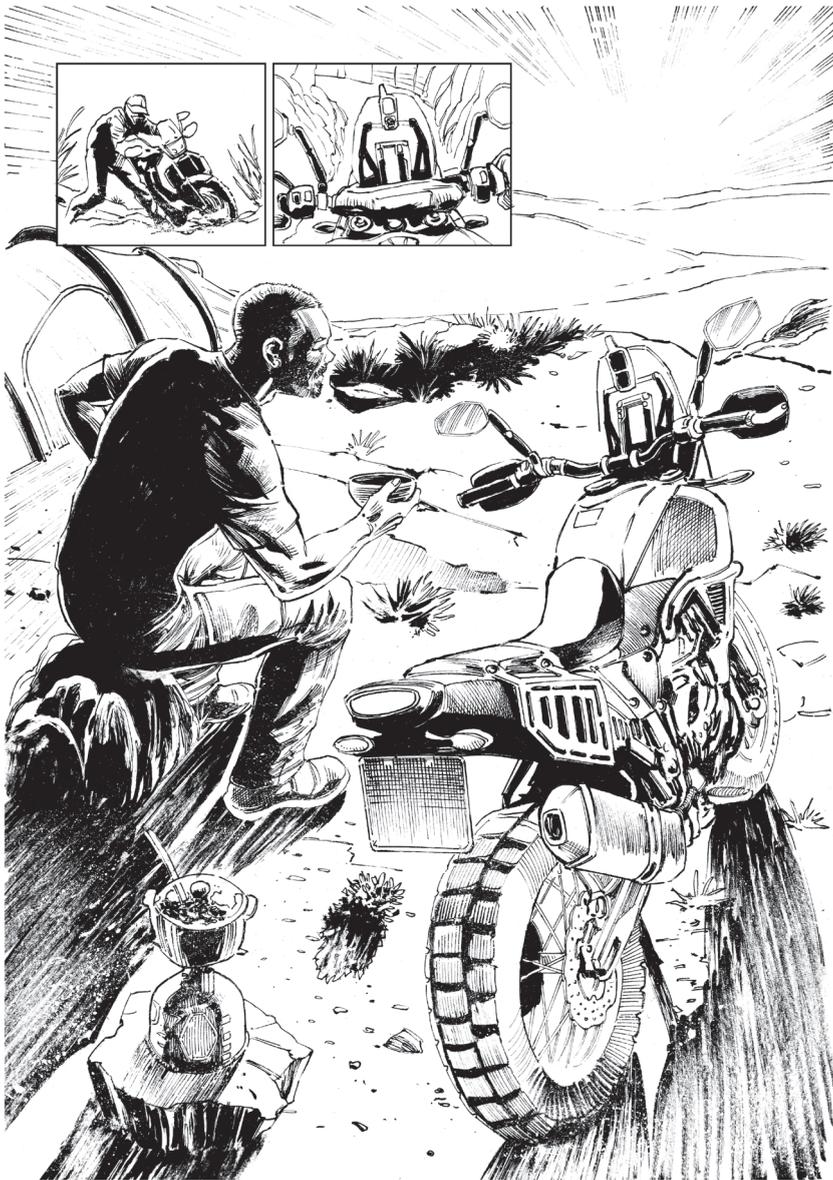


Page 1: Story & Design by Jason Wragg, Art by Elias Martins



Page 2: Story & Design by Jason Wragg, Art by Elias Martins





Page 4: Story & Design by Jason Wragg, Art by Elias Martins

The subsequent pages discuss the underlying philosophical and theoretical concepts that inform the narrative and my reflections as presented in the comic.

