Perceiving and Expressing Place: Site-Specific Performance by a White Sheila

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Abstract
This paper explores the ways in which site-specific dance performances can tease out some of the less conscious aspects of our belonging or not belonging in Australian landscapes. While working with a group of Gunditjmara dancers from south-western Victoria in 2003, the author realized how much their dance practice enhanced their connection to particular places. She decided to see if her own dance practice could help overcome a shallow sense of belonging and so, for her PhD, she developed two performances in particular sites in the Melbourne region. Audiences attending these performances are taken on a journey of discovery designed to provoke deep reflection about the places in which we dwell. The paper argues that this is a form of ‘active art’ that can contribute to the broader public discourse on Australian identity.

Keywords
Landscapes, sense of place, dance performance, indigenous knowledge.

I am researching the relationship between body and place via my practice of site-specific performance-making. Although my work sits firmly on the side of ‘Art’, rather than ‘Activism’, its subject of place has significant political, ethical and environmental implications. I consider performance to be a medium for ideas, which can creatively contribute to social change. My PhD research and performance practice (in their small way) approach the broader cultural context of Australian identity. White Australians have not, until now, gone far towards establishing a tradition of performance generated from our land, reflecting ‘us whitefellas’ detachment from it. The fact that there is currently quite a frenzy of creative and discursive work (as exemplified by the diversity and abundance of contributions at Two Fires conference and festival, as well as at the Poetics of Australian Space conference in Sydney) exploring Aussie place-making and relationship to land, suggests that the time is nigh to take steps towards healing this detachment and to seek a deeper sense of being-here. I feel it is integral...
to evolving our cultural identity that we find creative expression for our own individual and collective experiences of this land.

My work aims to disturb or dismantle established hierarchies of human and landscape (anthropocentric approaches); the subject loses its dominance as body becomes a part of the landscape. By ‘framing’ a pre-existing geographical place and all it contains as a performance space or ‘site’, I hope to draw attention to the complex non-human world we often diminish to the status of ‘backdrop’ to human activity. I perform with the environment I am participating in, and try to engage my audience in a similarly immersive, participatory relation with the site of the performance.

I am experimenting with movement/dance as a spatial practice and as a mode of locating. As I dance in a site, I am responding to, participating in and trying to know the site; my dance is a slippery, endlessly seeking jostle to find my place with(in) the place, acquaint myself with it, find relation to it. Japanese Butoh dancer Min Tanaka, who founded the training method ‘Body Weather’, speaks of ‘dancing the place’, rather than in the place. Since training with Tanaka in 1999 and 2000, I have applied some of his sensory perception processes to diverse Australian landscapes, and developed my own improvisational ‘dance of place’, or ‘locating’ practice. I present material from this physical exploration of place in on-site performance works. The audience experiences immersion in the site, and my performance suggests an active awareness or multi-sensory ‘listening’, hopefully effecting in my viewers a deeper appreciation of and openness to the places we inhabit or visit. A bodily relationship to land (via perception, immersion, participation) is, for some of us, a more tangible means of finding connection to place than merely cerebral modes.

Larry Walsh, indigenous historian, spoke at the ‘Lie of the Land’ forum and exhibition at Footscray Community Arts Centre in 2001:

Let’s not talk about reconciliation. Let’s talk about belonging. If you claim, which I do, my spirit comes from this land, where does my spirit fit in? That’s the big reconciliation question. Not whether we like each other or not. Isn’t it time we all belonged?

The majority of us in ‘civilized’ countries have arranged our lives within interior urban spaces. We do not feel comfortable or at ease upon our land, as we do not engage with it. In Australia, a country ‘settled’ by immigrants, this lack of belonging is particularly prevalent. A sense of displacement and unease was understandable back in the 1800s, exacerbated by the repressed knowledge that the land ‘belonged’ already to the indigenous people, but, as Walsh suggests, it is surely time we got to know our land now.

