Ecology of Place: Art Education in a Relational World

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In current research, place is a concept with multiple meanings, rich with personal, socio-cultural, historical, and political complexities. Through a phenomenological investigation of place meanings with preservice art teachers, I weave my narrative as a writer with my role as an artist/teacher/researcher who examines their performance art as one tool to further an ecology of place. I then draw conclusions that support sense-knowing, the importance of participation, embodied practice in art, and connective relationships. From these threads of inquiry, I conclude with an ecological re-vision for art education.

The lack of a sense of place—that of belonging or attachment—is often a serious by-product of transnational migration, of increased economic and social mobility, and of the pervasive characteristics of a homogenous consumer-scape. If we are to understand an increasingly turbulent and mobile society in which many experience a loss of identity, boundary conflicts that are both long lasting and complex, and symbolic attachments to places both remembered and imagined, a discussion of place is essential. How can changes in education counteract a growing sense of placelessness (Relph, 1976)? Can teacher education in the arts address the disquieting realization that students feel displaced by the inauthentic, theme-park appearance (Kunstler, 1996) of communities that offer little to feed the imagination? Even “the landscape of schooling,” eco-educator David Sobel candidly states, “looks like American urban sprawl” (2004, p. 5). If these reasons were not enough, developing an awareness of how our sense of attachment or belonging affects our relationships in natural, somewhat pristine settings is also dubious. In Last Child in the Woods, author Richard Louv (2005) describes human estrangement from the natural world as a “nature-deficit disorder” (p. 34) and the feeling of isolation, fear, and displacement that most Americans experience in wild places as a form of “cultural autism” (p. 63). How can art education address this kind of estrangement and replenish our ideas on what will be a sustainable way of cultivating not just a present, but a future? Can we envision education, and in particular art education, in a manner that enlarges and deepens a sense of place as being one of connections, complements, and distinctions, whether it be with the natural world, in the human domain, or with the built environment?
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this work is to explore place as a part of a fluid, relational identity within a world that is clearly shaped by the artful actions we undertake. Further, research which ‘emplaces’ the teller of the tale within an art form is an artistic inquiry which tends to blur some of the distinctions between insider/outsider roles by sustaining the value in the experience through a continual renewal, an interpretation from a text that lives on by drawing out what was already there (Alexander, 2003). I will begin by briefly exploring how other disciplines have contributed to the growth of the concept of place, although my aim is not to describe the wealth of literature on this topic, but to highlight those examples that suggest viewpoints either tangential to art education or ultimately of great use. Following this explanation, I then offer a few examples of performance art as one kind of curriculum component that is timely in a discussion of an ecology of place. Last, with a narrative that weaves the phenomena of student place performances with my own voice on place experiences, my inquiry threads an a/r/t/ographic (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004) construction of interpretive voice and aesthetic experience, memory and imagination of place that intentionally invites a discussion of how that which is unknown and not yet understood might manifest itself (Abram, 1996) in artful education.

The Designation of Place

Defining a commonly used term such as place is difficult precisely because it houses a variety of meanings. Sociologist Thomas Gieryn (2000) suggests that the appreciation of places is possible only because of boundaries, physical or phenomenological, which enable us to understand the difference between ‘there’ and ‘here.’ He notes that a place could be any number of assignations: a neighborhood, an easy chair by the fire, a mountain vista, or an entire continent. The same could equally be offered for place’s closest relatives: landscape, home, life-world, being-in-the-world, community, identity, and belonging. Anthropologists Margaret Rodman (1992) and Sally Ward (2003) readily admit that place is no longer the simple locale, the backdrop for events that earlier field workers noted as a peripheral aspect of their inquiries. Rather, place is a part of the relational nature of people and culture. Gieryn, to his credit, also acknowledges that place is a “player in the game” (p. 466). He contends there will never be a sociology of place, but that a space for place in sociology will emerge only with the studies of “anything and everything that are informed by a sense of place” (p. 468).

So what does inform a sense of place and further define what we are talking about? Here, this means that the structures and values, the power distinctions, the nesting and overlapping of physical and psychic domains, and the ways of being with one another are essential. Place is

2It should be understood that performance art, while useful, is not offered here as a cure for education’s problems, but as an inquiry space consistent with educator Brent Davis’s (2004) conception of teaching and learning as a fluid, emergent, and responsive kind of ecological discourse.

