

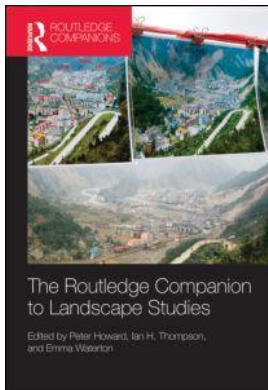
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Landscape and a sense of place: a creative tension

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In the opening pages of Tim Creswell's (2004: 12) book *Place: A Short Introduction*, the author states that 'Space, landscape and place are clearly highly interrelated terms and each definition is contested.' This seemingly simple observation hovers like a compass needle, pointing the way into difficult terrain. The brief journey I propose in this chapter is to visit and dwell awhile upon the two important concepts of place and landscape, and to consider what might be gained by examining the creative tension between them. Consideration of these themes is significant. Landscapes, places and cultures are ineluctably linked. They work on and change each other over time. It would be all too easy, in the age of virtual realities and globalization (Massey and Jess 1995), to miss the fundamental role that landscapes and places play in the development and sustenance of cultural identity.

I find it impossible to write about landscape and place only in the abstract. For me, landscapes and places are best considered from the perspective of the particular. Every place is a result of an ongoing interaction between natural and cultural phenomena. Human expectations and desires for a location and the resulting way that humans live in a landscape shape and are shaped by that location. This reciprocity between people and locations on the Earth's surface provides the reference point for all considerations of landscapes and places. As the American land historian William Cronon (1996: 22) observed, 'The material nature we inhabit and the ideal nature we carry in our heads exist always in complex relationship with each other, and we will misunderstand both ourselves and the world if we fail to explore that relationship in all its rich and contradictory complexity.'

Therefore, I will write from the perspective of a place not far from where I live (see Figure 7.1). The Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Reserve is located on the south-east coast of mainland Australia. Nooramunga is a 30,000 hectare complex ecosystem of tidal waterways, mudflats, mangroves and low-lying sand islands. It is a globally significant migratory bird feeding and breeding area and its sea-grass beds are a vital habitat for local fisheries. I have been visiting Nooramunga for twenty years and it provides a compelling example of some of the differences and similarities between the concepts of landscape and a sense of place.

This chapter is divided into four parts. Part one provides a brief survey of some of the contested ideas about *landscape*. This section is not meant to be exhaustive. There exists a well-developed commentary on this subject (see, amongst others, Jackson 1984; Cosgrove and



Figure 7.1 Camping on Drum Island opposite the Port Albert Channel entrance. The Clonmel Banks can be seen on the horizon.

Daniels 1988; Wylie 2007). Rather, it provides a prelude to later considerations of place. In part two I consider the concept of place. Whereas landscape may be seen as something viewed by the outsider from a vantage point – a landscape *gaze* if you like – a place is something experienced through immersion by the insider. Places are phenomenal rather than fixed in character. Part three considers the creative tension that arises when *landscape* and *sense of place* perspectives and practices are combined. The combination is, I will argue, a synergistic one that takes us ‘Beyond duality, beyond the opposition of mind and matter, subject and object, thinker and thing’ (Coupe 2000: 1). The last section of the chapter provides a brief conclusion that suggests some signposts for inquiry and education practices that venture into the terrain of this creative tension.

Shifting the landscape gaze

Landscape, as a word, has evolved from its old Germanic language origins into a classic trans-disciplinary concept. It is a central concern in architecture, cultural and human geography, some branches of philosophy, art and design, and should be in education. In his wonderful essay titled *The Word Itself*, Jackson (1984: 5) traces the origins of *landscape* back to the ‘ancient Indo-European idiom, brought out of Asia by migrating peoples thousands of years ago, that became the basis of almost all modern European languages’. The roots of the word, he suggests, were introduced into Britain not long after the fifth century AD.

Modern day usage of *landscape*, according to the American art historian Lucy Lippard (1997: 8) can be traced to the German fifteenth-century term *landschaft* – ‘a shaped land, a cluster of

temporary dwellings and more permanent houses, the antithesis of the wilderness surrounding it' and 'in the Dutch seventeenth-century word *landschap* or *landskip* – a painting of such a place, perceived as a scope, or expanse'. Thus *landscape* has become a projection, a site of layered meanings, a receptacle for human values and experiences. As Simon Schama (1995: 6–7) comments in *Landscape and Memory*: 'Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. It is scenery built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock.' For Edward Relph (1985: 23) landscapes 'cannot be embraced, nor touched, nor walked around. As we move, so the landscape moves, always there, in sight but out of reach.' Or, as Lucy Lippard (1997: 9) succinctly says, 'The scene is seen.'