## Page 1: Landscapes and Narratives

In October 2021 I was looking to undertake a multi-day trip by motorcycle on dirt roads as part of my preparations for an upcoming 30-day international trip that was going to be at the centre of my PhD. The Trans Euro Trail (TET) comprises of over 51,000km of dirt roads, is overseen by a not-for-profit community interest company, and it looks to inspire journeys through some of Europe's most remote, diverse, and inspirational landscapes by lightweight motorcycles (Trans Euro Trail, 2022). The TET provided the perfect landscape for this trip, specifically the Sarn Helen in Wales. Off-roading in the United Kingdom is a myth as driving a vehicle off-road without authority of the landowner is an offence under Section 34 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 (Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). However, there are byways, like the Sarn Helen, which are tracks, often rural, that are too minor to be called a road. These are open to the public (although can be restricted to non-motorised traffic) and provide unmaintained routes through varying surfaces such as gravel and mud to provide off-road experiences.

Set in the mountainous landscape of Wales, Sarn Helen for me is a laminal space; a place that is both real and imagined (Thomassen, 2012), a place that physically sits in the southern Welsh mountains, but metaphorically represents another world to explore and adventure in. The Roman invasion of Wales in 43 AD has left many marks on the landscape of the national parks and mountains. Sarn Helen is part of the Roman road network through Wales, built by the Romans to enable them to move their columns of troops across Wales quickly and efficiently. In some places the road network can be clearly made out, but in others it is more guesswork. It is only because of the Romans road building technology and techniques that after nearly 2,000 years the remnants can still be found. Page one of the comic looks to set this context and depict the background of the landscape in question.

What was once a main thoroughfare has now been replaced by bigger roads in a more expansive network leaving these now dilapidated roads to be slowly taken back by nature. This byway provides access to parts of the Welsh landscape that are otherwise difficult to reach. It is the perfect location to seek out adventure travel by motorcycle and so a trip was planned.

Modern roads provide a quick and efficient way to travel between locations, they pass through places making the journey a sterile experience. By leaving

these mundane travel experiences and heading into rural, unmaintained dirt roads the focus is less about speed and efficiencies and more about experiencing landscapes. These dirt roads provide what Foucault (1998) coined “Heterotopia”, where things mirror the everyday world but are different. Foucault’s summaries of heterotopia attempt to explain principles and characteristics of cultural, institutional, and discursive spaces that are somehow ‘different’: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, and transforming. It is important to note that these heterotopias are not merely a specific type of place that exists in the order of things but are devices for the ordering of things (Hetherington, 1997:46). They also momentarily suspend temporality and provide time apart from the ordinary world. Whilst Foucault’s concept of heterotopias is at best frustratingly inconsistent or incomplete and at worst incoherent (Soja, 1996), within the context for adventure travel it can highlight the role of ‘off-roading’ trails as ‘other’ or ‘third’ spaces. Kraus (2013) puts forward that Heterotopias offer the experience of a third space beyond the idea of in or out and allow for self-positioning in seeking out a narrative identity. Although Foucault distinguishes heterotopias from utopias as imagined alternatives to their real space counterparts Rankin and Collins (2017) argue that, despite being imaginatively constructed, heterotopias establish a physical territory.

These heterotopias in the form of dirt trails are legal byways, just ancient unmaintained tracks that are not recorded as roads, but still subject to law and codes of their use. Their purpose has changed: no longer efficient ways to quickly travel across Wales they instead provide access to less travelled spaces. Dropping the bike on regular roads would be a significant incident, resulting in an expensive repair bill and possible injury, whereas on the dirt roads it is a regular occurrence but one with less severe ramifications. Whilst mirroring the everyday, mundane, roads in that they connect to locations and provide a means to travel between them, the dirt roads are different in that they are not efficient or convenient, are not policed in the same way and have a different populace on them; they are a liminal space. The liminal space allows for the meaningful making of experiences and the negotiation and renegotiation of meaning from an experience.

## Page 2: Crossing the Threshold

Liminal spaces are strongly connected with transition. Van Geenep’s (1960) anthropological work on liminality identified their role in rites of passage being the location whereby the middle stage of transition rites, coming after the separation of an individual from society and before their incorporation back into society

with a new status. Whilst the concept of liminality has often been focused on discussion around a temporal dimension in which a person is ‘no longer one but not yet another,’ Van Geenep also indicated a physical liminal space and passage through this became the spiritual passage. Whilst on a formal rite of passage travel through these liminal spaces, whereby things are different, can provide a freedom from the rules and conventions of society and the everyday, thus providing opportunities to explore one’s own experiences, identities, and roles in society.

