Embodying Places: Making Meaning in Performance

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University, Perth, 2012
I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

Larissa Pryce
There is no creation without place.
(Edward Casey, The Fate of Place 16)
Abstract

This thesis develops a poetics and practice of place for contemporary performance. A poetics of place explores ways of knowing and making place. It must be prepared to chart new pathways and refresh habitual perspectives. In this thesis, performance poetics involves taking steps toward questioning how it might be possible to rethink place/s anew. A poetics invested in ways of perceiving and making sense of the place-world also, by necessity, needs to consider current conditions and the difficult questions that affect us all (although in very different ways) living in the 21st century where problems and issues concerning place and ‘placelessness’ remain largely unresolved.

Underpinning this poetics are particular ways of thinking about place informed by perspectives from philosophy, phenomenology, geography, history and cultural and critical theory. I draw on a range of place-thinkers, including Edward Casey, Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Carter to explicate a performance poetics sensitive to the inhabiting of place/s. Specifically, it is Casey’s philosophy of place, and his notion of implacement, that is of particular significance as I work towards developing a framework for thinking about and engaging with place/s in performance. Investigating implaced and embodied experience are central to the kinds of critical speculation which, in pursuing the aims of this thesis, I argue, can potentially open up a diverse range of distinct experiences between body and mind, person and place, self and world.

The explorations this thesis generates around ideas of place and ‘placelessness’ have currency in an increasingly fragmented, globalised world. Rather than accepting the negative aspects of ‘placelessness’ and displacement I explore these ideas through detailed analyses of some recent examples of performance and performance research. The responses gleaned from these analyses aim to provoke reflection on past legacies, present conditions as well as the future implications of being in place/s as part of contributing to an awareness of the full significance and importance of this phenomenon. This investigation of place through performance builds a framework
for ‘reading’ place/s that calls for other ways of understanding or coming to grips with what it means to inhabit places today.
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Introduction
Points of Departure
This thesis is a critical and creative exploration of place-making in performance. It investigates ways of embodying places, and the kinds of questions this can potentially raise in the context of creative research. The critical value of my investigation into place/s is that it calls for re-thinking one’s own relationship to place as well as considering the wider implications of what it means to inhabit places. Living in this globalized, technologically developed, socio-cultural world as a creative practitioner and human being means examining the implications and consequences of human inhabitancy. Our existence on this earth raises many issues, and in recent years has taken on a renewed significance with new paradigms emerging in Performance Studies which aim to articulate the changing nature of human interactions to and with place.

I argue for ways of seeing, and being in, place/s that can deepen awareness and encourage self-reflexive thinking about the interconnectedness between people and places. This is demonstrated through analysis of embodied modes of contemporary performance practice in terms of the kinds of meanings and responses they can potentially invoke, for both the performer/s and audience/s. Performance Studies offers important insights into the role of places in our everyday lives. I use the concept of inhabitation in this thesis to develop a theoretical and practical framework for place-making that draws attention to the lived embodied experience of being in place.

The inspiration for undertaking research into ‘place’ and ‘inhabitation’ came from my experience as a workshop participant in Triple Alice 1 as part of the Triple Alice project led by Tess de Quincey (see Chapter 2). This project was conceived as a series of three performance laboratories taking place over a three year period in 1999, 2000 and 2001. This performance laboratory, located geographically in the Central Desert of Australia, offered a complexly nuanced experience of how place and space are intimately connected to an embodied way of understanding the act of being in place. It was by training in Body Weather that workshop participants were

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1 “Being in place” is a term I use throughout the thesis to invoke a sense of the intentionality (and inseparable nature) which underscores the relationship between human beings and places. My use of this term shifts in emphasis from “being in place”, “being-in-place”, and “being-in-place”, as I draw attention to specific aspects of the relationship or to reinforce its historical usage. The idea implicit in the term “being in place” is influenced by the philosophical understanding of “being-in-the-world”, an expression that Edward Relph claims “enfolds a wealth of meaning and subtlety” (Geographical 17).
given a framework for experiencing the desert, through an experimental approach that focused on the role of the senses and perception. Habitual ways of seeing – and being in – place and space were challenged by participating in the framing and focusing of the desert context through elements of the practice which integrated critical lessons for opening, deepening and expanding an awareness of being in the place-world.

