place

in which notions of place are explored through the teachers’ representations of their places

map of this chapter

an awareness of place
embodiment of place
the intimacies of relations with place
places and becomings-teacher
“tell me about this place”

on this plane there is no distinction between the natural and the artificial
- Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988:266)

We are always somewhere, in some place. And place consists of both animate and inanimate assemblages; of movements and relations among human and non-human multiplicities. In the images and stories of their journeys (in the chapter stories of place and becoming) the teachers told me a little about some of the places they had inhabited, and a little about their becomings in those places. These places and becomings were a part of them, a part of their lived experiences in the present. Exploring the teachers’ lived experiences, with the aim of coming to a better understanding of the nature of the relations between their becoming-teacher and place, meant exploring the way in which these teachers “functioned” with other multiplicities. In this chapter I explore the teachers’ intimate relations with their natural and built environments, with the animate and inanimate in place. And I dwell upon the representations of their lived experiences with conscious awareness of my own relations with place.

an awareness of place

At first “place” did not seem problematic to me. The places of this study were rural. And rural was a place I knew. I knew it in me, as a personal experience, and I knew it in a geographic way: I could mark rural Australia on a map. I had personal experience of rural. But I was also aware that the experience of place is a corporeal and intimate experience. We experience place with and in our bodies. And each person’s experience of place is unique. I found myself asking questions such as: If place is important in becoming-teacher, then how is it important? How do we relate to place? What is our relationship with place? Most importantly I needed to know how other people expressed their relations with place? What did these expressions look like? In an attempt to answer these questions about representations of the experience of place I began reading historical and literary works about rural Australia; exploring other people’s representations of their experiences of rurality. And I continued to read and reflect on philosophical and sociological writings on place as well as my own experiences of place.
As part of my participation in the 2004 Visiting Scholars Program at the Australian National University I was required to “perform” a part of my research, so I arranged and performed the following one-person play, consisting of eight vignettes. Some are direct quotations from literature, and some are personal reflections and experiences. With varied modifications it has been performed twice since to other academic audiences.
place

a performance

written & arranged
(& performed)
by Genevieve Noone
It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it ...

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather ... everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, [is] indivisibly united in this event.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood...

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual ...
I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself.

Vignette 8.

the orator removes the coat and glasses, steps out from behind the lectern and gazes at the tree poster

I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture:
stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the
delicate blue and silver ...

I can perceive it as movement:
flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith,
suck of the roots,
breathing of the leaves,
ceaseless commerce with earth and air ...

I can classify it in a species
and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life ...

I can dissipate it
and perpetuate it in number,
in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object,
occupies space and time,
and has its nature and constitution..

Prologue

The orator moves to the box, removes the lid, and takes out its contents, one by one: a shell; clapsticks; a baby's blanket; a white laboratory coat & a pair of spectacles; a poster of a tree.

She places them at various points within the performance area.

Vignette 1

scene: a cemetery somewhere in rural Australia

the orator lowers herself onto the low table (gravestone) near the back of the performance area

It's me, Dad.
sorry it's been so long – cemeteries are not really my place
but I do talk to you
all the time ...

you've got a good spot here at the bottom of the hill
with Charlie and Jamie – bit of a laugh among the boys – the three of you being buried here together

good company and a great view
[the orator slowly scans the landscape- and sighs]
I love this place
and I miss it
I don't stop in town though – there's no-one there I know now
but I love being here ...
I'm glad you're buried here
it gives me an excuse to come back ....
Vignette 2

the orator walks to the baby’s blanket, bends down and picks it up

Subjects are seen as connected to, rather than separate from the landscape.
The question of body connection is … important for all bodies, for the body of the world.
a blanket is often the first object … that makes the transition between child, mother and outside world.
It has its existence in the space between self and other, self and world.

the movement between self and landscape … it is the same as this movement between self and … person – across a space of difference.