After leaving the main roads and passing through rural farms I come to a gate that puts me on the Sarn Helen. Passing through a gate and onto the trail is a clear demarcation from the main roads, the mundane, and is both a physical and metaphorical crossing over the threshold to the world of adventure. The crossing of the threshold is pivotal in framing a journey. Campbell’s (1949) narrative pattern of the Hero’s Journey can be perfectly applied as a lens to understanding adventurous travel and can be traced back at least to Odysseus (Dan, 1999; Goodnow, 2008).

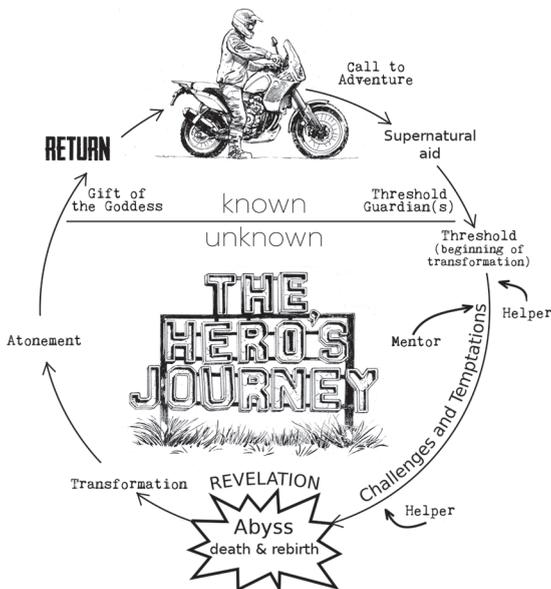
Huijbens & Benediktsson (2007) discuss how the experience of travel on mountainous roads are mediated through automobiles (in my case the motorcycle). These vehicles are the facilitators of freedom of movement. The motorcycle has a longstanding relationship with freedom and my love for them is intrinsically linked with the sense of freedom one achieves while riding. It both facilitates freedom of movement whilst mediating travel through landscapes and shaping the way we experience them. I have always preferred to travel by motorcycle. Cars separate their driver from the harshness of the environment via a steel and glass cage, they have suspension designed to smooth out a ride and even air conditioning to regulate the temperature (as captured here in panel 2). Motorcycles on the other hand keep you fully immersed in the environment: if it rains you get wet, if it is hot so are you, riding a motorcycle on rough surfaces is a physical act that requires concentration and a relationship with the machine. Pinch and Reimer (2012) identify this physicality as a central theme in narratives expressing the motivations for leisure riding.

### **Page 3: Challenges on the Road**

Passing through the gate puts me on unfamiliar ground, the way ahead now a rough unpredictable path. It is here that I face tests of navigation, confidence, and motivation, encounter my ally in the bike and confront enemies in the form of ascents, doubts in one’s ability and, of course, the inevitable drop. I have entered

heterotopia; the safety and familiarity of the roads has given way to strange and new encounters. This space is heterotopic in that it is still a road and with it comes the need to have the motorcycle roadworthy, insured and compliant with the Highway Code. Yet the road is no longer constructed in smooth materials with clearly defined lines and markers, there are no conveniently placed road signs warning about corners and upcoming obstructions, they are left for me to encounter organically and to overcome independently.

Adventure travel has always provided me with an outlet for a restless spirit and a struggle to find my place in society. As Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie & Pomfret (2003) suggest, these experiences separate the individual from everyday life and the mundane, they create joy, induce learning, stimulate self-development and are intrinsically rewarding while entailing intellectual, physical, or emotional risk and challenge. Campbell's (2012) narrative pattern of the hero's journey has the hero crossing the threshold, committing to the journey, and then beginning his journey along the road of trials whereby he faces tests, encounter allies and confronts enemies.