Undergoing the rigorous training and exploration of desert terrain for three weeks fundamentally changed my embodied experience of self and my perception of place and space. I returned to Perth, after *Triple Alice 1*, with a tangible sense of desert place permeating my fleshly being.

After *Triple Alice* I wanted to engage with, as well as critically understand, how the experience opened up my being. Although I had participated in some training workshops of Body Weather and Butoh practice prior to *Triple Alice*, the experience of the Body Weather laboratory in the desert evoked, for me, a radical shift in my relationship to the creative possibilities of embodied performance practice and raised questions concerning how embodied perception can be used to connect “the” body to places and spaces in the world. However, in light of the life-changing experience offered up by the *Triple Alice* project, it was difficult (at the time) to find a language, in terms of a theoretical framework, that could capture a sense of the felt, lived dimensions of being in, and exploring, the desert. The embodied experience was not something that I thought could be simply explained. There was an embattled quality to my writing in trying to make sense of the experience through the use of critical theory. In the months that followed being-there in the desert, I began to experience ‘after-effects’ that evoked the embodying of ‘familiar’ places through the activation of memory, imagination and day-dreams. The force of these affects induced, for me, the beginnings of a personal and cultural *awakening* (after Walter Benjamin) which

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2 After *Triple Alice 1*, I corresponded by email with several theatre and performance theorists and practitioners who had participated in the writers’ workshop component of the laboratory and/or the Body Weather workshop component. There was, at least initially, a dialogue which opened up regarding the use of theoretical frames in order to make sense of the event. While different theoretical approaches were utilised by theorists and practitioners in formulating a mode of response to the event, many of these frameworks did not capture a sense of the embodied experience for me. I am aware, however, that *Triple Alice 2* and *Triple Alice 3* were constitutive of other modes of response from theorists and practitioners.

3 This raised, for me, the issue of writing about an event after it has happened.
has led to undertaking a physical journey into places.\textsuperscript{4} Journeying in, through, across, away from and back to places has become a guide for both the form and the process undertaken in writing this thesis and acts as a mode of response to my experience of \textit{Triple Alice}.

The \textit{Triple Alice} project raised, for me, many interesting questions which coalesced around issues concerning the relationship between experience and its interpretation, the ownership of the experience through scholarly forms of representation, the representation of place in performance, the purpose or value of the work, as well as the documentation of the event in terms of how, what and why performance is recorded. The relevance of these questions, I believe, are that they act as a guide in terms of how a cultural practice is defined and the kinds of responses that can potentially be invoked from those who participate in them. The ongoing interrogation of the \textit{Triple Alice} project by both creative practitioners and theorists, affirms the value of its contribution, especially in terms of how cultural practice can offer alternative perspectives towards seeing, and being in, Australian space.\textsuperscript{5} The \textit{Triple Alice} project has had a lasting impact on my own sensibilities as a creative practitioner and theorist. In many ways, it has led me to pursue what it means to inhabit places, as well as, how places inhabit us.

In pursuing my inquiry into inhabitation this has led to an experiential and conceptual understanding of place which derives from the creative collaboration between theory and practice and from the cross-fertilisation of diverse art forms. This is in keeping with the need to change and develop new perspectives from which to understand performance as the changing landscape of our digital global culture, the Internet age and the creation of new performance technologies cultivates an environment that is rapidly transforming how people culturally perceive and interact with places and spaces. Finding ways to elucidate a sense of the connections, interrelations and movements between people and places is at the heart of my inquiry, and frames my way of understanding ideas about place and inhabitation for

\textsuperscript{4} This interpretation of ‘journeying’, which is linked to Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘aura’, is discussed by Rojek, \textit{Indexing}.

