



MAKING SENSE OF PLACE

*Making Sense of Place* explores place from myriad perspectives and through evocative encounters. The Great Barrier Reef is experienced through the sense of touch, Lake Mungo is encountered through sound and 'listening', and light is shed on the meaning of place for deaf people. Case studies include the Maze prison in Northern Ireland, Inuit hunting grounds in Northern Canada, and the songlines of the Anangu people in Central Australia. Iconic landscapes, lookouts, buildings, gardens, suburbs, grieving places, the car as place — all provide contexts for experiencing and understanding 'place' and our '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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## Director's foreword

The National Museum of Australia was delighted to be a partner in the Senses of Place conference held in Hobart during April 2006. The several days of discussion provoked lively interest in how and what Australians and others mean by 'sense of place' and how we relate to the places that are important to us. The broad range of backgrounds of both speakers and participants illustrated how important 'place' is to humankind, and how many perspectives there are on place.

So it is with great pleasure that the National Museum of Australia Press has produced this book, stemming as it does from the conference and representing a further development of a number of the presentations made in Hobart. The volume has been an excellent way to expand upon a number of key lines of argument and dissertation.

The accompanying DVD captures, with extraordinary sensitivity, a number of personal relationships with place, recorded in interviews with conference participants during the Hobart gathering. The interviewees' spoken words complement the tone of the written words of this volume.

The National Museum, in exploring its three themes of land, nation and people, is keenly aware of how individuals, societies and cultures are shaped by their environment and by place, and how place is in turn shaped by them. This relationship between people and place — a relationship that exists at a range of levels, from the theoretical and remote to the deeply felt and daily lived — is a rich and worthwhile area of study and research. I am sure that this volume and DVD will make a major contribution to the way we think about and relate to place.

*Craddock Morton*

*Director*

*National Museum of Australia*

## 29. Place, belonging and nativeness in Australia

David Trigger

DAVID TRIGGER is professor of anthropology at the University of Queensland. His research interests encompass the different meanings attributed to land and nature across diverse sectors of society. Of particular interest are the issues of 'nativeness' and 'invasiveness' as understood in both nature and society. He has undertaken over 25 years of anthropological study on Aboriginal systems of land tenure, including applied research on resource development negotiations and native title. He is author of *Whitefella Comin': Aboriginal Responses to Colonialism in Northern Australia* and a co-editor of *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies*.

HISTORIAN PETER READ HAS WRITTEN EXTENSIVELY of Australian connections to place.<sup>1</sup> His perspective considers the issues very much against the background of the history of Aboriginal dispossession. While documenting cases where settler- and migrant-descendant Australians articulate intense sentiments of belonging to places in which they live (or have lived), he remains thoughtfully receptive to assertions by some Aboriginal people that such belonging (and by implication, rights) would necessarily be morally inferior compared with the emplacement of people asserting an 'Indigenous' identity.

In her critique, Linn Miller comments on Read's conception of Australian place-consciousness as something to be measured against Aboriginality as the essential 'emotional icon for belonging'.<sup>2</sup> Miller is concerned to go beyond Read's focus on the experience of exile (whether in terms of Aboriginal dispossession, or settler- and migrant-descendants' loss of long-term connections to highly significant locations and dwellings). While acknowledging that experience of place is 'always culturally configured', she says that emplacement is not something people choose — it is, ontologically speaking, a condition of human being. Following Jeff Malpas, a sense of belonging in place is not something 'tied in any way to land ownership or length of residency', not 'inherited or accumulated', but rather it is an existential opportunity that presents itself to all — and in the Australian context, this means whether or not persons may have Aboriginal ancestry, be native-born, migrant, refugee or visitor.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 29.1. Lake Ballard, Western Australia: a sculpture from the *Inside Australia* art installation by English artist Antony Gormley, commissioned for the Perth International Arts Festival, 2003. Sculptures were derived from laser scans of the inhabitants of Menzies, Western Australia. Photograph by Jane Mulcock



This view is a useful corrective to analyses that overstress the significance of ‘nativeness’ in contemporary constructions of Australian identity. Understanding senses of place and identification with environs appropriately recognises a wide range of continuing links to migrant homelands that contemporary citizens or their ancestors have left to come to Australia. People from many countries have fashioned their residential and occupational landscapes according to imported cultural symbols, as well as autochthonous ones — and, indeed, according to introduced ‘non-native’ species of plants and animals, as well as the natural environments encountered across this huge continent. As with Read’s exploration of his personal senses of belonging to places in and near Sydney, it is unlikely to be difficult to elicit from a wide cross-section of citizens, thoughts on the places they spent their childhood, youth, adult working life, and so on. These are ‘primal landscapes’,<sup>4</sup> replete with memories and nostalgic experiences of return when such opportunities arise.