The Hero's Journey by Joseph Campbell (2012).

Robledo and Batle (2017) argue that the Hero's Journey can be perfectly applied to adventure travel. The journey of the archetypal hero can be considered as a

metaphor for the transformational experience of adventure travel. Along the Sarn Helen many challenges await, such as rough terrain and steep climbs, some of which cause me to fall as I struggle to conquer trials and challenges that the route throws at me. These disorienting dilemmas, which as Mezirow (1990, 2000) states, facilitate more than broadening of the mind, rather the traveller returns home transformed into a different citizen of the world. The transformative potential of adventure travel is widely recognized but under-researched (Lean, 2009; Wilson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013). Kottler (1997) first introduced the term transformative, defining it as a process that involves the actualization of “something missing” driven by “intellectual curiosity, emotional need, or physical challenge” (Kottler, 1998:26).

However, in reflecting on the experiences in the creating of the comic I discovered that the Hero’s Journey does not sufficiently embody the experience itself and so a different theoretical position was sought out. Identifying as a hero does not sit well with my own identity, I am not seeking accolades or recognition from others, in fact I am looking for something more internal. Zweig (1974) argues that adventure does not lie only in the magic of exotic countries, but also in dazzling intensities of risk and inner venture at the margins of our lives. This is part of the shift in how I relate to dominant narratives of adventure. MacFarlane (2007) argues that narratives play a significant role in the way we build relationships with and move within landscapes. I have long been enthralled by tales of journeys and adventure, my relationship with the outdoors and adventure has been fuelled by the stories of Shackleton, Scott and Mallory and the great quests during the romantic period, reinforced by time in the military and as an expedition leader. Now through my autoethnographic study my position has shifted and these stories, which have themes of colonialism, now sit less comfortably in my view of the world.

## Page 4: A Contemporary pilgrimage

Theologian Richard Niebuhr (in Corelyn, 2002) identified a “deep characteristic of human nature” as “the desire to travel, to be in motion”, but this is not only physical motion but also mental, emotional, and spiritual movement. The journey of a pilgrim has much in common with that of the hero. It is the undertaking of a quest; journeying in order to attain something, to reach a destination (that can be either physical or metaphorical) and a destiny. Beginning in the human world, venturing aided and abetted by helpers and hinderers into the “Otherworld” where they obtain an object, perform a task, and the journeyer is

transformed and finally returns to this world (Stewart 1990:85). But there are also differences, pilgrims know they are on a particular journey and can identify it as such, whereas the hero does not fully recognise the full extent of their journey until it is over. A pilgrimage is also freely chosen whereas the hero's journey is not.

Pilgrimage begins with the decision to make a particular journey and includes the preparations which go with it, often as important as the journey itself. Smith (1992) claims that in current usage the term "pilgrimage" connotes a religious journey, however, its derivation from the Latin *peregrinus* allows broader interpretations, including foreigner, wanderer, stranger, and traveller. Badone & Roseman (2004) suggest that in the world of postmodern travel rigid dichotomies between pilgrims and tourists are no longer tenable. They highlight that gaining clear insight into the experience of pilgrimage is problematic due to the complexities, contradictions and mixed feelings felt by ethnographic actors. Pilgrims construct their own understanding of the significance and meaning of the journey being undertaken. Graburn (1989) and MacCannell (1999) provided us with the theoretical position that tourist travel fulfils a need for spiritual renewal and like early travel of civilisation it provides a break from the routine and ordinary.