3Abram notes the Hopi concept of the manifested as correlative to that which is already accessible to the senses, without distinction to the past, present, or future. In contrast, the manifesting is that which is “psychologically gathering itself” (1996, p. 192)—behind and beyond forms, in the mind, and in the heart.
more than aligned with the term ‘location’ or ‘landscape,’ those stage sets or sweeping vistas of space that were once thought to operate rather independently of events and actions that occurred there. As an example of this contrast to earlier definitions, Ward (2003) cites the research of early Australian ethnographers Munn and Strehlow whose attempts at making sense of Aboriginal culture underscored a belief that place was more akin to an inert object: static and unchanging. In contemporary anthropology, research perspectives that once favored discourse on the fixed locales of the ‘other,’ and intact cultural traditions have eroded dramatically. They have been replaced with theoretical frames that recognize and identify multiple/conflicting ways of belonging, human movement across real/symbolic borders, place as being relational, contested and political (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), intertwined with conceptions of belonging, home, identity, and what it means—on many levels—to be displaced.

David Seamon, a self-described phenomenological geographer in a department of architecture (2000), suggests that place is indivisible from the person living in it, harkening back to Heidegger’s thoughts on dasein (being in the world). In Sense of Place, Sense of Time, noted landscape historian J.B. Jackson (1994) links the term ‘sense of place’ to the Latin origin—the genius of a place, genius loci, that derived much of its ambiance from the intervention of the spirit of the place. While this may seem farfetched, there is something to be said for expanded sensory perceptions that note the qualities of a location are intertwined with responses, both human and other-than-human. Perhaps this is most clearly evident in David Abram’s (1996) Spell of the Sensuous that marks the increasing porosity of science/humanities research borders with a paradigmatic shift that makes room for both what we know and how we have come to know it, and the embodied understanding of being in place. Daniel Z. Sui’s (2000) reflections on the recent developments in geography support similar expansions in place-meanings. He notes that although visual evidence is still the mainstay of the discipline, other sensory experiences, even the unconscious (p. 323) now act as tools for geographic research.

Philosopher Edward Casey, drawing from the traditions of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau Ponty (1962), asserts that place is embodied and requires another lens of understanding than those that would situate place externally, while both ethnography and phenomenology attempt to examine the everyday life-world replete with all that the individual is conscious of and engages with (Casey, 1996). Casey would also suggest that place denotes that “we are not only in places but of them. Human beings—along with other entities on earth—are ineluctably place-bound. More than earthlings, we are placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit” (p. 19).4

4For an extraordinary read (Senses of Place, 1996) that spans a remarkable collection of place-meanings from Casey’s erudite bridge of the philosophical/anthropological thinking on place, to Basso’s Apache place names, Feld’s acoustemology of place, the emotional layering of place in Kahn’s New Guinea experience, and Geertz’s evocative reminder that “no one lives in the world in general” (p. 262), I am deeply indebted.
Place, according to phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1964/1958), also denotes interior spaces that are saturated with elusive qualities which join memory with image, and personal narrative with communal history.

This seems like the best possible ‘place’ to consider eco-education and art education which credit life—human or otherwise—with being in place, and part of a specific place, which I think refers to Ward’s early comment of the formerly static sense of place noted in early anthropology. In addition to the above scholars, eco-educators and curriculum theorists (see Aoki, 1993; Davis, 2004; Davis, Summara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000; Jardine, 2000; Kessler, 2000; Pinar, 1991; and Sobel, 2004) have argued that place meanings have remarkable value in education, to the point of noting that an education that does not recognize a sense of place, that “processional coming-into-being” (Riley-Taylor, 2002, p. 138) of identities that are intertwined with place meanings, has little to sustain their function as educational pursuits.

Art educators Blandy and Hoffman (1993) note that our conceptions of art education will change as we “imagine new relationships among art, community and environment” (p. 23). A possible addition to this might be to recognize the value of an accompanying ecopsychology that puts the human psyche in place “in a way that makes it internal to the natural world or that makes it a phenomenon of nature” (Fisher, 2002, p. 7). The more-than-only-human scope of an ecological place meaning for art education must encompass art as a behavior, which Bowers (1990) relates back to Dissanayake’s intentionality that is implied in her phrase ‘making special.’ His astute observation that these behaviors in art education could, and should, relate to the seminal ideas of Gregory Bateson is clarified when he notes that art “has to do with communicating, often in a metaphorical way about relationships” (p. 75); and as I note elsewhere in this article, about what happens embodied in place, whether one is a student, or a teacher/researcher. The exploration of place, as an enduring idea, one that enriches discussion in art curriculum is an essential component of art education scholarship: (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Congdon, 2004; Congdon & Blandy, 2001; Kiefer-Boyd, 2002; Neperud, 1995; Stewart & Walker, 2005). As Anderson & Milbrandt also emphasize, this exploration has validity, for “the sense of place has to do not only with what we personally feel and think about the environment but also with how we suppose others may think and feel about it” (2005, p. 170).