### Primal landscapes and cultural identity

If I have a ‘primal landscape’ — a sense of emplacement imprinted on my mind from my youth — it is the suburban streetscapes in the vicinity of the Brisbane house in which I grew up. My feelings for this cultural landscape seem closest to what I could experience as autochthony — a sense of being fundamentally linked to the patches of earth over which I spent many formative years. The house was built by my father, a skilled tradesman, during the year following my birth. And it is in the minutiae of a place resided in for so long that my sentiments of connection are revealed — the garage wall built with cast-off half-bricks that preceded the arrival of better quality materials; the door jamb in the kitchen where the gradually increasing heights of children were marked, showing ages and names; the azalea and pomegranate plants nurtured by my mother to create her personalised garden features. In such ways, the suburban block is replete with long-evident family endeavour. Our length of residence there now spans 50 years.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that such sentiments about particular places will not be shared by all. Are not some Australians hesitant when asked about the locations they feel are ‘home’, the place they might ‘belong’, more so than anywhere else? Mobility during the lifecycle doubtless contributes to such ambivalence. In my case, the childhood home is in Brisbane (Queensland), but I now live in Perth (Western Australia). Are my ties to place stronger in relation to where I spent the first 30 years of my life, or where I have lived subsequently for some 20 years? As it happens, my parents were born in Perth — coincidentally, perhaps, the city where I now live — leaving as children with their families for the eastern states. I have forebears buried in both Perth and Brisbane — and, though it is not necessarily a sentiment shared by others with whom I have spoken, I feel some considerable connection to the sites of their graves in both cities.

Can I be an autochthon in Perth, as connected to the earth, soil and nature as I might be in the settings of youthful experiences of many aspects of life? Is it a local place, a city, or perhaps the expanse of a nation-state to which citizens establish primary relationships of attachment? Are individuals connected to *multiple* homes within the geography of national identities? And, if the sense of belonging is in fact transnational, what is the role of *ancestral* connections to place, whether known of in concrete terms as the locations in which one’s actual forebears were autochthons, or understood as a set of general collective ethnic rights derived from a long history of imagined residence and spiritual connection to a landscape far away?

My own life circumstances include having grown up as part of a small Australian Jewish community, whose elders included Holocaust survivors who taught young minds of their moral attachment to the State of Israel. This entails a ‘right of return’, to ‘make *aliya*’, which is, to refer to the webpages of the Israel Aliyah Center, a journey of ascent, progress, advancement and immigration to Israel as a symbol of taking one’s Jewish life to a higher level.<sup>5</sup> By this view, making *aliya* means ending a period of ‘exile’ (the Hebrew *galut*). For me, as with many Jewish people, it is life in ‘the Diaspora’ that encompasses ‘home’, not becoming a citizen of a place I have yet to visit. Indeed, the terms *galut* (exile) and diaspora might be regarded as a fundamental signifier of different Jewish–Australian senses of place and belonging: the former condition (of exile) being regarded as unnatural and temporary; the latter (part of a worldwide diaspora) as an accepted and permanent home away from what is nevertheless thought of as a culturally significant ancestral land.<sup>6</sup>

Although my genealogical roots stretch back to places in Poland and Russia, and my grandparent generation arrived as young adults in Australia from England, collective cultural links to the ancient ancestral homeland of Israel were also taught as fundamental to Jewish identity. And while singing the Israeli national anthem at Sunday religious school grated against my sense of rootedness in the Australian nation, and my awareness of contesting claims of Palestinian autochthony and rights increased through my youth, the meaningfulness of a collective Jewish homeland in Israel has always been clear enough — driven into young Diasporan minds by monochrome images of mass Jewish graves, personally witnessed tattooed numbers on the forearms of survivors of Nazism and, for some, apprehension that anti-Semitism may arise again. My own sense of Australian identity has always been unequivocal, yet my understanding of the wider family’s place in the world has had to cope with the idealistic departure for Israel of a first cousin, a young man who decided to become an Israeli at 18 years of age. Despite now acknowledging the attractions of visiting his ‘primal landscape’ in Brisbane, for him the imperative to ‘make *aliya*’ overwhelmed his sense of place in Australia.

Such details of personal and family histories will differ, but global migration (both forced and voluntary) makes essential our consideration of the ways Australians can simultaneously assert

local autochthony, and yet retain knowledge of significant links to lands not personally resided in. Whether the latter are places entailing strong attachment sentiments will depend on family circumstances that affect the sustaining of trans-national connections, including the having of economic and/or political power to mobilise such relationships to often distant but culturally meaningful landscapes. Australians of Italian background, for example, can maintain strong links to a hometown of family origin in Italy, and fashion their local Australian environments with plants and other symbols imported from the meaningful places of forebears.<sup>7</sup> Thus, as in many Australian locations, my Sicilian-background neighbours tend their 'exotic' juvenile olive tree on their front verge with methodical deliberation. As my Italian Studies colleagues tell me, the distinctive prickly pear plants growing in their ornamental front yard are expressive of Sicilian connections.<sup>8</sup> A further example is a front yard in Albany, south of Perth, containing a brick, concrete and steel scale-replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa (Figure 29.2). The Italian migrant built the model in his private place, yet clearly on public display, following a return visit to Italy.



