Sense of Place: Transatlantic Perspectives on Place Attachment, Identity and Ecology in Literature, Art and Education

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From Romantic Pantheism to Eco-Cosmopolitanism: Sense of Place, Belonging and Environmental Consciousness

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Sense of place: dimensions of meaning

'Sense of Place' is a deceptively simple phrase. The bewildering plurality of nuances of meaning which the briefest of internet searches for a definition reveals is due not least to the currency which the term enjoys across disciplines ranging from geography, sociology and anthropology to literature and the arts, each with its own perspectives and concerns. It is encountered in environmental philosophy (above all phenomenology, but also ethics and aesthetics), psychology and education, not to mention interdisciplinary fields such as urban studies and memory studies.

Phenomenologists, who study things as they appear in our experience, the ways we experience things, and the meanings things have in our experience, probably understand sense of place in the broadest way: for them it is an innate faculty arising out of the embodiment of human existence, which connects us to the world, and is possessed in some degree by everyone. Place is an integral part of all lived experience: being is always "being somewhere", as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Malpas have argued (see Malpas 1999). Geographers, who are concerned with the Earth, the distribution of its natural and human phenomena, and how they have come to be, use the term in different ways. In the 1970s, Yi-Fu Tuan wrote of the importance of place for identity, and of the significance of place belonging and relationship to place for subject constitution and wellbeing. Place, writes Tuan, is a center of "felt value" (Tuan 1977: 4). However, as Edward Relph, author of another foundational text calling for the defence of places in an age of creeping placelessness, notes (*Place and Placelessness*, 1976), sense of place has come to signify for geographers a faculty which can be enhanced through critical attention to what males places distinctive. An educational goal in Geography, Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design, it is "a learned skill for critical

environmental awareness that is used to grasp what the world is like and how it is changing" (Relph 1997: 208): "A well-developed geographical sense of place is one that looks carefully at local idiosyncrasies, keeps an open mind about them, and then sees through these to the larger patterns and processes they signify." (p. 212) Meanwhile, historians such as J. B. Jackson stress that both place and sense of place emerge and are subject to change over time. Sense of place "is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom" (Jackson 1994: 5).

Alongside their private significance for individuals, places possess shared collective meanings which provide a degree of objectivity and continuity. In Setha Low's anthropological understanding, "place attachment" is "the symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual's and group's understanding of and relation to the environment" (Low/ Altman 1992: 2). The features of a place which make up its identity, as perceived by local inhabitants and visitors, are in large part cultural: whatever roots the meaning of a place has in the experience of the physical surroundings, the impression is ultimately determined by an accretion of cultural associations, by how the place has been written about by poets, novelists and historians, and portrayed in art and music. It is no accident that the term 'places of memory' plays a central role in theories of collective memory. Cultures may be conceived of as an inventory of shared places with their associated values.

The variety of usage of 'sense of place' across this range of disciplines, in which it is sometimes loosely employed as a synonym for place-attachment, place-belonging and even place-identity, is not the only reason why 'sense of place' is difficult to define. While its primary meaning is the subjective feel which an individual or group has of a place, their perception of it, the term is also frequently used to designate supposedly objective qualities of places, which exist independently of the observer. This duality of meaning can be traced back to the Romantics. Place played a central role in the reconceptualization of nature as a "dynamic, self-generative unity-in-diversity, of which humans are integrally a part" (Rigby 2004: 53), with which the Romantics responded to the industrial revolution. The standardisation which accompanied the rational material exploitation of natural resources in the eighteenth century was perceived as a threat to the identity and integrity of places, peoples and

individuals. Harking back to Classical culture, the Romantic concept of sense of place implied a *genius loci*, or spirit intrinsic to a place. In its origins, sense of place was thus a reassertion of an animist worldview. The Greek and Roman notion of a divine or semi-divine being personifying a place, which had survived as a mythical trace in the archives of cultural memory, mediated through folktales and song, was an important source of inspiration for Romantic writers. Transferring religious feeling to the realm of the aesthetic, the *topos* of 'spirit of place', whether associated with a specific landscape, or understood as a local manifestation of the greater spirit of nature, became a vehicle by means of which nature as a whole was reinvested with the aura of intrinsic value which it was losing in commercial reality. Out of the notion of a *genius loci* emerged the idea of sense of place as individual human receptivity to the natural environment. Romantic poets regarded themselves as 'topographers of the sacred' (Rigby), tracking the trace of a numinous other in landscapes which were interpreted cognitively as symbolic manifestations of the divine and whose essence was simultaneously felt in the flesh.