While writers such as Peter Read (Belonging, Haunted Earth) are investigating immigrant Australian races’ connection to place(s) — tending towards discussion of ‘notions’ or sensibilities of mental, emotional–psychological attachment — my inquiry is concerned primarily with the physical relation, and emphasizes the fact of an ongoing process, with no easy end in sight. So perhaps my project is a physicalized ‘Whitefella belonging’ or, in my case, a White Sheila. An artwork rather than a practical solution, it may be read to represent a universal seeking-to-belong, an endless process of attempting to find located-ness.
‘Where you from?’ is the question invariably asked of me by indigenous Australians on meeting, often even before asking my name or particulars of what I do with my life. My answer to it is: ‘Not from anywhere as much as you are ...’ To state the obvious, we whitefellas are all displaced here. Although I was born here, in Ferntree Gully hospital, Victoria, my ancestral lineage does not extend forever in this country. I am sure I am not alone among Aussie whitefellas in the fact that I have not even been to the European places my ancestors came from. Hence, I believe that we are all (whether consciously or otherwise) in a perpetual state of attempting to locate ourselves here. The constant state of flux of the increasingly busy urban lifestyles we have created perhaps, to some extent, reflects our rather poor attempt to seek location. Miwon Kwon, author of *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, proposes the notion of ‘belonging-in-transience’, reflected in some recent site-specific art-works. Kwon is referring more generally to seeking/finding a sense of place in this age of post-modernity, but I think borrowing her belonging-in-transience idea to apply to questions of Australian identity could be helpful.

I think it is necessary to find some acceptance of our complex condition of displacement—living with the guilt of our ancestors’ brutal erasure of the landscape and its people, the deep void that therefore exists between us and our being-in/on-the-land (let alone the impossibly vast gap between the current state of human relations in this country and a hypothetical ideal of shared belonging)—and there are no neat, conclusive solutions to these sorts of issues. Whilst we seek to improve our relationships, to deepen our understandings, between ourselves and our environment and between the immigrant races and original inhabitants of Australia, there is not much choice but to dwell in the state of seeking, inhabit our perpetual process of locating and choose to belong in the unsettled, transient disorder. I attempt to dance from the midst of this struggle.

I spent time with some Gunditjmara dancers whilst working on Jill Orr’s site-specific film installation *From the Sea* at Warrnambool in 2003. Getting to know these people a little bit made me deeply happy and simultaneously drop into a state of mourning for the fact that I had lived here in Australia for the 30 years of my life without personally engaging with Aboriginal culture(s). I had the joyous experience of following a snake track across sand-dunes with a young Gunditjmara woman, who proudly pointed out the varieties of bush foods along our path, and told me about her people’s dances as we went. I had to go off for a weep after this, in realization that this was the first such experience I had ever encountered. What a massive void in my being-in-the-place. And what a tragedy that this situation—this complete ignorance of indigenous Australian ways and knowledge, and this dearth of relationship between blackfella and whitefella—is so normalized in average suburban white Australian life. Watching the dances of these people, I saw the landscape inscribed in their bodies. This was their place and they knew it; it inhabited them as they it. Generations of living in, on, with and from this particular area of country was written into their every movement.

I will never belong here as they do. However, I try to trust that my experience in each moment is valid, and that my body, inscribed by the multiple trainings and experiences that it is, has the capacity to perceive and express something
of the place I am in. My practice of improvising in different environments—‘locating dances’, as I call them—both represents as well as actualizes my longing to ‘fit in’, my attempt to connect with the place; to get closer to a sense of located-ness by getting in amongst it, immersing, letting it mould my body and influence my movement, in the hope it will eventually assimilate me. I know it never will entirely assimilate me; I can never fully inhabit it as my own so, embracing something like Kwon’s belonging-in-transience, I dwell in the state of attempting, locat-ing. I explore other ways of getting to know the land than my predecessors’ modes of erasure and imposing—namely, sensory perception. I listen to the sounds, perceive the smells, experience the textures via touch, follow and respond to the movements of what is already there to get a kinaesthetic sense of the place. I also research the history and geography of the particular place or ‘site’, enabling an imagination of the multiple layers of life that have existed and are still existent in this place. My project is self-confessedly subjective; I can only dance from my own sensory experience and interpretative knowledge of the place. I emphasize this subjectivity, encouraging my audience to also observe and value their own inherently individual experiences of the site and the performance that happens there.