For me, Morinis' (1992) term of a wandering pilgrim better made sense of the journey; there is no specified end goal or sacred place which one needs to reach, and the journey in and of itself is what leads to self-fulfilment and enlightenment. The journey through Sarn Helen is not about reaching a destination of significance but rather experiencing moments of authentic adventure and distance from the mundane everyday world. For Macanell (1999) all tourists embody a quest for authenticity which is a modern form of the human concern with the sacred. For me authentic adventure requires that there is a real risk and not as Holyfield (1999) puts it a "manufactured experience". Fletcher (2010) suggests that successful adventure tourism requires the construction of a "public secret" – something commonly known but not articulated – whereby tourists are able to maintain the contradictory perceptions that they are participating in a dangerous and unpredictable activity that is simultaneously planned and controlled to keep them safe. I agree with Coupland who states, "Adventure without risk is like Disneyland" (in Holyfield et al, 2005:173). On this journey the risk is real, although thrill-seeking is not the sole purpose of the ride; it is a means to achieve the rewarding feelings of freedom and adventure. This can be achieved in heterotopias, in what Foucault (1998) referred to as a heterotopia of deviance, a space where behaviour deviant in relation to the norm can occur; in this case riding in rough dangerous terrain to get away from the everyday.

The final panel of the comic captures a moment of authentic solitude only achieved through adventure, the end of a wandering quest for the ideal timeless

eternity, found in the beauty of nature of inaccessible lands. (Basho 1966). This concept that is not tied to religious endeavours provides a way to analyse and make meaning of my travels, seeking out moments of joy, but without seeking a specific location or experience, the act of journeying provides the opportunity for enlightenment and meaning, making not only of the experience in itself but of ones place in the wider world.

## Conclusion

Autoethnography has the potential to reveal new positions in understanding adventure travel by motorcycle. It illuminates the normative, taken for granted axioms of adventure travel and challenges them by highlighting alternative ways to consider and make sense of the phenomena. This autoethnographic work brings to the forefront elements of the adventure travellers experience that more conventional research methods erase or downplay. By focussing on the lived experience of the motorcycle tourist, autoethnography explores voice, emotions, and the embodied senses giving deeper insight to the independent traveller.

Combined with an Autoethnographic methodology, comics that draw upon conventions of fiction writing and are fully grounded in field data offer the opportunity for a more diverse audience to access wider concepts of tourism than a research report.

This autoethnographic comic highlights and provides insight into how journeys through heterotopic spaces by motorcycle can provide opportunities for exploration of experiences and the everyday world, as well as demonstrating both the outward physical journey as well as the internal emotional journey and how these inform each other. There is an argument to be made that travels through these heterotopic spaces are actually realised utopias.

Whilst there is a need to develop sites of tourist attraction with access to them via modern roads, there is also a need to leave undeveloped spaces, roads and trails that provide challenges, risk, and a sense of authentic adventure travel away from the masses and the everyday world. Unfortunately, these are political spaces with an increasing trend to close these unmaintained roads to motorised traffic in favour of walkers and cyclists. As such I am running out of 'roads' to go 'off-roading' on and now I, along with many others, have become pilgrims looking for these spaces.

The concept of the pilgrim in a contemporary world provides a different position to understand the transformational experiences adventure travel provides. As a motorcycle adventurer the relationship between the heroes' quest and the

pilgrims' journey overlap. While there are risks and challenges to be overcome, they are not the sole purpose of the journey. It is not about external reward or validation but seeking out moments of authentic adventure and an utopia that provides a third space away from the everyday world. This research is an initial exploration into concepts of the Hero and Pilgrim as sense making tools and highlights the seeking out of heterotopic spaces as a form of authentic travel. Undoubtedly further research, both theoretical and empirical, into adventure travel by motorcycle is required to investigate the extent of these concepts.

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## Authors' information

Jason Wragg (FRGS, FHEA)  
 School of Sport and Health Science  
 Faculty of Allied Health and Wellbeing  
 University of Central Lancashire  
 Preston, PR1 2HE, United Kingdom  
 E-Mail: [jwragg@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:jwragg@uclan.ac.uk)  
 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1984-142X>

Jason Wragg (FRGS, FHEA) is currently the Course Leader of BA (Hons) Outdoor Adventure Leadership at the University of Central Lancashire, United Kingdom. He holds a Master's Degree in Outdoor and Adventure Education and this is where his interest in narrative based research began. Jason has led international expeditions around the globe and is currently undertaking his PhD, an Autoethnographic investigation into the lived experience of adventure travel by motorcycle.