Something of this Romantic notion of intuitive perception of the spirit of a place by particular individuals with a developed aesthetic faculty still resonates in today's usage of the term 'sense of place', at least in English. It is objective inasmuch as it is grounded in the external physical characteristics of a place which distinguish it from others. But it is simultaneously subjective in being the product of processes privileging certain characteristics over others, in order to define a discrete entity where there is in reality multiplicity and open borders. Sense of place is therefore in common parlance not so much the matter of factual knowledge which professional geographers and architects speak of, as one of psychic attunement with a place through the emotions and memories it arouses in the observing subject, whether these memories are collective or merely personal. The duality of cognition and emotion present in sense of place is brought out well by the sociologist David Hummon, who has described it as

> people's subjective perceptions of their environments and their more or less conscious feelings about those environments. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretive perspective *on* the environment and an emotional reaction *to* the environment [....]. Sense of place involves a personal *orientation* toward place, in which one's understanding of place and one's feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning. (Hummon 1992: 6; emphasis in original)

The accretion of associations of the phrase over time and its enrichment through intellectual debates are to an extent culture-specific. ‘Place’ is one of the nature-related concepts for which there is rarely a one-to-one translation in other languages (Montserrat López Mújica discusses the use of the French term ‘espace vécu’ in her contribution to this volume), and there is no exact equivalent of ‘sense of place’ in French, German or Spanish culture. The closest authentic term in Spanish, for instance (the language of four contributions to this volume), is “sentido del arraigo” (*arraigo* meaning literally ‘rootedness’, from *raiz* = ‘root’). While encompassing the physical landscape, this foregrounds belonging to the community rather than the materiality of the place. ‘Rootedness’ also suggests an unconscious condition of identification with place restricted to the indigenous or ‘native’: Tuan, who regards it as unattainable by members of western societies, therefore contrasts it with ‘sense of place’, which he sees as somsthing which can be achieved by newcomers and consciously maintained (Tuan 1980). In Germany, ‘Ortsverbundenheit’ and ‘Sinn für die Bedeutung eines Ortes’ are among a number of always only partial equivalents. One of the aims of this volume has therefore been, while reflecting on the importance of place and examining literary and artistic depictions of places on both sides of the Atlantic, to draw attention to the different historically and culturally shaped connotations of place and sense of place in countries from the USA and Canada to France, Britain, Spain and other parts of the world.

Sense of place and environmental consciousness

Both the objective and subjective elements of sense of place mentioned above are present in the usage of literary ecocritics, for whom it denotes an attentiveness to the locale including but going beyond aesthetics. Sense of place is an openness to appreciation of the characteristic features of a place, whose understanding may give insight into how people interact with their environment, and facilitate efforts to make this interaction more sustainable.

To explain this link between place and environmental awareness, it is necessary to recall the revival of interest which space and place experienced in the late 1980s in the context of postmodern social and cultural theory. David Harvey and Edward Soja, key thinkers in this ‘spatial turn’, wrote of a replacement of the privileging of time over space that had dominated philosophy for over 200 years in

the age of modernity by one of space over time in postmodernity (Soja 1989, Harvey 1990). In the years that followed, Edward Casey traced the 'loss of place' in the modern world and its reclamation in twentieth-century philosophy (Casey 1993, 1997), and Marc Augé theorized the 'non-places' (motorways, airport lounges, hospitals, offices, shopping malls, etc.) which characterise the age of 'supermodernity'.