For example, Peter London (2003) has expanded our perceptions of how one might find a portion of the raw world, open to the speech of the natural environment, and become emplaced. Carol Jeffers (2005) has commented on the open terrain of not knowing, the uneasy placeless feeling students often have when they are about to be ‘placed’ in a new
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In sum then, place, can be understood as having multiple meanings, which I would suggest are constructed through relationships (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967), by people and their interactions with human and non-human life in physical environments, memories, and the actions of people everywhere to be the meaning of “in place.”

In the following research, the definitions of place arose from preservice art teachers’ lived understandings of economic mobility, marginality, identity struggles, rooted contentment, displacement, whimsical simulacra, and their ideas of being emplaced in a natural world that no longer exists, except in their stories. For some, place became a fusion between location, perception, and the actions of class participants. Through their movements which circumscribed the area and their frequent choice to involve others as participants, we sensed how space became place in a powerful merging of self, time, space, and perceptions. Casey (1996) suggests our perceptions alter all lived experience. In his words, “[P]lace, rather than being a mere product or portion of space, is as primary as the perception that gives access to it” (p. 19).

This said, the underpinnings of my discussion of place are deeply rooted in the perceptual, phenomenological world: the felt, embodied meanings of emplacement that provide truth or veracity that one belongs, dwells, thrives, or does not—sensually or spiritually—in ways that both solidify identity and embody memories. These concepts, while differing in meaning from author to author, are readily expressed by Marcel (1964), Bachelard (1958/1964), and the most recent work of Deleuze (2001)—particularly in their discussions of ideas such as incarnation, being at home in the world, and immanence as a life.

The choice of performance art as a means of a beginning exploration for a curriculum of place seemed most appropriate when considering that its roots are in the body (Garoian, 1999; Wilson, 1997); center around everyday experiences (Green, 1999); recognize and support cultural differences as well as learning styles; offer unique possibilities to penetrate public places and challenge viewers (Apple, 1995); and allow participants to take “conceptual and emotional risks as well as responsibility for what they imagine and what they create” (Garoian, 1999, p. 67). In addition to the exploration of emplacement, the symbolic function of place is also noted here: where a place opens unexpectedly for explorations through story, myth, ritual, and naming, in ways that metaphorically convey rich relational meanings. In fact, the term ‘relational knowing’ (Riley-Taylor, 2002; Noddings, 2005) will be used repeatedly in this writing to explain how place functions as an aspect of lived interactions; how curriculum works as praxis rooted in a sense of place; as well as being one of the most important distinctions to note in the definition of the word ecology.

5 Deleuze speaks of immanence as a life. It is not in something, nor does immanence belong to something as a quality. Rather, pure immanence is always in potential, in process (pp. 25-28).
An Ecological Definition Connected to Place

The word *ecology* has from its inception implied a relational function. In 1869, German biologist, Ernst Haeckel, combined the Greek words *oikos* (meaning ‘household, ‘dwelling,’ or ‘home’) and *logos* (the study of) to designate the “study of the household of nature” (Balgooyen, 1973, p.1199) as a way of more clearly defining abiotic and biotic relationships. It is as though this original conception of the word *ecology* had at its core the very idea of ‘place’.

This broad-based meaning of ecology gained additional, much needed specificity over the next century, particularly with social scientist Gregory Bateson’s (1972) expansion of the term which noted the *patterns* of connections, and the inter-relationships among all organisms and systems. In Bateson’s view, as I have explained in an earlier work (Gradle, 2006), the meaning of ecology deepened when he asserted that Mind [Bateson's capitalization] was not only observable in species, but also in the complex interactions between species throughout the ecosystem. This thought has led many, I included, to consider that ecology is not just a theoretical examination of relationships alone, but the understanding that the in-between, “latent grandeur” of what is unknown and unseen (O’Donohue, 2004, pp. 232-233) is discovered in participatory knowing. To me, this carries weight: there is an implication here that the sustaining power of our being exists in ethical relating.6

Ecology will be defined here as the remarkable collection of relationships, responses, patterns, and co-creative endeavors in a *kincentric* (M. K. Anderson, 2005) world that organizes the entire system of Gaia in an ethical way which allows for on-going adaptation and conservation. Thus, the word *ecology* is far more nuanced than environmentalism; it is firmly rooted in an understanding of relationality; the belief that identity is always a processual concept; and the eco-ethical nature of co-dependent connections among beings and natural/built communities.

Research Methodology

This leads to the next acknowledgement—that of my predilection for knowledge building as a qualitative, phenomenological activity which, as art educator Kenneth Beittel (1989) suggests, highlights the “breathing of the universal in the particular” through our lived experiences rather than an enumeration of accumulated facts that could be parcelled out as generically applicable. The mystery of research, for those who seek it, is not looming like a specter, large and perplexing on the pathway to analysis. Rather, it is that which we are in. From our own particular vantage point, we can marvel at the unique glimpse this affords us of essential understandings. It is from this vantage that I offer a second voice woven through this reading that extends the meaning of place-thoughts contributed as a result of recent personal experiences.