Figure 29.2. Front yard, Albany, Western Australia, 2003.  
Photograph by Jane Mulcock

Catherine Nash writes of 'genealogical tourism', where citizens of settler-descendant nations — such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada — look for their roots in the Irish archives of the country from which their ancestors migrated generations ago.<sup>9</sup> They likely have no experience of residence in Ireland, and their familiarity with family members there will vary. Yet despite ambiguous connections to place, attachments to the ancestral location may form a significant element of identity. Thus, my 20-year-old Australian-born informant — a friend's daughter — feels strongly that she 'looks Irish'. Her mother and grandparents are Australian-born yet have retained knowledge of earlier generations of Irish migrants and contemporary relatives in Ireland. She states how much she feels at home on the few occasions she has visited there.

Nevertheless, it would seem difficult not to conclude that visitors to Irish landscapes that are historically remote, to Italian towns that are home to welcoming relatives, or to a State of Israel which is mythically rich yet physically distant, typically remain fundamentally rooted in the settler- and migrant-descendant nation in which they reside. Apart from differences according to the recency of family arrival, there is surely a strong assertion of emplaced identity

across the Australian population. If they were asked about the places in which they belong, and perhaps even in which they believe themselves 'native', we might expect a reasonable certainty of expressed emplacement in the locations of people's actual life circumstances. Indeed, it is the underlying sense of certainty about the right to assert emplacement across the Australian continent that prompts intellectual struggle over notions of autochthony and indigeneity. As is made evident in Read's work on Australian senses of 'belonging', this can be a fraught contest in light of Aboriginal claims to a particular sort of connectedness to land and nature.

### 'Trying on' indigeneity

While the current terminology of being an 'Indigenous' person is broadly accepted as meaning 'having some Aboriginal ancestry', where that leaves the majority of the Australian population is somewhat ambiguous. 'Not indigenous, merely born here', is Les Murray's provocative articulation of the issue, insofar as it implicates how the majority without any Aboriginal ancestry might *belong*.<sup>10</sup> If such Australians do resent being termed 'non-Indigenous', Read regards this reaction as inadequate but understandable. He comments in regard to his own 'sense of moral belonging' that this has been weakened "by so many years of painful interview and conversation", which has taught him about the history of Aboriginal dispossession.<sup>11</sup>

My own lengthy research with Aboriginal people, focused particularly on their connections with landscapes and nature, has prompted the opposite response. Just as I have mapped sacred sites, occupation places and traditional ecological knowledge, especially among Gulf Country communities, I have been prompted to ask about the equivalent of such place-awareness across other sectors of Australian society. But I have not arrived at what seems to be the fairly common suggestion — at least among those in whose work Read finds elements of 'self-denigration' — that 'being a non-Aboriginal Australian means being somehow cut off from where we belong', a person who has necessarily lost 'the sense of the sacred' in relation to land.<sup>12</sup> In attempting the complex research task of understanding with empathy a wide variety of Australian senses of place, across urban, rural and remote locations, I have found as much emplacement as displacement.

No doubt we can debate whether my interpretations suffer from too positive a view of the place-linked cultures of contemporary Australia. But more apt here is to note that beyond the world of intellectuals, this issue can be vigorously contested, with practical implications for symbolic senses of collective identity as well as individual material property rights. In the Yorta Yorta native title claim hearing concerning land in the states of New South Wales and Victoria, farmers, sawmillers, tourist operators and other Euro-Australians presented evidence that they are people who are third- and fourth-generation landholders with considerable historical knowledge of and connection to the places at issue. Consider the evidence of a man who had worked in the forests of the area for most of his life:

I think forestry people are not made, they are born. I do not enjoy being away from the Mulwala area, and I just cannot imagine not going into the forests any more. My family have lived here for generations, and we feel very strongly about the forests. I want to be buried in Mulwala. After spending most of my 56 years living in the bush, I believe I have the right to camp, hunt and fish in the forests. No one has the right to stop me doing these things. My father taught me how to live and work in the bush. My father taught me to hunt only enough to survive.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the judge ruled that the evidence from non-Aboriginal witnesses was not relevant to the question of whether Aboriginal people continue to hold rights and interests under traditional laws and customs:

It is irrelevant that non-Aboriginal people may observe the same or similar practices as are said to be a manifestation of the applicants' traditional laws and customs nor is it relevant that such people experience the same or similar affinity to the land and waters ... Nothing in ... [the Mabo decision and other relevant legislation] lends support to the proposition that the laws and customs of the Aboriginal peoples must be acknowledged and observed exclusively by those peoples and not by others.<sup>14</sup>

Yet while this particular argument for non-Aboriginal connection with, and sense of belonging in, the landscape was excluded from consideration in the legal setting of a Native Title case, the implicit challenge to an exclusively Aboriginal culture of belonging to the land is clear. Just who has rights to place and nature, in what ways and with what degree of a sense of autochthonous indigeneity is a contested matter in Australia. Furthermore, non-Aboriginal respondents to such claims will include a wide diversity of first-, second- and third-generation migrants, as well as those with longer family histories of colonial settlement.

