

The Senses and the Sense of Place

Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place through Different Senses and Lenses

Edited by Frank Vanclay, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw
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Making Sense of Place is an edited collection of papers presented at the 'Senses of Place' conference held in April 2006 at Hobart. The conference organisers took the familiar term 'sense of place' as its central theme, and aimed to extend its scope. As the book's editors explain:

The conference, with its by-line of 'exploring concepts and expressions of place through different senses and lenses', sought to expand understandings of place by broadening the basis on which it is usually considered. A sense of place can be in the form of a cognitive consciousness (or intellectual abstraction), but full appreciation of the meaning of place can only be experienced through the senses—the smell, taste, feel, sound, sight and spiritual dimensions of place that we experience, whether we are aware of them or not. (vi)

Human centred processes by which places are encountered, imagined and represented are the focus of attention in this book. Chapters are arranged into four parts: 'Narratives on the experience of place', 'Understanding Indigenous senses of place', 'Making Places' and 'Analysing and utilising the sense of place'. Supplied with the book is a short DVD presentation of conference participants talking about their own relationships with places. *Making Sense of Place* is richly illustrated, enabling a better sense of the places under discussion.

Interpretations of the central theme vary widely. In his chapter 'Places of silence', historian and geographer Mike Gulliver considers the history of those 'deaf places of silence' known only to deaf people. He tells an extraordinary story of a vigorous deaf community in the late nineteenth century struggling for survival against the efforts of 'oralists' to eradicate sign language. Other chapters explore various patterns of human engagement with places in Australia and elsewhere. Greg Lehman, a descendent of the Trawulwuy people of northeast Tasmania, reflects on the practice of welcoming outsiders to country. Lehman locates the practice in its local historical context, and calls for critical reflection on the meaning and purpose of this tradition, its potential to acknowledge local histories of colonial invasion and Aboriginal death. Writer Merrill Findlay, in

correspondence with the book's aim to foreground cultural processes, writes of the power of storytelling to reshape places and lives:

No continent can be invaded, no massacre committed, no abuse perpetrated, no people subjugated, vilified or discriminated against, no land degraded, no wetlands drained, no climate changed, no species made extinct and no creeks or rivers despoiled by humans—unless stories make it so. The reverse is also true: people can be empowered, abuse ameliorated, wrongs righted, pain acknowledged, differences reconciled, land returned to its traditional owners, ecosystems restored and endangered species allowed to flourish—but first we need the stories to unleash these possibilities. (19)

Despite the intention of conference organisers and the book's editors to focus attention on the embodied and intellectual processes of human engagement with place, common threads are somewhat difficult to detect. The variety of perspectives and place related topics may be intentional. In the introductory chapter, Frank Vanclay explains that he and fellow editors made a selection from the many conference presentations that gave 'a broad base by which to understand the concepts of place and sense of place'. I wonder whether the chosen topic for the conference and book may have undermined possibilities for coherence. The term 'sense of place' is perhaps too loose and general a concept to meaningfully gather thought and discussion. Most chapters are, nevertheless, individually engaging and rewarding.

From the perspective of the ecological humanities, wherein connectivities between humanity and an active, expressive nature are often of prime interest, the framing of this book in terms of 'sense of place' and its making by humans is problematic. All places are defined by individual histories and lively particularities. Every place has a unique character. To speak of a 'sense of place' seems to honour not place, but the sensing human who has taken time to notice a place. Such a human centred approach is evident in the DVD presentation supplied inside the back cover of *Making Sense of Place*. In this artful and engaging production, individual conference participants talk mostly in abstract terms of their engagement with places. Names of places are not spoken, their located particularities obscured. Script floats across the screen: 'a showground', 'a forest', 'a bush shack'. To corral our concerns within human minds and bodies, to maintain an established cultural attitude of a pronounced opposition between people and the rest of nature, is a dangerous stance, argue scholars in the ecological humanities. At a time of global ecological crisis, when we need urgently to attend to the wellbeing of places and their living communities, we should take care not to reinforce habits of division.

Scope for escaping human centredness and for turning towards the particularities inherent in the rest of nature is emphasised by some of the authors in *Making*

Sense of Place. 'The land is always singing' observes sound artist and composer Ros Bandt. 'The wind is alive with the spirits of the dead, and the plants and animals are in constant communication with us about both our lives and theirs' writes Trawulwuy descendant Greg Lehman. Anthropologist and bi-lingual interpreter Diana James describes a profound transformation in her 'ontological sense of place' on hearing a song of the Ngintaka, the perentie lizard, inside a rock shelter on Anangu lands. Diana offers hope that humanity can indeed imagine and embed itself, responsibly and responsively, within dynamic patterns of history, life and place:

I am connected to the perentie lizard man, to the land he formed, to the generations of people who hold, tell, sing and dance that story. The land is singing and I am a note in the chorus of that song. (118)

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