(Margaret Somerville 1999, Body/Landscape Journals, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, pp. 148, 151, 173)

Vignette 7.

the orator places the clapsticks back on the floor and move sprightly to the lectern, donning the lab coat and glasses

the basic stuff of the universe … is … a kind of pure energy that is malleable to human intention … our expectation itself causes our energy to flow out into the world and affect other energy systems …

Karate masters have talked about an underlying Chi energy responsible for their seemingly impossible stunts of breaking bricks with their hands …

Perhaps the universe runs mechanistically as a basic operation, but then also subtly responds to the mental energy we project out into it …

Vignette 3.

the orator takes the blanket, walks over to where a doll lays on a chair, wraps the doll in the blanket and sits down

I cried for the first two weeks it was so tough
the place was so run down
the house the land the cattle
we were both so busy
a new baby
being mother
wife
joint-manager of a station
I saw the environment as quite hostile

I was surprised when friends would come out from the community and stand on our verandah looking over the wetlands and say wow how beautiful

I couldn’t see it

even though I’d lived in the community for two years
it was ages before I could begin a relationship with the environment at the station …

(personal communication with friend, at Roma Street Gardens, Brisbane, January 2005)

Vignette 6.

the orator moves to the clap sticks and squats down, picking them up

Aboriginal people … speak to land,
and they listen …
Jessie … walked in a country full of sentience,
where ‘animals, many plants, Dreamings, the ancestors, and other things like hills or stones take notice …’

An Aboriginal land ethic requires that … human and non-human, attend to each other:
‘Jessie took notice …
and I never knew her to hear silence’

(Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths 2002, 'Landscape and language' in Words for Country, Landscape and Language in Australia, eds Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths, University of New South Wales, Sydney, pp.1-13, p.3 - cited words are those of Deborah Bird Rose 1999)
Vignette 4.

the orator stands and places the wrapped doll on the chair then moves to the shell, picking it up

A phenomenologist must not be subject to the charms of external beauty. For generally, beauty exteriorizes and disturbs intimate meditation … interest should begin with the original amazement of a naïve observer. Is it possible for a creature to remain alive inside stone, inside this piece of stone? Amazement of this kind is rarely felt twice.

(Gaston Bachelard 1994 (1958), The Poetics of Space, Beacon Press, Massachusetts, p.107)

Vignette 5.

the orator places the shell back on the ground and walks to centre stage

Several years ago I was fortunate to hear a presentation by Dr Valerie Brown about the Landcare movement in Australia. The one point that has remained with me was the implication that the land had an effect on people. In her research many landholders she spoke to stated that they saw themselves as caretakers of the land; as having an obligation to look after the land under their care. This perception reminded me of beliefs expressed in Aboriginal stories and songs, about the responsibility of people to care for the land. It seemed to me that the land itself was influencing the people who lived closely with it; whose existence relied directly on the earth and its ability to provided food and shelter. The land and the people were in a mutual relation.

(personal communication, Dr Valerie Brown, presentation at TAFE, Shepparton Campus, 1997)
The thought which most struck me from my reading, reflection, and performance, was the possibility and nature of personal intimate relationships between humans and place. And also that these relationships first require an awareness of and receptivity to place; not as an object, but as a mutual relation. To ‘be bound up in relation’ with place, with the animate and/or inanimate, and for the ‘human and non-human to attend to each other’, first requires a sensual awareness of and a receptivity to place. Prior to their engagement in this study the teachers would not necessarily have been aware of and receptive to the non-human in their places; and may be not have been aware of and receptive to all that was human in their place. To be able to explore the teachers’ relations with place I would first have to facilitate their awareness of and receptivity to their place. I began by asking each of them to “tell me about this place”; to tell me about the rural place in which they were living and teaching.
This town is not as bad as people make out. There’s a lot of people around my age who've been to boarding school that seem to be the two divides. You've got your higher class and you've got your par... (continued)

I've been over to people's houses and then you've got your parents who've been to boarding school language. It goes straight to the point. I don't know how to describe it. It's like you've got to put any fr... (continued)