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6 Elsewhere, (Gradle, 2006), I describe this inter-relational sort of knowing as *intelligence*, a creative topography of inter-dependencies that sustain our existence. Davis (2004) describes this far better than I when he speaks of participatory epistemology, or *interobjectivity*, noting this is a shift in how we have come to understand the world as much more than a staging metaphor, populated by objects. Space, time, and events are altered by our actions. Davis asserts that this is not a new idea—a contemporary of Isaac Newton named Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) first suggested that space takes on its shape, or meaning, because of the interobjectivity that occurs with participation (pp. 102-103).
These textual places are meant to parallel, but not replace, the analysis of student performance work on recurring themes: displacement, emplacement, and place as a site of powerful experiential memory. It is my hope that this work adds the kind of subjectivity which becomes a strength of the narrative inquiry (Kellman, 2005), and enables one to better reflect on the experiences of others (Barone, 1992).

Performance art, as explained by art educator Stephen Carpenter (2001),7 is a visually embodied narrative that encourages students to look for meaning through the relational qualities of symbols, metaphor, movement, and words that are evident in the work. As an introductory focus for a course that would have much to do about places, feelings of displacement, emplacement, and our understandings of how rootedness or the lack of it impact curriculum, each student created and enacted a performance piece on place. Later in the semester, the course curriculum greatly expanded from this initial enquiry of a personal sense of place to include place meanings at specific sites and with divergent populations within the community.

To facilitate a better understanding of how art is emplaced, however, our first discussions centered on pre-modern and traditional cultures’ connections to ritual performances in artful, elaborative ways (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Cajete, 1994; Dissanayake, 2000). The next orienting discussion highlighted the inquiries of a few key scholars who have discussed ritual (Grimes, 2000; Langer, 1957), ecology (Abram, 1996), anthropology (Basso, 1996) and place/identity in art (Krug, 2001; Lippard, 1997). From these scholars’ writings, it seemed that a slow seepage of place-meanings has been crossing discipline divides. Additionally, research, particularly in the humanities, is now suggesting that the Modernist proclivities about space/time have taken a back seat to inquiries about place in postmodern thinking, as Edward Casey (1996) asserts in Senses of Place:

To reinstate place in the wake of its demise in modern Western thought—where space and time have held such triumphant and exclusive sway—one can equally well go to the premodern moments described in ethnographic accounts of traditional societies or to the postmodern moment of the increasingly nontraditional present, where place has been returning as a reinvigorated revenant in the writings of ecologists and landscape theorists, geographers and historians, sociologists and political thinkers—and now … anthropologists. (p. 20)

Following the discussion sessions, students in the art education curriculum course developed and enacted their performance pieces on place, using as a guide Carpenter’s (2001) suggestions. Individual conferences and sketches were required to flesh out a 10-minute (maximum) performance piece. Filmed performances, student journal work and

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7 I am indebted to Carpenter’s brief but thoughtful ideas for educators who assign performance art to students. He notes the necessity of a strong research component and sketches/scripts submitted to the instructor before implementation—which seem as useful as his admonition to rehearse prior to performance. Equally helpful were his thoughts on the importance of recognizing the body as a component of the work, the necessity of real actions, and the essential, practical consideration of having a recognizable beginning and end to a performance work.
reflections, and class critiques became part of my research documentation. The following narratives of performance/textual interludes highlight a few of the themes that came to the fore during the inquiry: those of displacement, mobility, absurdity, and place as a site of memory.

Performance Discussion

This was the year of mobility. Jennifer, from ‘elsewhere,’ drove over an hour each way to attend class, and juggled this with jobs that paid for the ever increasing price of fuel to get there. In her sometimes breathless entries into the classroom, and her quick scan of the room to determine what was in progress, I felt an empathy with the heightened perceptions of place that anyone new brings with them when entering from elsewhere. It seems true that “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place” (Feld, 1996, p. 90), yet this truism obscures the felt qualities of experience when one is new to a place: it takes time to feel emplaced, and sometimes that slow passage of sense-making is a torturous education.