The environmental movement, which it is often forgotten coincided with a resurgence of regional identity in the 1970s, introduced a new argument for fostering sense of place: individuals and groups sought to preserve the geological, biological, architectural and cultural character of local places and derived a sense of collective identity from doing so. Political and social, psychological and aesthetic concerns coincided with and found expression in environmental commitment. Taken to the extreme, preserving place becomes a moral imperative. The writers and environmental activists Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder are among the principal literary proponents of this philosophy of localism in the United States. Familiarity with the immediate physical environment, its natural processes and rhythms, their argument runs, is a prerequisite for awareness of environmental change and action to mitigate it. Erosion of sense of place leads to abuse of the natural environment: failure to understand the impact of decisions and actions makes it easier to externalise or defer their true, hidden costs. The view that our tendency in a globalised world to replace the concrete and local by the universal and abstract is leaving a trail of destruction has been underpinned by theories of bioregionalism (see Lynch/ Glotfelty/ Armbruster 2012) and (re-)inhabitation (see for instance Freya Mathews' conception of 'indigeneity'/ 'becoming native' (Mathews 2005: 49-63). Common to such approaches has been a reaffirmation of human embeddedness in natural systems and our vulnerability at the hands of nature.

In her book, *Space, Place and Gender* (Massey 1994), the geographer Doreen Massey introduced several important modifications in theorising our relationship with place today. Apart from exploring the gender relations of spatial belonging, she proposed that place should be conceived of as constantly changing. Space is in her words "an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" (p. 3), and place an undoubtedly significant, nevertheless only momentary stabilisation of its meaning. Like individual and national identity, which come into being over the years through a layering of interconnections with the wider world, the

identity of place must be recognised as always unfixed, contested and multiple. At the same time, Massey contended that that place should be thought of as relational, i.e. defined by its links with what lies beyond it, rather than bounded by the counterposition of one identity against another (p. 7). Problematic association of places with notions of an ‘authentic’ home to a particular population can be avoided through recognition of their multi-layering and openness to others.

Advocates of a type of environmental education based on the premise that perception of global environmental change and motivation to prevent it hinge on local knowledge have acknowledged in varying degrees this need to adapt traditional notions of place belonging to circumstances in the age of mobility, transient, multiple and shared occupancy of places. While holding that a sense of place achieved by exploring home and the local community, ecology and history, landscape and ecosystems constitutes the foundation from which to explore the global, Mitchell Thomashow questions for instance the necessity for long-term residence in a given place. (Thomashow 2002). Val Plumwood argues similarly for a place-sensitive culture which need not be tied to a single place. She suggests making journeys (of any kind) as projects of dialogical encounter with multiple places and converting them into sites of “mutual discovery and disclosure” (2002: 233).

Sense of place today must accommodate not merely the mobility of individuals and the proliferation of ‘non-places’, but also the processes of detachment from place as a result of the transformation of localities through the availability of international products and the pervasive presence of the international media which Arjun Appadurai has described as cultural consequences of globalisation (Appadurai 1996). Globalisation theory has largely superseded postmodernism, but it follows here in the footsteps of Deleuze and Guattari’s and David Harvey’s concepts of deterritorialisation and space-time compression, entailing the detachment of cultural practices from their anchoring in place and their reconfiguration in relationships with other places as well as other scales of spatial experience (Deleuze/ Guattari 1987, Harvey 1990). In the globalised world, everyday values and behaviour patterns are increasingly dislodged from their anchors in the local environment, and places are gradually losing the power to define the terms of our existence. Ulrich Beck writes of an “expropriation of the senses” by the pervasive risk in contemporary society and its impact on everyday reasoning. Risk awareness

is now based on “second-hand non-experience”, and loss of the experiential logic of thought transforms our relationship with place (Beck 1995: 55).

Ursula Heise has therefore argued that traditional place attachment has become an anachronism: ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’ is a more appropriate goal in an age when identity is more commonly defined by relations to a multiplicity of places than a singular place. Local awareness of change does not necessarily lead to enhanced consciousness of large-scale risk, and can in certain circumstances actually block perception of it. There is clearly a need for information about the larger context (which is necessarily mediated) as well as immediate sensory perception. While restoring individuals’ sense of place remains a useful tool in environmentalist practice, it is therefore “a dead end if it is understood as a founding ideological principle or as a principal didactic means of guiding individuals and communities back to nature” (Heise 2008: 39f.).