The performances I make are outcomes of the improvisational locating dances practiced regularly in a site for several weeks, and are more stylized, structured events to offer these ideas and experiences to an audience. For my performance *Immersion/Excursion: Killeai*, I guided the audience on a walk into an old farm property in Eltham, Victoria, which is now part of public parkland. I talked about my experiences of dancing at this site, of sensing the spirit and character of a colonial woman, her family life, joys, hardships and grievances of living in a then-isolated place, her imposition of European cultural customs and proprieties onto this wild, foreign landscape, and my imaginings of the effects on her of this landscape after a lifetime of familiarization with it. I told them about my discoveries made while researching with local historical groups, that there had been a certain Beatrice Morrison who had lived there from her girlhood, then as a mother of six and widow, until she was a grandmother of many, and eventually died there. I interspersed Beatrice’s story with my observations of birds, insects and animals of the area, ecological information gleaned from a local naturalist, recent events such as the helicopter I had seen whilst dancing at the site that was searching for the body of a man who drowned in the Yarra River that week, and occasional snippets about the earlier indigenous inhabitation of the land, such as food sources abundant in the area.

My talking about the place was interwoven with dances in the various sections of the property we entered: in my ripped 1900s costume covered with ash, I fluctuated between being myself in this present moment—responding to birdcalls, movement of wind in the trees, textures of grass, static buzz of neighbouring electrical towers, and aeroplanes passing overhead—and imagining I was dancing the spirit of Mrs Morrison—playing as a child in her European-style garden (which remains, dishevelled now, amidst the native bush), as a mother surrounded by a gaggle of needy children in her ‘house’ (which is no longer there, it was levelled six years ago), and as an elderly woman/almost-ghost, looking out at the electrical towers and remembering the
place before they were there. All the while she is drawn, distracted from her practiced civilized-ness, to physically blend with her surrounds, ‘melting’ into the tune of birdcalls and sway of wind. Her European garden, farm and customs have obviously sculpted the landscape, but my dance asks and imagines: how did the land inscribe itself upon her?

I also referenced a sentimental, nostalgic archetype of Pioneering Woman, singing Waltzing Matilda into the echoey water tank, chasing and killing an imaginary snake to keep her children safe from the threats of the wilderness. (This is where the ‘Sheila’ bit comes in!) I tried to re-focus the laughably flawed story of ‘Australian His-story’ from which women have of course traditionally been excluded, placed in similar low/non-status as native Australians and immigrants (such as the Chinese on the goldfields) or, at best, background to the persistent colonial image of the Heroic Bushman as the heart of Australia’s character. Some of the great images allocated by this history (and still lingering in our culture today) to the pioneering woman include the nagging kill-joy/enemy to man’s freedom, and the weak and going-mad in the harsh bush world. Mrs Morrison’s story illustrated quite a different picture, of a capable, independent woman who was however not so stoic or unemotional as to be unaffected by her surroundings.

Randomly traversing temporal zones, morphing between various ages—maiden, mother, crone, ghost—she becomes all times at once, acknowledging the place in its many stages of evolution from cultivated and active family home to its current state of returning to bushland. My body shifted between hints of civilized character, gestural action, and qualities of the surrounding natural world, treating all with equal attention. Sometimes I am Gretel in sensing, dancing performative mode; sometimes as vocal tour guide; other times I am Beatrice Morrison in her various stages; and other times I am open to the other, perhaps even older spirits of the land to dance through me (and occasionally I did feel moved by these ancient forces).

By my cutting up of Beatrice’s narrative with information from various discourses—ecological, historical, philosophical and sensorial/kinaesthetic—delivered in varying forms of expression—dance, spoken language, written language—I do not give the audience the easy satisfaction of viewing a linear narrative of a singular, stable character. I also give the audience the uncomfortable task of negotiating their own place or position, locating themselves with(in) the place and performance. I introduce the event by telling them that they are responsible for where they stand or sit in relation to the site and to me (and this keeps changing because we walk around the area), and also for what they perceive. I encourage them to look at the eagle flying overhead, if we are lucky enough to see one, rather than feeling obliged by ‘normal performance etiquette’ to keep their focus on my dance. This sort of adventure is a rather unsettling challenge to the mainly urban-dwelling whitefella audience that attended the event. They have to deal with insects, wind, sun, scratchy (possibly hay-fever-inducing) grass, and more insects. They have to walk up quite a steep hill. They have to surrender to not knowing where I am taking them or how I am going to ‘be’ in relation to them (with my shifty persona of tour-guide to spirit-channelling, animalistic dancer!). They do not get to be a
passive audience in neat, comfortable rows of seats, securely distanced from the ‘entertainment’; on the contrary, they may suffer the embarrassment of sitting or standing somewhere that suddenly becomes the ‘stage’, as I step into their chosen viewing area.