As far as scenery goes Nooramunga is not much to look at from the nearest vantage point on the mainland; that is, from the outside. At first it seems to fail to conform to our expectations of the pictorial. The islands seem little more than a dark green smear of low coastal vegetation that mark a demarcation between sea and sky. The wind blasting out of the nearby Bass Strait lifts the sand and brings scudding rain. Mercifully, the wind blows the biting sandflies away. Parting clouds allow shafts of sunlight to add a sparkle to the white-capped waves. Though it may initially fail the viewer in its postcard value it is possible to gain a sense of sublime wildness from the scene. No doubt this is the heritage we draw from the Romantic artists and poets who introduced us to this modern way of interpreting the land and the sea in Western Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. Their return to nature (Bate 2000) inspired 'the ecological impulse' (Hay 2002: 1) that has powered the establishment of environmental reserves throughout the Western world, as much for the preservation of their natural landscapes and scenery as for their ecological conservation (Nash 1967). Despite this, or perhaps because of it, our landscape gaze masks as much as it reveals. It casts a veil across the land.

Sublime experience is predicated upon an initial fracture that places observer and observed on either side of an abyss. And just as the sublime beholder dissolves in dreadful delight, so he or she simultaneously undergoes an energizing apotheosis: the event of vision begins and ends with a cleaving apart of subject and world.

(Wylie 2005: 242)

Landscape has become, perhaps, the quintessential appropriation of space by Western culture that stands in the way of experiencing and knowing the particularities of local places. The landscape of Nooramunga would have appealed to the American cultural geographer Carl Sauer and the English historian W.G. Hoskins. Both held predilections for the 'rural, rustic and the remote' (Wylie 2007). Their fieldwork would have quickly revealed the marks of humanity's 6,000 year engagement with this landscape (through ancient shell middens left behind by countless generations of Brataualung clan members of the Kurnai tribe) or later evidence of the European colonizers (through old ports and pilot stations, ship wrecks such as the *Clonmell* which foundered on the outer islands in 1841, or the rough huts and fence lines of the cattlemen, who brought their island cattle grazing techniques with them from the 'old' country). But there are no permanent human dwellings or residents in Nooramunga anymore. Instead it seems to have become a place of transience. Migratory birds such as curlews and sandpipers arrive each year from Siberia, Mongolia and China. When they leave to breed in the northern summer, they are replaced by other species flying in from the south to seek shelter from the Antarctic winter. Stands of large coastal banksia trees collapse and whole chunks of land disappear beneath the sea during winter storms. It is all too easy to construct the landscape of Nooramunga as a kind of primeval land before time, rather than an 'everyday' or 'vernacular' landscape (the preferred terrains of later geographers Donald Meinig and John Brinkerhoff Jackson).

There are several dangers in this view of landscape. Yes, a material earth is acknowledged as existing, but it is always and everywhere valued as secondary to human interpretation of the scene. This potentially leads to the belief that *nature*, *wilderness*, *landscape*, even *place* are just more examples of a vast range of intellectual constructions that can readily be reinvented, reimagined and reprojected to fill or modify the empty space before us. Such an approach makes places available for our expropriation (Seddon 1997). In the process the sensing body of the viewer is always sidelined and particular historical-cultural interpretations are considered to precede their experience. And so we reach an impasse in our travels through the Nooramunga Marine and Coastal Reserve. Perhaps it is hubris that has led us to believe that we can make a landscape from the raw materials of nature. As Carl Sauer (1963: 343) concluded, ‘the cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a cultural group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result.’

Sensing places

What, then, distinguishes a *place* from a *landscape*? ‘The word “place” is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities, and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other’ (Relph cited in Cameron 2003a: 173). How the members of a cultural group see a landscape is only one ingredient of the complex mix that comes together to make a place. Places are ever changing. They are always in a state of becoming.

Many of our contemporary ideas about place come to us from the work of cultural geographers such as Tuan (1974, 1977), Relph (1976, 1992) and Seamon (1979, 1992, 2004), and philosophers like Edward Casey (1993, 1996, 1997). Collectively this scholarship marked a phenomenological shift that highlighted the centrality of lived-experience and embodiment in the experience of place and its role in the development and sustenance of individual and cultural identity.