Lawence Buell has written similarly of “maladaptive sedentariness, hankering to recover the world we have lost, [and] xenophobic stigmatization of outsiders and wanderers” as dangers of place attachment and stewardship at the local level (Buell 2005: 68). We need to be suspicious of environmental criticism’s tendency to privilege experiences of platial thickness (p. 69). Unlike Heise, however, Buell develops a phenomenology of contemporary place attachment which embraces the different places most people ‘belong to’ simultaneously in one way of other today, places to which we are attached through the power of imagining alone or media-produced identification, the temporal dimension of place attachment, and the changes places are constantly undergoing. Place attachment can be a palimpsest of serial place experiences, and less personally than socially produced. Further developments in the critical redefinition of contemporary relationships with place include Kate Rigby’s argument that we should conceive of dwelling as “an achievement, something which we have to learn again and again, something which involves conscious commitment” (Rigby 2004: 11), Scott Slovic’s reflections on a transcalar thinking linking the local with the global in this volume, and Amin Maalouf and Jean Marie Le Clézio’s call for a plurality of place attachments and openness to others, which is discussed by María José Sueza (also in this volume).

Mindful of the fact that place-attachment is neither necessarily ‘natural’ nor always environmentally desirable, Yi-Fu Tuan developed the metaphor of the “cosmopolitan hearth” in his book, *Cosmos and Hearth*: we are all drawn to our

hearth, tradition, home, culture and landscape, yet in our modern world, cosmopolitan attitudes abound. We need to know places other than our own in order to appreciate what we have. Tuan stressed that moving away is natural—all persons move away from their hearth in order to develop—and precisely by moving away and seeing difference can we learn. Journeying is an essential part of knowing and self-awareness (182f.): stated in Plumwood's terms, travelling constitutes a process of mutual discovery, that of the new places and of ourselves. Tuan also noted that while many late 20th-century festivals, celebrations and rituals marking calendar and historic events promote "communality and sense of place" (p. 185), they are also staged to attract strangers and tourists, and serve to welcome the global into the local (p. 186). The question is then how sense of place is adapted to meet these challenges to its continuing relevance in an age of mobility, multilocal belonging and poly-ethnic places, and the extent to which it continues to foster care and concern for communities and environments embracing both the local and the global.

Sense of place and rootedness: transatlantic perspectives

This volume brings together essays from scholars working in Spain and the United States on the literary and artistic depiction of places and our relationship with them in a changing world. They ask on the one hand what prose and poetry, paintings and photographs, films and museums tell us about shifting forms of place attachment and belonging, and alienation from place, and on the other what part literature and art play in challenging common assumptions, opening up new perspectives, and contributing to the goals of an environmentally inflected place-based education. Places serve as settings for the constitution of social relations and relations between humankind and nature, and as Thomashow argues, stories of "inhabitation" can describe and imagine the interpenetration of species, people and landscape in places (loc 2430). Writers and artists can perform a crucial social function in evoking feelings of fear, awe and reverence, or alternatively of freedom, empowerment, joy and security, when depicting places. Adapting traditions such as the pastoral and the sublime, they can link places with ideas and values through narratives, symbols and associations, and imagine new forms of place and place identity, for instance by depicting relationships with places in other countries, times and cultures, and reflecting an understanding of place-making as an ongoing, culturally inflected

process. Place can be made imaginable as a locus of interdependence and reciprocity between humans, non-human animals, and inanimate objects.

The opening section of the volume is devoted to predominantly theoretical contributions united in addressing the use of sense of place as an educational tool. In the first essay, 'Re-scaling Geo-loyalty: Considering Expressions of Transcalar Thinking', Scott Slovic takes up the ongoing ecocritical debate on the relative value of local place attachment and cosmopolitanism. He makes a compelling argument for a 'transcalar imaginary', as a way of combating blindness to environmental change. Slovic illustrates a range of different aesthetic strategies through reference to texts, works of art and films. Esther Rey follows with 'Place Still Matters', an essay on the need for place-based education. Rey considers mid twentieth-century American writer Eudora Welty's stories and essays on place, challenging the common interpretation of Welty's images of the southern states as a bastion against global capitalism, and examines Barbara Kingsolver's recent novel *Lacuna*. She suggests both writers reflect the ambivalence of place, raise questions about movement and stasis, and explore tensions between belonging and outsiderness. Like Slovic, Rey argues that teaching literature can help create a social imaginary which promotes environmentally conscious lifestyles. María José Sueza's essay 'Amin Maalouf y Jean Marie Le Clézio o el sentido poliédrico de lugar' examines reflections on place-belonging in the work of two of France's most important contemporary intellectuals. She shows how Maalouf and Le Clézio plead for a plural and 'polyhedral' sense of place, and for an understanding of identity as a mosaic created from experiences in different countries, cities and places. Plurality of place attachment and familiarity with the cultures of the *other* are a vital basis for respect and peaceful co-existence.