\textsuperscript{5} Some of these contributions include McAuley, \textit{Unstable}; McAuley, \textit{Body}; M. Anderson; and Vedel, \textit{Dancing}. Recent discussion about Triple Alice includes the “informal conversation”, \textit{Triple Alice: from where to where?}, Performance Space Clubhouse, Sydney, 25 February 2010.
performance. In this thesis I develop a theoretical and practical framework that focuses on exploring human connections to and with place. I draw on key ideas about place and the body from philosophy, phenomenology, geography, critical and social theory as well as performance theory and practice. These ideas form an interdisciplinary landscape that informs my approach for exploring place/s which I describe as ‘poetics’. A place poetics is a way of thinking about and engaging with places that aims to open, deepen and expand an awareness of the place-world (and its importance) in our lives through creative practice.

Anne Buttimer, offers a useful way of thinking about this approach, when she writes that poetics

denotes the evoking of geographic awareness, critical reflection, discovery, and creativity. It elicits curiosity and insight about relationships between humanity and the physical earth in themes such as culture and landscape, sense of place, nature symbolism, or the history of ideas. … The poetic dimension should ideally address the critical and emancipatory interests of all other practices. (Geography 15)

A poetic approach is important to my thesis in constituting ways of understanding, participating in, and developing connections to places. In this context, the poetic dimension offers a platform for thinking about place (and its evocation) as both a category of practice and a category of analysis. Poetics are tools of analysis that I use as a way towards knowing and making sense of place, and which I explore by engaging with the embodied experience of place and its interpretation. A poetics of

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6 This is not to say, quoting Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, that such an approach simply “reflects some kind of reality or truth” that I have discovered about place, but rather “that it creates reality and gives meaning to the world” (9). For a detailed discussion of some recent perspectives which foreground “ways of” conducting creative arts research, see Grierson and Brearley.

7 Derek Gregory writes, in Geographical Imaginations, that Pierce Lewis believes “[t]he ability to evoke people, places, and landscapes is an essential prerequisite to analysis but it is not a substitute for it”. Gregory believes that evocation, and he uses the example of moral-aesthetic sensibilities in works by E. P. Thompson, “need[s] to be inscribed within critical analysis; they are not thresholds or supplements to intellectual inquiry but essential moments within it” (83).

8 The relationship between experience and interpretation is written about by Sandra Kemp, and it is an idea I explore further particularly in relation to the way that the body contributes towards the process of creation and how this influences the ways in which audiences respond to, or ‘read’ a performance work. The body is an important part of my poetics for place-making in performance. For more information regarding some contemporary approaches that work with the ‘lived’ body as a way
place performs a critical function that draws attention to experiences of beings and places with implications for how we then make sense of our own place in the world.\textsuperscript{9} Performance is an art form that can further enhance this critical function by drawing on a range of aesthetic mechanisms with which to offer recipients new and multiple perspectives of the place-world. In this light I consider how performance contributes towards making sense of place, by examining the critical and creative strategies and practices used in some recent contemporary works that explore experiences of being in/out of place.

I engage poetics at a fundamental level, evoking the poetic (felt, lived) dimensions of the body to gain access to those multiply-defined dimensions of human existence thematized as ‘senses of place’, ‘belonging’, and ‘identity’ that our relationships with place/s potentially yield. While these global themes have broad interdisciplinary appeal, they also form rich sites of exploration in performance dedicated to place research and inquiry.\textsuperscript{10} These are themes that come under scrutiny in my investigation of place in this thesis. I examine the interrelationship between place, belonging and identity as part of a dynamic and ongoing process informed by embodied modes of inhabiting place/s. I draw insights from place-making practices (such as walking) which engender a conscious awareness of being in place, and explore ways of finding meaning in the process of making connections to places.

In each chapter I foreground how performance works to deepen and enrich an experience of place. My research enquiry explicates a creative and critical process for engaging with place/s that I believe can be useful for performance theory and practice. It aims to foster an ethos of interconnectedness with place/s as a necessary precondition for creatively engaging with them.\textsuperscript{11} It also proposes how, as theorists towards knowing and making sense of human experience, see Steinman; and Todres. They both offer practical applications of phenomenological concepts and approaches towards humans making meaning in creative and real-world contexts.