Many of their ideas drew from the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Early in the twentieth century Husserl developed a transcendental phenomenology of the everyday, a series of investigations into the experience of life as it is lived. Arguably Husserl’s most significant legacy was his conceptualization of the lifeworld. According to Abram (1996: 40) the lifeworld, ‘is the world of our immediately lived experience’ in its ‘enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of “facts”’. From Heidegger came a way of considering what it meant to dwell in a place, to make a home, and the critical role played by interpretation and language in this process. Merleau-Ponty’s writings yielded insights into the role of perception and embodiment in sensing the web of relationships that make up the world, a world made up of places of which people are an integral part.

The Australian social ecologist John Cameron (2003a: 173) writes, ‘the word “sense” does not refer simply to the physical senses, but to the felt sense of a place and the intuitive and imaginative sensing that is active when one is attuned to, and receptive towards, one’s surroundings.’ As Lucy Lippard (1997: 34) argues ‘the sense of place, as the phrase suggests, does indeed emerge from the senses. The land, and even the spirit of the place, can be experienced kinetically, or kinesthetically.’ We engage with places through the medium of our bodies. We become a part of a place by giving up the outsider’s high vantage point so that we can participate with the ‘more-than-human-world’ (Abram 1996: 95). Now, together, people and landscape become the phenomenon that is a place.

The distinctive characteristic of how a place is experienced is that of *insideness* (Relph 1976). To be inside a place is to *feel* the bonds of attachment and to *sense* that you are welcomed

home. It is not too difficult to hypothesise that the scholarly interest in place is most acute in New World settler cultures, such as North America, Australia and New Zealand, precisely because the process of reconciling an identity with both indigenous cultures and the land remains an everyday reality for many.

The work of the late Australian polymath George Seddon (1972, 1994, 1997, 2005), the Australian land historian Peter Read (1996, 2000, 2003) and the late New Zealand ecological historian Geoff Park (1995, 2006) provide valuable insights into the study of place-identity. European colonizers perceived Australian and New Zealand landscapes very differently. The former was seen as a 'prison-scape', the latter a garden or a pasture (Park: 1995). Neither gaze has spared these lands, their places and indigenous peoples, from significant ecological and social damage and disruption. As a result scholars such as Seddon, Read and Park have had to ask questions and seek answers in new ways, as they searched for a way to explain their landscapes and places.

Peter Read's three books *Returning to Nothing* (Read 1996), *Belonging* (Read 2000) and *Haunted Earth* (Read 2003) represent a sustained investigation into place attachment and the significance of place experiences in Australia. Read has explored the attachment to place and the grief that results when people become displaced through modern developments, such as dams that flood valleys, highways that split suburbs and even the declaration of national parks that remove locals. He also wrote of the complexities of indigenous and settler attachments to the same places, and the possibility that a spirit of place, a *genius loci*, resides in the land independent of humans.

This latter concept is most confronting to those steeped in European traditions of enlightened rationality. To accept a local spirit-of-place means that we believe a location has inherent meaning in its animals, rocks, trees and waters. In this view places are already brim full of meaning independent of the new set of cultural projections that settlers (or tourists) thrust upon them. Yet Relph (1976: 15) sees an irreconcilable gulf between 'the existential space of a culture like that of the Aborigines and most technological and industrial cultures – the former is "sacred" and symbolic, while the latter are "geographical" and significant mainly for functional and utilitarian purposes.' It is just such a gulf that the Jungian scholar David Tacey (1995, 2000) suggests settler Australians must cross if they are to have any hope of reconciliation with both indigenous Australians and the land itself. He warns that the "'spirit of place" is by now a cliché of journalism and a cash-cow of tourism, but "spirit place" is altogether different, a powerful visionary claim that smashes almost everything we know' (Tacey 2003: 243).

This, then, is the challenge that place poses. For it to be a useful concept requires new settlers to suspend their belief in several cultural ideas and ideals that they hold dear. First, they must remove the veil over the land cast by the landscape gaze of the picturesque and the sublime. It is an important part of Western history, but we must move on. Second, developing reciprocal relationships with places requires active sensory participation with a place that we believe to be already inherently meaningful. The bonds between people and places that arise from such place-responsive experiences are rich and powerful. This approach requires us to consider a place like Nooramunga quite differently. Rather than the tourist who brings their gaze with them like a pair of wrap-around sunglasses filtering everything they see, the *empathetic insider* (Relph 1976) must relearn their way into a place, and this process begins with their active body.