In the peculiar way life has of marking our journeys, and of letting us know all subject matter is placed in none other than ourselves, Jennifer’s car broke down on the day of her performance piece, “Finding home away from home.” Later, she reflected that her art was indeed affected by her preoccupation with how she was to get home that day, as well as her frustrations over her long commute. Her idea for the performance piece began with a concern that social and cultural mobility, which is now equated with financial success and a good education, has led to a common modern phenomenon: the changing conception of what/where we call home. Remaining in place, on the farm, or in the small town of one’s birth is more often perceived as a lack of choice, as an entrapment suffered by the poor, the disabled, or the elderly (Sheldrake, 2001). In author Howard Kunstler’s words, “In America one goes somewhere in order to become something” (1996, p. 60). In Jennifer’s written curriculum work on this performance, she addressed the seemingly innocuous ways that venues have of imitating home: WiFi and comfortable chairs in the chain of coffee shops that plague/grace every major metropolis, for example (Locey, personal communication, April, 2006). The comforts of home in a hotel could very well include high thread count sheets, sleep number beds, and warm cookies in the lobbies—consumer bait that dazzles like a commodities wish list. The master meta-narratives of a goal-driven rationality, as Lyotard (1984) questions, were under critique in her writing, and shaped her thoughts on curriculum. What can be taught about product packaging and its subtle acceptance of a transient lifestyle? How do business venues encourage the public to stay and spend, rather than go home? The critical eye is a necessary one when examining the privatization of place and consumer influences on
unchecked growth in products and services. As C. A. Bowers (2006) notes, it is an important enterprise of education to develop “communicative competence” (p. 44). Quite possibly the awareness of place that Jennifer sought to examine critically, and likewise in Bowers’ careful consideration, are the place-based solutions to eco-cultural dilemmas that we can challenge with art.

I state this now, long after the fact, as a kind of knowledge that emerged as I grappled with making sense of my perceptions during her performance. As Ricouer observes, “To feel is still to think, though feeling no longer represents objectivity, but rather reveals existence” (1966, p. 86). Now, my interpretive voice is tempered by what I know as an educator can be useful applications of a performance moment that stretch their intentions into a future. Then, her performance inside of a box, where the empty gallery space reverberated with the almost deafening sound of a saw ripping through cardboard, was more like immersion “in the listening-space around language and between language, or by it, but not in it” (Levin, 1989, p. 195).

Finding Home Away from Home

The saw’s teeth emerged slowly at first, struggling to make the initial bite in the box. We watched the blade go in, then out, wrestle with a turn, and then continue sideways and up, each serration reverberating in the small space. The u-shaped cut became a flap. Two gloved hands pushed out what appeared to be small objects, wrapped in newspaper. Silence and waiting. Time felt uncomfortable, a gaping hole that had swallowed us before a presence we could not see. Then the saw resumed with another series of cuts, this time lower. More wrapped objects were expelled from the next flap, as if no longer needed. Then the hands began to explore the terrain beneath the lower flap like blind creatures that had lost something valuable. With quick, panicked movements, the hands pawed at the air, fingers finally grasping the wrapped objects. As though the hands themselves had memory, and knew the familiar profiles by touch, they now moved with precision, unwrapping: plastic plate, a plastic cup, a gyros sandwich. Ripped and crumpled papers were tossed hurriedly aside. Detritus from the cardboard cuts littered the floor and the two hands, once again still, retreated into the box, and closed the flaps.

During this performance, although I tried to think critically about her message, I confess I was caught up in an intense perception of the heaviness of time, in a way that I have not thought about since I first experienced John Cage’s “Four minutes and thirty three seconds.” Was it the lack of knowing what would happen in the performance? Or when it would end? I also felt acutely aware of her confinement which seemed unbearable to me. It called to mind decades-old scenes of POW abuse.
in Viet Nam, remembered fears of dark, enclosed places, and equally bleak locations of mind-numbing transience that look like anywhere and nowhere, and because of this, seem like simulations, the déjà vu of repeated travels. The sameness of everyplace has become a non-place where we struggle to seek out any differences at all to claim as distinctions in our daily lives. Jennifer later revealed in her reflections that her performance felt like a replication of place for her, and yet for observers, this was an embodied experience that forced us to examine the disquieting frustrations of a life with simulacra that passes for ‘freedom of choice.’ From our perspective as onlookers, this non-place assaulted our senses with uncomfortable “what ifs,” and directly confronted us with patterns of cultural consumption that reduce us all.

As Bowers suggests, “it will be necessary to recognize the tension between the culture’s metaphorical frameworks that still promote ecologically destructive thought and behavior patterns and the ecological principles that need to become part of the basis for a new cultural practice” (1995, p. 132). For students, one benefit of their understanding of the placelessness and mobility addressed in this performance seemed to be an empathy. The “occasions of perception” (Casey, 1996, p.17) enabled students to understand what it might be like to be displaced, ‘boxed in,’ or marginalized within another cultural setting.

**Gathering World**

Other students elected to highlight the way that stewardship or dominion models of earth care have a surreal quality that we rarely note in our daily actions. The humorous ‘Monty Pythonesque’ depictions of the domineering way humans have of assuming that we know what is best for the environment challenged our perceptions of place: how were we to understand and orient within the natural world? What was the meaning of being grouped in a circle, and instructed to carefully observe the actions of a performer who cavorted through the woods appearing to chase squirrels with a butterfly net? Was there sense-making in nonsense? What did it mean to hunt or to gather?