I have noticed the really big interaction that seems to be the two divides. You've got the two divides, the ones with the very clear horse removal and the people who live on farms. They're containing to the river and comes up. I just noticed the water... (continued)

I had a parents who've been to boarding school. We had about 8 teachers and we got flooded here. It might be two weeks... (continued)

I noticed with the parents of my home town when I was growing up. I would be a little bit worried if I was walking up the street now... (continued)

We've just done our reporting. We had some rain and some of the farms were really unsettled children. They did have to go through... (continued)

I noticed the parents after school. I had a par... (continued)

We've got a new subdivision up behind the school this way as well. So I just wonder... (continued)

I'm still... (continued)
Each of the rural places in this study was quite different from the others. They were unique. And each of the teachers noticed different things about their place. These anecdotes tell of the teachers’ responses to their unfamiliar places:

- it’s flat
- it’s cold
- it’s welcoming
- it’s far enough away to have your own time and your own events
- it’s a busy place
- I did the rim of my tyre in

David Abram (1996:50) insists that our responses to place are dependent upon our ability to be receptive to place, and our ability to be creative in responding. Some responses reveal comparisons to previous experiences:

- my home town’s an older community
  - I went through a small school when I was young
  - it reminds me of my home town when I was young

Other responses compare the lived experience to prior expectations:

- it’s not that far away
  - there are a lot of people from out of town …
  - it’s just amazing for a town this size
  - I didn’t see this town as that sort of place
  - the quiet life
  - except for last week
  - … murder … robbery … house fires … deaths
  - this town is not as bad as people make out

And some noticed that not everyone is the same:

- I have noticed the Aboriginal English…
- I notice … the property owners … how good their English is
- you’ve got the two divides
  - we have several different church groups
  - community groups …
  - some are involved with horses …
  - the other side is into the sport and tennis
  - you’ve got the higher class
  - and you’ve got your lower class
These stories are stories of adjustment, of movement, of relations with place. Most importantly, they are stories of the teachers’ bodies in unfamiliar (yet in some ways familiar) places. Margaret Somerville (1999:4) suggests that ‘in telling a story of place it comes into being as a particular landscape evoked by a particular body.’ These are embodied stories.

**embodiment of place**

As the study progressed I became very aware that, for me, place is an embodiment. I experience place with and in my body. However, the very fact that I was able to think of place in this way, with the language of ‘embodiment’, was because I was familiar with this language; I was familiar with literature about embodiment. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962:239) insists that as we are 'in the world through our body', and as we 'perceive the world with our body' that we will rediscover ourselves by making contact with our body. Edward Casey (1997:235-6) contends that what Merleau-Ponty teaches us is:

> [not only] that the human body is never without a place or that place is never without (it’s own actual or virtual) body; he also shows that the lived body is itself a place. Its very movement ... constitutes place, brings it into being ... The body itself is place-productive...

Our bodies are places and our bodies produce place. Place is a part of our bodies. Laurel Richardson (Richardson & Lockridge 2004:83) notes that in writing about Beirut, both she and Ernest begin with their bodies:

> [Ernest] Returned a few weeks back from the sun-drenched oven of Beirut. I’d’ve written sooner, but promptly got a respiratory infection which by all odds should have been some exotic Med-bred bug ... (p.75).

> [Laurel] I’m home. Safe, but not sound. Something’s seriously wrong with my shoulder. I can’t raise it above my waist without excruciating pain ... (p.79).

And when Laurel asks, ‘Do you usually begin writing by imagining yourself bodily back in time and space?’ Ernest replies in the affirmative (p.174). In recalling their bodily experiences both Laurel and Ernest began by becoming aware of their bodies, and once they were aware of their bodies they needed to acknowledge how they felt in the present, before recalling their body in the past. The teachers too, recalled their bodies’ sensations when describing their places: today was cold; oohh it’s too hot; it’s so relaxing. An awareness of place begins with an awareness of our own bodies in place.