Empathetic insideness demands a willingness to be open to significances of a place, to feel it, to know and respect its symbols. ... This involves not merely looking at a place, but seeing into and appreciating the essential elements of its identity. ... To be inside a

place empathetically is to understand that place as rich in meaning, and hence to identify with it.

(Relph 1976: 54)

Productive tensions between landscapes and places

It seems that my preference is clear for place as a *way of experiencing* over landscape as a *way of seeing*. But it is not that simple. For some years John Cameron, while working at the University of Western Sydney, conducted a ‘sense of place’ curriculum that required students to engage in place-based projects. As a result, he cautioned,

I have observed a tendency amongst some students to take refuge in their chosen places, to derive personal comfort and significance from these visits, to revel in their newfound place attachment, and not to relate to the larger questions of sustainability, or cultural change, or control of economic power. It is a risk for educators that experiential learning can lead students so deeply into their internal experience that they are reluctant to emerge from it.

(Cameron 2003a: 188)

How might we engage with a place through our senses so that we may experience an ‘embodied emplacement’ (Casey 1993: xvi) but not dismiss our own layered enculturation and the cultural forces which inevitably bring change to that place? The answer is surely to explore a creative tension between the interpretative traditions of landscape studies and the experiential pedagogies from place-based and place-responsive approaches. The practices of the late New Zealand ecological historian Geoff Park (1995), evident in his book *Ngā Uruora (The Groves of Life): Ecology and History in a New Zealand Landscape*, provides a compelling example.

In *Ngā Uruora* Park details his search to uncover what had been lost to New Zealand culture with the near total clearance of its lowland forests. These clearances were as much about sourcing timber and agricultural land as they were about the colonizers establishing supremacy over the indigenous Māori and attempting to recreate a vision of the bucolic English landscape that they had left behind. Park’s search took him to the few remaining intact wet lowland forests as well as into dusty historical archives and into direct contact with the local peoples. He explored each remnant forest through the medium of his body, on foot and in canoe, developing his perceptual acuity to the utmost, and described these discoveries for the reader. But he also detailed the location’s land-use history from a rich array of sources and corroborated his findings through his fieldwork. Finally, he used only Māori words for indigenous entities (such as the names of trees, birds, Māori practices and so on). The effect is a weaving of landscape history and a sense of place, and a reminder that people and places are inevitably linked in a reciprocal relationship.

As I found what still lay hidden in the ground, tracked my way into archives and had Māori memories revealed to me, I came to know the lost forests of the plains. I found that the ecology of a stretch of country and its history are far from unrelated. They work on one another. They shape one another. If you go in search of one, you are led to the other.

(Park 1995: 16)

Park’s place studies are more than only a combination of interdisciplinary study and personal narrative. Park’s storytelling is a ‘polyphonic account’, writes Seddon (1996: 397). To

comprehend Park's text the reader must strive to return to an understanding of the place itself. The result is a writing that is 'for New Zealanders about *becoming* New Zealanders' (Seddon 1996: 405).

Interestingly, a recent movement in landscape studies seems to be revisiting many of the place-oriented ideas and approaches of Tuan, Relph, Seamon and Casey. Like Park, its proponents seem intent upon dissolving the barriers that once separated the knower from the known. They reject the Cartesian dualisms between object and subject and the intellectual from the embodied. This relatively recent development of a landscape phenomenology in cultural geography 'eschews notions of landscape as an image, representation or gaze composed of specific cultural values and meanings' (Wylie 2007: 14). The philosophical orientation of this new movement within landscape studies has been clearly articulated by Wylie (2007: 149, and Chapter 4 in this volume):

Divested of assumptions regarding observation, distance and spectatorship, the landscape ceases to define a way of seeing, an epistemological standpoint, and instead becomes potentially expressive of being-in-the-world itself: landscape as a milieu of engagement and involvement. Landscape as 'lifeworld', as a world to live in, not a scene to view.

Cultural geographers have long been interested in the value of fieldwork (perhaps none more so than in Carl Sauer's 'Berkeley School' of cultural geography). The difference in a place-responsive or landscape phenomenology approach is that the *lived experience* of a landscape is fundamental. We have to *experience* the 'invisible threads' of the relationships that come together to constitute the phenomenon that *is* a place. The cultural landscapes we project (through art, history, politics, economics, ecology and so on) must still be studied to understand the human-land relationship fully, but they are secondary to how we come to *live* in and *experience* a reciprocal relationship with a place. Perhaps the next significant challenge for scholars, teachers and students in landscape studies is to refine a pedagogic approach that offers the greatest potential to experience and study landscapes in this way.