In *Genius Loci*, phenomenological architect Norberg-Schultz (1979) clarifies what I think students were suggesting with such intriguing performances. He notes that the concept of dominion (man over nature) developed among historians as “a challenge and response,” noting Toynbee’s interpretation (p. 168), in which humankind’s shrewd endeavors shaped a natural world and harnessed it. Nature was a thing, an object to be used, crafted, elaborated on, but never considered as more than a resource. Norberg-Schultz points out that the alienation or loss of identification with our environment is the root cause of our placelessness. The true function of our actions of gathering and identifying what is sustainable in our worlds is to reveal life to us: “We
dwell poetically when we are able to “read” the revealing of the things which make up our environment. Things are made with the purpose of revealing; they gather world, and may themselves be gathered to form a microcosmos” (Norberg-Schultz, 1979, p. 169). Caught between the what is and what could be, we struggle with the cumbersome cultural baggage of understanding how our past systems of survival, replete with domination and mastery over individuals and the hierarchy of culture over nature has locked us into a particular story of survival. The odd twist is, that to survive at all in the future, we must reverse the maxim, as Bookchin observes—we must live to survive (1995, p. 46).

**Interlude on Invasive Placemaking**

At my university, there is a large, wooded area in the center of campus where walking paths traverse the hilly forest. Last year and this year, deer attacks on humans have prompted the posting of caution signs along all the trails. Reports indicate that the curious/concerned/delighted humans have unintentionally gotten between the doe and their young, prompting aggressive interference from the mothers. While I am not unsympathetic with the severity of lacerations that required several individuals to seek out immediate medical attention, incidences such as these cause me to speculate about the wilderness of our collective imaginations. Clifford Geertz (1973) once said that we never dwell in nature—we dwell in our culturally constructed meanings of the natural environment. The so-called wilderness, created with its asphalt trails, lighting, and foot bridges is a cultural construction that seems to buoy the assumption that we are welcome there, since we are the creators, invaders, and perpetrators of this Disneyfied notion of the wild kingdom. How can we be so shocked, then, that the mild mannered natives fight for their young before they turn and flee?

**The Journey of Place, and the Place of Journeys**

Caitlin’s decision to create a journey that would enable class members to examine the term ‘sense of place’ as psychic space was sparked by her own realization that reflexivity cultivates not only the recognition that one has grown or moved beyond a particular mode of thinking/being/perceiving, but that such reflection creates a state of mindfulness for future changes in the self as well. Peter Abbs (2003) notes that, other than affirming our identity in the world, this is one of the great values of the arts. Particularly in performance pieces, we can utilize art’s ability to probe relationships, to investigate the sticky places of difference, and take on the journey that enlarges student place-worlds. The expansion of Caitlin’s world into that of other class members was only a small aspect of what she accomplished through this performance. After unrolling a long sheet of paper for the journey’s passage, she dipped her feet into two trays of paint at one end of the paper. Clutching a staff of tangled honeysuckle, she set off.
Caitlin described how important it had been in her life to acknowledge the people that had caused transformation, and had moved her from one place to another. As she crossed the long divide of paper, she told her story of volunteering, of being part of a group that had assisted a neighborhood with painting and repairing their homes. While this was a good experience, it didn’t feel like anything all that special, she admitted. Not until the end. It was the gratitude of the residents that caused her to realize that simple contributions are often appreciated in the lives of others and can encourage transformation. This experience sparked a consideration: Would it be possible to use a performance piece so that students could experience the relational qualities inherent in their constructions of identity? Could they understand that who they are and what they do with others effects who they become? This journey from a place of fixed identity, to a place of expansion, relation, and inclusion of others, was no more than a simple story-told-in-motion, a short trek across a classroom. And yet ultimately, the journey as experienced here established a powerful sense of belonging among class members, as well as being a method to mark their own journeys in relation to others.

One by one, students peeled off shoes and socks, gingerly dipped their feet in the cold slime of tempera paint, grabbed the staff, and traversed the same space with entirely different stories. All of the stories—told walking, slipping, tenuously grabbing the staff and each other for support on the journey—shared similar transformations. How interesting that the slipperiest, most difficult steps were always those taken in the beginning of their journeys, we noted as a class afterwards. How fascinating, too, that the footsteps were such firmly distinct, individual impressions in the beginning, yet they faded and co-mingled with others by the time each person had crossed the paper. How remarkable that a participatory ritual so steeped in metaphor, so twined with the simple action of moving slowly and deliberately, while telling the story of where one has been and where one is now is as old as the earth in some ways, and is also as marvelous as it gets.