In planning the data collection issues of the body and embodiment were central. I began the fieldwork with an assumption about how graduate teachers might experience place, that is, with and in their bodies, and I wanted to “access” the
embodied experiences of the teachers. My experience with and knowledge about the creative arts suggested that they were the most appropriate means for facilitating the teachers’ expression of their embodied experiences. But there was also my body to consider. How would my body be engaged in the research? This research could have been carried out by phone and email interviews. Instead I chose to take myself, my body, to the physical places of the graduates; to meet their bodies, and develop relations with them in the flesh; to inhabit the same physical places which they inhabited, and to be present in spaces with them. This was a conscious choice I made. My life experiences suggested that my bodily presence would enable me to better understand, in my body, and so be better able to represent, the stories that the graduates told me. On the one occasion I found myself asking questions by email of one of the teachers, both the quantity and quality of the response (in terms of what the teacher chose to share) were greatly less than the responses that I received from the teachers to whom I asked the question in person. My body was present as part of the story telling. Should my body also be present in the reporting of the stories? Margaret Somerville (1999:130-131), reflecting on her work of recording and transcribing stories of Aboriginal people, writes:

The general opinion seemed to be that I should erase my presence in the text. That it was better to pretend that the stories stood alone ... that they somehow got produced by themselves, without bodies and all the politics of their production ... I argued, both for myself and for potential readers, if there is no chance of having an embodied presence in the landscape of these stories, then how are we to develop a relation of empathy ... to the tellers?

I was present with the teachers, in their places as they told their stories. The stories were told in conversations we had together; conversations between two bodies in particular places—two bodies each with their own experiences of place in the past and present. The places of this study were unfamiliar to me. I became very aware of my body as I travelled to, and spent time in, the teachers’ places, and my field notes contain numerous entries about my body’s receptivity and creativity in adjusting to place. But my experience of these places was unique to me and it was important that I was aware of my own embodiment of place so that I could acknowledge it as mine, and then allow the teachers’ to tell me about their relations with these same places.
12th January 2005

It is a very hot day. I head off about 1 o'clock in the afternoon. After the drive down off the tablelands, the landscape for most of the rest of the 400 odd kilometres of the trip from my home to Neil’s place is undulating, the vegetation varying from completely cleared cropping land, through partly cleared open woodland and closer scrubby land, to densely vegetated (at least by the road) eucalypt and native pine forests. On one particularly flat stretch of road, the view out the front window is very hazy, as is the view in the rear view mirror. It is like driving in a steam-filled bubble ... Everything is fuzzy. I’d driven this stretch of road often during my six years living on the tablelands of northern NSW, and every time it felt like this: a feeling of being “out of place”; of being in-between, in-between home and my destination. And it is the same today. And so hot. With the air-conditioning vents turned so as the cool air is blowing onto my hot skin, I feel cold; my body shivers. But if I turn the vents away from my body so as the cool air fills the car, I feel my body burning up – the direct sun on my “driver’s arm” and the radiated heat from the dashboard are unbearable ...

Eventually I arrive at my destination where I am to stay with friends who have agreed to ‘put me up’ for each of my visits. They have a pool, and after the greetings we waste no time in donning our bathers and sliding into the cool, clear water. Then someone suggests that it is quite late and we should organise some dinner – time has slipped by; surely I haven’t been in the water that long!
Sunday 13\textsuperscript{th} March 2005

This time I leave early, about 8:30am, to try to beat the heat. But it isn’t early enough. By the time I arrive at my friends’ the mercury is well into the mid 30’s and the car is hot. That same haziness plagues the hours in between the tablelands and my destination. And the same dilemma of choosing between being “chilled” and being “gently roasted” presents itself. Will this trip never end? I keep checking the clock and the odometer – are they purposely taunting me with the slowness of their progress? I find myself looking forward to the next trip, in May, when it will not be hot. And, as always, the vegetation fascinates me: What is that crop? And that one? Which eucalypts are these? Are these pines really native? There is so much one doesn’t know when one is “out of place”.