A pedagogy of landscape and place

How then do we learn a landscape and a place? Let us return to Nooramunga to answer this question through a *lived* example (see Figure 7.2). In a recent book entitled *A Pedagogy of Place: Outdoor Education for Changing World* (Wattchow and Brown 2011), Mike Brown and I proposed four signposts that point the way towards a place-responsive pedagogic approach. The first of these involves *being present in and with a place*.

To be present in and with Nooramunga requires developing our perceptual acuity towards its natural phenomena; tides, weather, climate, landform, sea conditions and ecology. Initially, this requires a concerted effort. A traveller won't get very far here unless they develop a keen sense for the intricate relationships that exist between wind, tide and land. We need to become attentive to our surrounds and how they influence every decision that we make; where and how we travel, where we pause, to what we direct our attention. Over time some of this becomes 'second nature' and we begin to move and dwell with a sense of comfort and assuredness in the land and on the sea.

The second signpost is the power of place-based stories and narratives. Nooramunga, like all landscapes and places, is full of stories. Listening to these stories we would discover that Snake Island, the largest of the sand islands in the Nooramunga reserve, has special cultural significance. It was once a nuptial island reserved for young Brataualung couples who would



Figure 7.2 The view south from the Gulf on the north side of Snake Island. The peaks of Wilson's Promontory appear in the distance.

paddle over to it in their bark canoes after their wedding ceremonies. We become attentive to the more recent land history of the early European explorers and settlers who first charted the coastline and others who forged overland tracks and established the ports and towns of the region. We follow these human narratives of conflict, settlement and of ways of living with, or against, the land to trace a larger land use history. The North American nature writer Barry Lopez clearly articulates why story is such a powerful way to learn about landscapes. For Lopez, story begins to make those 'invisible threads' that connect people to places visible:

A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape. The purpose of storytelling is to achieve harmony between the two landscapes, to use all the elements of story – syntax, mood, and figures of speech – in a harmonious way to reproduce the harmony of the land in the individual's interior. Inherent in story is the power to reorder a state of psychological confusion through contact with the pervasive truth of those relationships we call 'the land'.

(Lopez 1988: 67–8)

An authentic story telling will reveal the ecological and cultural forces and events that have shaped the land over time and that continue to influence its ongoing evolution. Collectively, being present in and with a place and learning the stories of a landscape is a way of *apprenticing ourselves to that place*. In our journey into learning a landscape like Nooramunga we have knowingly to blend these two approaches, sensory immersion and narrative. Neither alone is enough. This approach can be effectively modelled by the fieldwork guide or educator:

open attentiveness, the willingness to suspend judgment and ‘listen’ to a place, the capacity to reflect on both affective and intellectual responses. These are abilities which are best communicated by the presence and attitudes of the educators themselves – by how they are rather than what they say when they are outdoors with the students. It sets the ... educators on just as much a journey as the students; always broadening and deepening their relationships with places.

(Cameron 2001: 32)

Finally, how we then *represent our experiences* in art or text (or even in landscape design, architecture, film and so on) will tell us a great deal about how much we have learned. The act of representation, as we have seen modelled by Park, is a process of cultural meaning making. It will be a never-ending task. As we change the place and it changes us, so too will our representations of our experiences in the landscape continue to evolve through time.

These four ways of learning our way into a landscape are parts of a continuous cycle. Being attentive, listening and telling culturally and ecologically significant stories, apprenticing ourselves to a place and exploring our relationship to landscape through the act of representing our experiences there, becomes a way of *being-in-the-world*. No doubt each landscape and every individual will require a slightly different response. There is no formula for this kind of approach. Place-based and place-responsive approaches are unlikely to be easy work. They will require long time frames and collaboration with and between local peoples. They will breach disciplinary boundaries and be respectful of local knowledge and ways of being. At times silence may be the best response where the sacredness of local stories and practices might be endangered by the public gaze. At other times the artist or writer who begins as an outsider, but one who is committed to the journey towards empathetic insidedness (Relph, 1976), may reveal a unique insight into a place that surprises even the locals, because it rings true. It won't be easy, but we won't go too far wrong if we begin to think of the landscapes and places we encounter in our day to day lives as already brim full of meaning and significance. They become our teachers when we combine the best of the landscape and place traditions.

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