\textsuperscript{9} For some examples regarding forms of poetic modes of response in constituting the lived, experiential dimensions of place, see F. M. Vanclay, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw.

\textsuperscript{10} Examples of performance works that explore aspects of this terrain include Bubbling Tom by Mike Pearson, Under Siege by Mona Hatoum, and One Square Foot: tree by Deirdre Heddon. For analyses of these works, see respectively, Heathfield, Small 172-185, Pearson, In Comes I; Ahmed et al 59-90; Heddon, Thousands, Mock 153-176.

\textsuperscript{11} I use the term ‘place’ (singular) to reflect the conceptual configuration where I foreground the idea of place as distinct from the places (plural) themselves with all of the concrete dimensions. This suggests a doubled kind of circumlocution in regards to place in terms of trying to bring unity to the
and practitioners, we might responsively consider our relationships with place/s, how they can be approached as sites of reflection, change and transformation, and how modes of performance that take us into places can potentially enrich our lives and the landscapes we inhabit.¹²

Each chapter in this thesis marks a stage in my own ongoing developing practice for inhabiting places. Each is an accumulation of making and knowing place and speaks of the forms that I became interested in as part of the process of the philosophical and methodological investigation of place. I explore, examine and analyse specific modes of inhabiting place through my own creative engagement as a participant and spectator in practices such as Body Weather, contemporary walking practice, urban dérives, and ethnographic fieldwork, a diversity of forms which have influenced the shape and direction of the journey undertaken.

To help situate and explain the methodological and theoretical framework of the thesis Chapter 1 offers a theoretical map for the journey. Philosophical perspectives are explicated to assist a way of understanding and thinking about what it is to inhabit places with the body, and the forms this takes throughout the thesis. The chapter discusses some of the conceptual ideas integral for understanding my poetic approach towards place. In particular I have sought out notions of place and embodiment via the philosophical writings of Edward Casey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Martin Heidegger and Paul Carter. Together these ideas constitute a topo-analytic framework that is useful both in theory and practice for it can be used to extend the reader/spectator’s knowledge and understanding of the significance of being-in-places within the performance experience and the wider place-world.¹³

¹² Place-making calls for an awareness of local circumstances and their connection to a broader schema in the place-world. As part of my investigation into place I am interested in how creative encounters with the place-world affect the imagining of it. For more information on this, see Jill Bennett.

¹³ I do not wish the reader to assume that there is a hierarchical relationship between theory and practice. Instead there is a sense of dynamic interplay between my practice and a range of theoretical frames which have developed over time. I did not set out to engage in practice with a theoretical armament at the beginning of this research yet I cannot undo the theory that I now know. Therefore theory shapes and assists with an understanding and way of reading my own work and the work of other place-based performance practitioners.
In Chapter 2 I focus on particular aspects of the *Triple Alice* project, and how it led me on a path for thinking about the wider implications of place. It is a case study account, in the form of auto-ethnography, and offers some reflections on the Body Weather laboratory workshop component drawing attention to the embodied and emplaced experience of being in the Australian desert. I foreground some of the ways in which this project offers a model for thinking about, and engaging with place and space. At the core of the Body Weather training practice is an ethos which does not offer an ‘answer’, but rather an ‘opening’ up to the possibilities of the task of creative cultural practice. The opening that occurs, acts as a vehicle of contemplation (or mediation for the individual) for thinking about how place-making in creative practice can contribute towards knowledge production in ways that open or evoke a consciousness of place through the sensory and experiential dimensions of our being. I argue that a different relationship between self and place emerges and how this can potentially draw attention to where dis-connections between places and beings exist.