The meaning of being emplaced and empowered cannot be found through haphazard, unreflective wanderings, or in escapism, or in detached and distant observations, or even through unmitigated freedom to roam the wide open spaces. As scholar Philip Sheldrake (2001) notes, we need places “where we can pass through the stages of life and become the person we are potentially” (p. 10), as well as affording us the chance to be part of both built and natural communities. This awareness is critical, for it indicates a disposition has most likely been cultivated in these preservice teachers that will foster embodied respect and enable them to look upon learning as fluid, ecological, and wonderfully interpretive.
Interlude on Place-Journeys

My friends speak of my life as being “the best of both worlds.” My mother says I ought to be grateful. How often is it that professional couples, employed in different cities, are able to find contentment in their jobs, their living-apart-yet-together arrangement, and each other? How can I explain that from my view, the place I still call home has an entirely different resonance when I re-enter now? It often takes time to re-immers[e] myself when I am home; I mourn over what I think I missed in my absence; I compare it to my memory of the same place and sometimes find it wanting. Add to that the guilt of not always being grateful for this new bi-location, my re-entry home is like putting on a pair of last year’s gardening gloves, stiff with encrusted debris of my creative toil—which I am able to soften only after a bit of hard work connecting with this place. I have come to accept that part of the journey home must include a ritual of creative re-entry, one that allows me to temper the slow assault of change upon my memories and does not minimize the deep vales of elsewhere I am bringing with me. For these are the places that are now gathered into being here; calling for new signage on a familiar map.

Displaced

Throughout the course, Christine had been passionate about the wasteful obliteration of the past in the name of progress. Not only had she shared news clippings and photos of buildings that no longer existed in her hometown due to unending suburban development, she also asked probing questions of guest speakers who talked to the class about art, its impact, and community needs. Why would anyone want to tear down a structure, she had queried, rather than try to restore it? And what was the point of erecting installation art that nobody understood? Art should have a purpose, she had insisted, it should mean something. Not surprisingly, Christine’s thorough sketches for her performance piece addressed her frustrations—narrative style—in scene after scene that re-enacted what she termed “obliviou[s] destruction” (personal communication, April 2006). Wanting to convey how human activity can have a large, negative impact on a natural environment, she prepared a scene in miniature that represented a wilderness area where she had played as a child. Since then, the land has been cleared for subtopian (Relph, 1976) living, shopping, and golf.

During the performance, we were called upon to be both onlookers in the upcoming travesty and to participate in her planned destruction. Christine circulated small cutouts, symbols of the life-connections that had been obliterated in this wild area. These were carefully placed in the miniature woods before she began the deconstruction with a small truck that mowed down the stick trees. As though this mode of destruction wasn’t fast enough, or complete enough, Christine began stomping the
remaining stand of twigs vigorously (and invited our participation to do the same). With the scene at last obliterated, Christine stood in the midst of the demolition, picked up a golf club, and swung. The small ball was lost in the oblivion of a manicured university lawn.

Part of me wondered what learners outside of this course might take away from such a performance: could they understand performance art that centered on the represented destruction of a place? What impact would this have on learners? I recalled the thoughts of geographer/educator, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) who believed that “a large body of experiential data is consigned to oblivion” (p. 201) and asserted that we are quite a ways from understanding how to articulate the quality of a feeling. This performance, in all its care with construction, in its planned roles for both participation and observation, and in its insistence to completely and thoroughly obliterate, extends learning in ways that a lecture on the perils of urban sprawl couldn’t, a statistical survey wouldn’t, and a text/painting could only visually invite. To be open to participate in an unconventional work that challenges students may be shocking, but as educational philosopher Martha Nussbaum (1997) notes, art has a role to play when it pushes against the conventional wisdom. While it may be uncomfortable to include this kind of performance work in a curriculum, the value in such a performance may well be that it does disturb, and thereby opens and extends dialogue about being in place that only art can provide on critical topics that deeply matter for a sustainable world.

**Final Interlude on Place Memories**

“Whoever discovered water, it wasn’t the fish.” (Geertz, 1996, p. 259)

_I have one natural object from a wilderness area where I have never been ‘in real life;’ but have fled from, time and time again, as this place looms in my imagination. My heart is always pounding and I pause, incredulous that I can know so much about this place even though I have not been there. I have infiltrated a told tale, perhaps to my own demise._

_Several years ago on a family vacation, I attended a colored pencil workshop in the wilder parts of northern California. The redwood forests there are immense, hushed, and dappled with light from a long way off. While I attended class, my husband and children spent their days happily tromping through these woods, collecting sounds and sights, and an occasional souvenir for me: a rock, a feather, and this one particular day, a small piece of driftwood in the shape of a cowboy boot. Just after my daughter picked up the little boot, they turned a bend in the path and my husband almost tripped on a sleeping bear. Adrenalin set in, and my family immediately turned and ran without stopping or_
looking back; my daughter clutching the little souvenir, and losing her glasses; my son yelling all the way to the cabin.