The essays in the second section are concerned with examples of the literature of place. Isabel Alves writes on a classic American novel of place, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913). Alves asks how Cather evokes her childhood home in this tale of a farming family in the prairies of the mid-west. She shows how sense of place is related to movement and escape as well as rootedness and stability, and asks how reading literary depictions of places may lead us to think about our own relationships with the places that shaped us. Identifying with a place can be a starting point for a spiritual transformation resulting in a more inclusive and flexible sense of the human place on earth. Montserrat López argues that defence of place

against the forces of global modernisation has been a key feature of the work of twentieth-century French Swiss writers from Ramuz to Chappaz and Bille. Using the concept of ‘espace vécu’, or inhabited space (an approximate Francophone equivalent to ‘place’ introduced in the 1970s), she examines representations of the region of French-speaking Switzerland. Antonia Mezquita compares the notion of sense of place in works by Henry David Thoreau, the mid-twentieth-century Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, and the contemporary Spanish poet Claudio Rodríguez, discussing similarities and differences in their reflections on local belonging and the relationship between humans and nature. Rafael Ruiz writes on the depictions of urban and natural places in the late 1950s writing of the North of England novelist, Alan Sillitoe. Distinguishing between ‘descriptive’ and ‘intentional’ attachment, he demonstrates the importance of the open countryside for Sillitoe’s working class protagonists as the *other* of a repressive society. Bibian Pérez’s ‘Multi-Layered Sense of Place in African Women’s Literature’ opens with a brief overview of African writing on place, focusing on the work of African women. Pérez then examines Tsitsi Dangaremba’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988). She identifies three levels of place attachment of female protagonists, and shows how the author subverts traditional dichotomies.

The final section of the book is devoted to the fostering of local and national sense of place and belonging in and through visual art, museum displays depicting landscapes, and poetry. Maria Luz González writes on Canadian landscapes in the early twentieth-century art and writing of Emily Carr. Carr, who was one of the first generation of painters in Canada to adopt a modernist painting style, was inspired by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast. With her canvases she sought to preserve vanishing spiritual places: they become icons of regional/ national identity and an ecological relationship with nature, but raise the issues of colonial appropriation. Carma Casula, photographer, discusses a number of artistic projects she has carried out, which illustrate and interpret a contemporary sense of rootedness and place. She reflects on how a sense of belonging is represented in objects (whether collected by people or re-created artistically) and new places, transplanting realities by both local and immigrant imaginaries in an attempt to reconnect the old and the new. She focuses on how individuals personalize and recreate their space, projecting their experience and identity onto places. Christopher Oscarson is concerned, like Maria Luz González, with the understanding

and representation of national landscapes, but in this case they are those of Sweden, and he examines their presentation in the displays of Stockholm's Biological Museum. Founded in 1893, this institution pioneered a representational strategy combining the global scientific standardisation achieved in the previous century with a new focus on the location of plants and animals in distinct localities. The international acceptance of Linnaean taxonomy, with its focus on the ordering of natural systems according to the physical appearance and structures of individual organisms, had had the effect of deterritorialising the natural world. The Biological Museum's new strategy, which was prompted by the popular longing of city dwellers for reconnection with place, had the advantage of foregrounding the ecological embeddedness of plants and animals. In the final essay in the volume, 'Towards a New Multi-dimensional Ecopoetics of Place: A personal journey towards a multilingual English view of Spanish place', Terry Gifford returns to Ursula Heise's challenge to the celebration of place attachment in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, in order to affirm the significance of a hitherto neglected aspect of the local. Approaching the subject through the lens of narrative scholarship, Gifford redefines the global as always inherently local, reflects on the constitution of place through language and culture, and raises the question how different languages frame the perception of place. Gifford's realization of how language frames perception thus returns to a common theme in the readings of American, English, Spanish, French and other texts presented in this volume, and underscores the difficulty of translating and interpreting the multiple meanings of sense of place.

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