Chapter 3 contributes towards this discussion as I analyse two recent examples of performance, *Void: Kellerberrin Walking* by Mark Minchinton and *Breathing for Biago Walking (A Walk from Perth to Kellerberrin)* by Domenico de Clario, in which walking is practiced as a critical strategy and creative mode for interrogating the living remnants of personal history and memory. These walks inhabit particular tracts of land in Western Australia as a way of bringing to light a sense of some of the complexities underpinning (indigenous and migrant) relationships to this country. In my analyses, I argue that walking practice is a form of identity-making that can open up a dialogue between past and present with important implications for future imaginings of Australian place and space. Walking opens up the possibility for revisioning a sense of relationship between self, past, present and place. More importantly, I interrogate how this embodied approach is used as a strategy for poetic and political modes of writing by the performers to produce reflexive accounts that engage with the process of reading places. Walking and writing entwine giving shape to a practice that aims to interpret the experience of embodying places.

Performance can reinvigorate familiar lenses and frames through which people know, interact and see places. In light of contemporary understandings of place and placelessness, Chapter 4 brings a critical awareness to ways of re-framing
place(lessness) within an urban context. I discuss these ideas via analytical framing shaped by the writings of Casey and Jean-François Lyotard. Using these ideas, I pose questions about how we might think differently about the places we ‘know’ or are familiar with in the context of our habitual everyday lives. I consider these questions in response to some recent examples of contemporary performance work, highlighting some of the strategies explored in the practice of *Wrights & Sites*, focusing specifically on their “mis-guides”. Although it is important to understand a practice by being cognizant of how it works, it is also important to participate in the framing and focusing of places where we live and intrinsically are a part of. Therefore, I respond by writing from my own experience as a participant in *Strange Strolls*, an audio-exploration curated by Perdita Phillips that unfolded in and around the city of Fremantle.

Inhabiting places, for me, is a dialectical question that has taken on the form and process of a journey (as noted above). My thesis is in part a documentation of this lived, embodied process with the expression of ideas and practices that resonated for me. In the next three chapters I explicate some of the meaningful encounters with places that I have experienced, and the affects they have had upon my ways of seeing and responding to being in places. A close reading of places emerges in my analyses, to establish content and context, and draw insights from my own bodily responses to offer a mode of response that traces the presence of the body and the interplay between body and place.

In Chapter 5 I offer an account of my own investigation into place, which is my contribution to place, in which I take up the interconnection between being in place and interpretation. I explore places as a critical and creative resource for situating myself in relation to practice and its articulation, and as a way of thinking through my connections to places. My exploration unfolds in and around the urban context of Perth, engendering a reflexive awareness of different kinds of places, and leads to my encounter with ‘heritage places’. I reflect on key aspects of this exploratory process such as the complexities of finding, and negotiating with, heritage places amidst the impact of wider, global forces. This becomes the catalyst for undertaking a personal journey beyond Perth to explore Cooper’s Mill, a heritage place located on an island in a regional locale. Undertaking fieldwork at this place generates research and the
collection of historical documents and histories. This leads to a consideration of the relationship between heritage practice (in this area of performance) and the discourses in which they participate.

Chapter 6 documents some of the forms and processes involved in researching and inhabiting Cooper’s Mill. It also considers the ways in which these forms and processes inform my creative response for embodying this specific place and its island-bound context. I explore the interdependent relationship between this place and the processes of making a performance work. I perform aspects of my experimental practice and processes that underlie my engagement with heritage, history and place. The performance is recorded on DVD, and Chapter 7 outlines some of the elements of the practice which feature in the performance.

I conclude with some reflections on the contribution of this thesis to ways of understanding and theorising the importance of place in creative research. The framework I have developed shows how theory and practice together provide ways of thinking about, and engaging with, concepts of place, as a means to enhance understandings of place in relation to the people who experience them. I focus on how my thesis explores and develops modes of inhabitation in contemporary performance through place-making practices that foreground the role of the body in constituting meaningful interactions with places as they are felt and lived by both performer/s and audience. In an age of globalisation amidst a growing sense of placelessness, it is imperative to continue a critique of existing modes of inhabitation, and to find creative ways of responding to place that can potentially transform how the person-place relationship is realised, enacted and embodied. What I propose in this thesis is a performance poetics that aims to pursue some critical and creative pathways towards thinking about what it is to inhabit places.