All this is of course not intended as punishment for my civilized audience, but offers them opportunity to open their senses to the land they are living in/on, and participate, physically immerse in it. It invites them to pay attention to what they pay attention to. I am performing with the place, and the audience members are active participants in the event, and thus temporarily part of the place as well. I am performing a dance of location, whilst they are also in a process of locating—relating to their surrounds. (This is not activism but active art!)

This style of performance has at least as much relation to Installation Art (such as Ann Hamilton’s elaborate, immersive creations), or land artists’ interventions that draw attention to the pre-existing place itself (Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy, Chris Drury, to name a few), as it does to theatre or dance traditions. Site-specific performance could be said to be having a small resurgence in Australia, with other artists, including Jill Orr, BoneMap and Ilan Abrahams, similarly combining concept and body with site.

My performance draws upon multiple moments from the past and hopes to bring to the fore the continuing existence of all past moments and this present experience—the presence of all of us here—as part of this place, as held by this place. I am becoming very interested in the indigenous Australian notion of Country enduring, as discussed by Stephen Muecke in his recent book Ancient and Modern.4 I attempted to embody this exploration with my recent work, Blasted Away.

In Blasted Away I performed on a wharf along the bank of the Yarra River, in metropolitan Melbourne, at a site that was once a waterfall and important river crossing and meeting point for Aboriginal tribes. The reef of rock across the river had divided the saltwater from the fresh water, hence playing a crucial role in the Europeans choosing to settle and build Melbourne city where it is (with fresh drinking water just upstream). However, very few people in Melbourne now are aware that it ever existed, because the waterfall/rocks got blasted away with dynamite in the 1880s to make way for a shipping channel (having long since polluted the freshwater anyway), and a bridge was built where the falls had been: Queen’s Bridge. I wore a smart little suit and strutted out of the corporate district of Melbourne at five o’clock with all the other office workers rushing to catch public transport home. The audience watched from under a rail bridge beside the river, with the thunderous roar of trains above their heads. They were guided to follow me across the busy road, as I slipped into a slower focus to haul large white polystyrene objects, attached by rope to mooring posts, out of the river and place them on the wharf: a cross, clock, the Queen of England and a Coke bottle... Gifts of the White Man to this ‘new’ continent, who had landed at this very point to claim it as his own (or the Queen’s).

I did some violent, self-manipulating movements, became a drunk who inhabits the wharf by night, climbed onto the bridge and followed and echoed the gestures of passers-by, and later I ‘became’ the waterfall. Still in my suit, I
imagined the rippling of rapids beginning in my legs as a minimal sensation and gradually building to take over the movement of my whole body. I moved with this image to the sounds of the place in the present moment: trains, traffic, ferries. At the climax of this movement, a video image of a waterfall was projected onto the bridge and the sound of rushing water was heard as I retreated. When the sound and image faded, I was standing on the wharf with a rope around my waist, leaning from a mooring post, wavering ever so slightly.

I tried to refer with these actions to the multiple layers of life going on at the site, with an intention to remind city slickers racing by of the many histories that in some way still linger at that particular point, still perceptible amidst or beneath the corporate, commercial mayhem. That ‘this too shall pass’, yet also be incorporated into the fabric of this place. Movement material was gathered from improvisations at the geographic site, my imagination of the previous landscape and responses to the ‘site’ of researching the European invasion and forcible erasure and manipulation of the land and its people.

As I have hopefully demonstrated, site-specific performance-making as a method of inquiry involves weaving ideas, perception and issues into both the form and content of my performance of place. This process has led me to encounter such struggles as my own identity as a White Sheila trying to ‘dance the Australian landscape’, how to actively engage my whitefella audience in/with the land/place/site, and some of the uncomfortable questions associated with these relations.

Endnotes


Bibliography


Gretel Taylor has worked as an independent performance-maker and dancer in Australia since 1996. She is currently undertaking a PhD project through Victoria University (supervised by Dr Elizabeth Dempster), entitled ‘Locating: Place and the Moving Body’.