19 March 2005

As I drive further and further west I notice the road names are preceded by the letters SR and a number. I guess that these refer to stock routes. The drought is bad out this way and I come across several drovers and their herds of cattle on the stock routes along the sides of the road. And always, on the horizon, are the ever present dust clouds...

20 March 2005

I am up early this morning and off for a walk. It is lovely and cool. Even this time of year the days are still very hot and this time of day, just before sunrise, is the only time the air feels cool and fresh.
6th June 2005

In a small village, about an hour from Nicola’s place, I stop at a café. The sun is setting and has been blinding for the past twenty minutes. When I set off again the sun has dropped below the rolling hills. The sky is a magnificent luminous pink...

As I continue westwards, the horizon broadens and becomes more distant, and the sky fades to deeper shades of orange and purple. The evening star appears. As all about me grows darker I look in vain for the lights of Nicola’s place: surely I am not far away now! At last, as I round a bend in the road, the lights of a cotton gin appear, and soon after a few scattered street and house lights. Almost there!
11th August 2005

I wander over to the park. Down by the river I decide to try recording some environmental sounds with my new digital recorder. As I stand, silently, recording, a platypus surfaces, glides across the water surface, then dives back into the murky water .... wow!

Few people have seen a platypus in the wild ... And there, on the water’s rim ... a small brown head appeared gliding, the body... flat as a plank in the water

25th October 2005

I arrive about 12 noon. Rick’s place is hot (and it is only late October). But the café is cool, so I have lunch there and I sit and read awhile. I drive around town (with the air conditioner on) to get some photographs (Rick hasn’t gotten around to giving me any yet!). I take some photos of some “weatherboard” buildings, then head to the caravan park to book into my cabin. It is shaded but the air inside is still and warm. I open all the windows and turn on the fan. Still it seems airless, so I take a chair out onto the porch where a slight (albeit warm) breeze is blowing. After a coffee and biscuits and a quick unpack I head off to take some more photographs on my way to the school. I stop at the newsagent’s to get a newspaper — it’s soooo lovely and cool inside.

no they don’t have any Heralds left
very unusual
once or twice a month they might run out of Teles
but never Heralds
must be the craft show in town

I stop to photograph the weatherboard garage then find a shady parking spot by the old cemetery. I get out and wander around, hopping from shade to shade, getting some good snaps. It is way too hot to stand in the sun. Further up the road I stop to take photographs of the “sacred footy ground” — but I only get one decent one as that is all I can manage from the shade.

At the school I sign in and show myself to the staffroom. It is cool. Oh so cool. Thank goodness for air conditioning. I take my regular 4 x corner photos of the staffroom, then sit in the cool and write ...

The bell rings. Shortly I will have to venture out into the hot concrete yard and find Rick ...
the intimacies of relations with place

to define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses. By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies

- David Abram (1996:56)

While the teachers’ descriptions of their places told of encounters with both the human and nonhuman in place, and of their receptivity and adjustment to the unfamiliar (yet at times familiar), I wanted to get a sense of the more intimate relations with place; of their sensing of place. I chose to do this through objects. We sense both the human and non-human which are part of our becomings and which are always in some place somewhere. Deleuze & Guattari (1988:21), in explaining the nature of rhizomes write that ‘what is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality ... to animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial ... all manner of “becomings”. As a rhizome, becomings are relations. Henry Thoreau (1965:182) suggests that inanimate objects can have a direct effect on our thoughts:

Who has not sometimes derived an inexpressible satisfaction from his food in which appetite had no share? I have been thrilled to think that I owed a mental perception to the ... sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I have eaten on a hillside had fed my genius.