They will tell you that I have it all wrong. And yet, when I ask them how it really was, none of them remember much about this place; it was left for me to discover. I have lived it repeatedly. I know the place; and I still have the boot.

Conclusion

Well known educator William Pinar (1991) notes the concept of place is frequently absent in curriculum. He believes that “the macro-trend toward cultural homogenization” (p. 166) has spawned curricula that are generic, abstract, and portable. The counterweight to this transient abstraction is a curricular approach that is built upon the notion that particular people in quite specific localities, with certain kinds of knowledge, interests, and beliefs are the ground where one might begin a sustainable kind of education. Yet, how does one cultivate a sustainable sense of place with students, one that gathers into being all that belongs (Heidegger, 1991/1981) in an ecological manner, supports divergent thinking, notes patterns and connections, and encourages immersion in sense perceptions that lead to expanded curricula?

As seen in the examples offered here, a sense of place or attachment to a place can be explored through performance art; and this medium has several distinct advantages that address goals of a sustainable education program simultaneously with art education. Performance art uses the body, memories, voice, and motion in the telling of a tale, often with the ability to address a point of view that is outside of the mainstream; it opens us aesthetically, is interactive, and is metaphorical. The physical and psychic journey to a new place, the struggle to release one’s self from a boxed-to-go culture, and a critique of displacement offer a powerful insight that situates metaphoric understandings and encourages narrative associations.

In the Interludes I presented, the goal was to likewise situate the reader in a text that would offer a parallel terrain of meaning to explore: humans as unwitting—and also presumptuous—place invaders, displacement in one’s life and the necessity of ritual in order to reclaim it, and imagination and story as a place of memory. To walk away enriched because of the sudden humor or surprise, or because of one’s participation in an art form, or because of the unexpected and unsolicited revelation of feelings, is to experience sense-knowing in a way that puts the learner fully in the body, and in place. As eco-educator Elaine Riley-Taylor suggests, “To dwell only in the house of rationality discounts the rich abundance of alternative ways of perceiving, interpreting, and understanding reality which living affords” (2002, p. 60). This alternative way of knowing, also noted by educator, Heesoon Bai (2001), sees the senses as a moral
necessity which returns learners to mindful awareness, without privileging the linguistic-conceptual way of knowing over the senses. How long can we stay with a sensation, a perception, a notion that something powerful has occurred? How long do we allow ourselves the possibility to explore the sensory ways we know something before the mind takes over and interpretations drag us to critique the form, and ignore the passion?

The fact that the arts can bring in daily life—the everyday experiences, the autobiographic richness—of students’ concerns about their place-worlds establishes meanings that are multiple and significant, yet each performer brings only the participation that they can embody at the time, and takes away only what they recognize as valuable at that moment. The rest of the meanings, like so many of our endeavors in art and culture, are in storage for ‘who we may yet be’ to discover.

**Ecological Design for Transformative Education**

As we continue to discover the interconnections, the patterns of relating, and the co-creative structure of our world, art’s sustainable functionality in education will depend upon how well we can put three key understandings of ecology into practice. First, we must **expand and deepen** all areas of concern to include not just the personal, individual sphere in the present, but widen our appreciation and care to non-human life, the past and future, the spiritual and psychological realms, and other world views. We must also consider carefully how to move beyond a predilection to consider art as an individual, creative response only and become aware of co-creative intelligence as a product of ethical, relational knowing.

Second, as we expand and deepen awareness, it will be critical to develop a capacity in learners to **conceptualize patterns of relating**, to think about contexts, to become grounded in the local as well as the global, to feel emplaced to the extent that knowledge will lead to purposeful artistic response. Finally, I believe that an ecologically sustainable education must be **balanced** to create conditions for thriving, to establish a secure sense of place in a world of inclusions, integrations, and connections; one which challenges a non-functioning paradigm of curriculum overshadowed by the stranglehold of accountability.

As a tool for research in ecological sustainability, a phenomenological exploration that is a/r/tographic (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004) offers options for discovery on a number of levels. First, less concerned with the facticity, more involved with the meaning, the phenomenal a/r/tography takes up the task of constructing an interpretation of experience, whether it be place meanings in performance, deeper reflection on emplacement in one’s life, or the sensory perception that later becomes knowledge as it is better understood. It is a “borderland
of reformation and transformation” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 30) where the a/r/tography of understanding a phenomenon includes research that is ever manifesting itself in place.

References