Following the story told by Margaret Somerville and Patsy Cohen (1990) of the Aboriginal woman who keeps in a box the things that are important to her, I asked the teachers to bring along to the workshop objects from their place. Just as Nadia Wheatley and Ken Searle (2003) begin their respective creative processes with objects from place, and in the same way as Hannah Hinchman (1997) pays attention to the detail of the things in her place, I asked the teachers to bring objects, both natural and manmade, from their places to the workshop for the purpose of creating an object collage of teaching in a rural place. In her research on wilderness theatre Kim Pitman (2003:90,92) asked her participants to ‘go and collect two or three objects of nature that they were drawn to’. The objects were placed in a large circle, one person at a time, describing the meanings of their pieces. At the end, they also took one piece each and were asked to ‘develop some sort of presentation about it’. I decided to ask the teachers to talk about the objects they had brought along before they began making the collage so as the object collage could be created in an uninterrupted space and time.
Enclosed in these pockets are representations of some of the objects which the teachers brought to the workshop. One teacher, rather than bringing physical objects, brought digital images of his place on his laptop and they are included here.
bark
this is off a gum tree outside the music room
and it’s my little piece of sanity at times
just to look out
it’s a little visual
deep breath I suppose

feather
it’s very little but very special
a little galah feather
they just come in and chatter away
just outside the music room
and I always say to them
“morning ladies”

between the gum trees and the galahs its like
ahhhhh

sanity
seed pod
I just brought these
to me that is such a school playground thing
it’s just a seed pod
and this was
open and
very red when I picked it up
the quadrangle is just full of
maples and it’s just a wash of red at the moment

I collected them all a few weeks ago
and this [a seed pod] has released it’s seeds
just while they’ve been sitting in the bag
they’ve sort of been doing their own thing
quietly

stones
these represent the river
rocks from the river
the two rivers
they just join in together

it’s quite
a long river
and that’s where we draw our water supply
from

further down the river we’ve got
water treatment plants for the
other towns
it’s a major
water supply

in the playground I found a makeshift guitar pick
I like that
I brought a selection of the different plants that I pass on my way to school. I’ve got all the natural ones that are in the garden. I did the long walk for this one.

On the long walk, there’s bottlebrushes and that spiky tree that everyone hates and an arbor thing that I have to dodge around and one of those sort of trees that loves to drop its leaves and a eucalypt that lives at the front door that’s the long way around.

On the short way around which is down two steps and up two steps I have another flowering bottlebrush thing that lives at the back door and a palm that I didn’t really want to take any of.

And this plant which stinks and when you brush up against it and you walk into the classroom it just stays with you its flowers seem to have a really strong odour a sort of potency and when they get stuck on you the kids up the front go did you come the short way to class? yes you smell.
the teacher’s planner

I’ve brought my
day planner
which
to me epitomises everything that
is at school
it’s chock full of everything that is my life
school
and
pieces of
paper and
every other note and conceivable thing that would have to be
there
it’s all fitted into one nice little
book that is carried around
all day every day to everywhere I go

you can turn up and go
right okay
that was that week
now I go to here and
that happened and oh no
that person’s had the baby then
they changed houses then
you’ve got to remember which
  family they belong to and whose
cousins were who
and who moved where
and which one had the baby
and what it was
and what they called it
I just can’t do that with
48 students and
all their families and siblings
first year out my mind just went
oh god—what have I gotten into
so everything gets written down

I was given it
by my sister-in-law-to-be who
when she started out
had a small little notebook
it’s that tattered and wrecked and everything
that was after the first term
then she put that away and got a nice diary
and then
that got tattered in a few weeks
she was constantly sticking things in all the time
so this year she got us both
teacher’s planners and
all my other sisters have got them for work so
we all have
our planners that we sit down and go okay this week we’re doing this
yeah I suppose I can meet you on this weekend
because we’re all over the place we sit down and go through it
with all our term dates
there’s four sisters in the family and three of us are teachers
to control my mind I have to write everything down
I brought this ruler along because it ...

... this just represents the anger of some of the students in the classroom the destroying of instruments while I’ve got my back turned and that’s I guess part of teenage-ness that little ruler wraps up how pissed off I am sometimes at the way kids just smash and break and tear and rip and when you’ve got an incy wincy tiny budget ...