In New Zealand, where similar issues are at stake, anthropologist Michele Dominy finds the concept of indigeneity full of ambiguities in the discourses surrounding settler-descendant identity. Dominy interrogates the concept of indigeneity as one that is all too commonly accepted as a fashionably unambiguous notion among scholars of post-settler societies. She is interested in the ways pakeha (white) New Zealanders themselves 'try on words' such as 'Indigenous', 'authentic' and 'autochthonous', and explore what it means to have a Pacific identity.<sup>15</sup> She breaks the nexus between 'indigeneity' and an exclusively aboriginal identity. The phrase 'Indigenous pakeha New Zealanders' is found at times throughout her book and, to use her words, Dominy sets out to investigate the forms that 'Anglo-Celtic settler-descendant

indigeneity' may take. The implication is that such forms of emplaced identity and belonging may be parallel to, but different from, Maori indigeneity.

Such a conception of 'being Indigenous' is likely to be at odds with political definitions stressing an encapsulated colonised history and the experience of dispossession.<sup>16</sup> In terms of empowerment of an historically dispossessed minority, it could be seen as politically counter-productive for those without Aboriginal ancestry to be allowed to adopt (or perhaps appropriate) the identity label of 'Indigenous'. Nevertheless, the significant intellectual questions about who and what 'belongs', in relation to the material and symbolic resources of Australian places, remains. Indeed, this is an issue grappled with by Aboriginal people as well as others. Research by Jane Mulcock among Australians involved with alternative health and spirituality, who are searching for what she terms their 'Indigenous selves', reports some Aboriginal people teaching fee-paying clients that all persons can belong in this continent spiritually, if they are born here.<sup>17</sup> At a Welcome to Country performed at a conference in July 2005, a Nyungar man stated that such belonging can be achieved after some seven years in the land, provided Aboriginal 'protocols' are understood and followed.

Aboriginal views regarding introduced plants and animals are instructive. While for some the category of indigenous species excludes things regarded as emblematic of colonisation as well as those responsible for environmental degradation,<sup>18</sup> there is also considerable evidence suggesting the incorporation into Aboriginal culture of certain 'exotic' species. In some areas of Central Australia, for example, feral cats are hunted for food and celebrated as spiritually significant with a Dreaming route similar to those of native species.<sup>19</sup> Introduced cat is also painted with traditional Yolngu designs in north-east Arnhem Land.<sup>20</sup> Buffalo from Asia and also cattle have been celebrated with traditional song and dance forms mimicking the animals' features, just as with native creatures.<sup>21</sup> As with a host of other animals and plants, this is flexible intellectual accommodation of introduced species, challenging any simplistic or taken-for-granted ideas about Aboriginal people's views on belonging and indigeneity in Australian places, landscapes and nature.

By implication, such intellectual openness among Aboriginal people prompts us to reflect on how we might define exactly what is to *become* 'Indigenous' or 'native' in both nature and society.<sup>22</sup> If Aboriginal people ('Indigenous Australians') make intellectual room for non-native fauna and flora, recognising the capacity of introduced animals and plants to achieve a place in the environment and the nation, does this not complicate any scientific (perhaps 'ec-nationalist') messages that position so-called 'exotic' species as essentially 'alien'? It certainly complicates any broad society-wide assumptions that symbolically identify 'Indigenous people' with an exclusively 'native' ecology, and any related view that simplistically equates things 'natural' with things 'native'.

## Emplaced identities, emergent indigenities and the ambiguity of nativeness

My reflections have been about ambiguities of cultural connections with place and nature in a relatively young post-settler society. Given that more than a quarter of the Australian population were born overseas,<sup>23</sup> and a great many more have parents and/or grandparents who began life as 'native' to somewhere else, I have necessarily dealt with issues of multiple attachments to different home-places, arising from histories of migration and resulting diaspora consciousness.

In considering complexities of belonging to place, and related issues of migration, autochthony and indigeneity, I have sought to raise politically difficult issues with sensitivity — not least among which are questions as to whether some people, and indeed some species of plants and animals, can ever be 'indigenous' to Australian places. I do not intend this as any displacement of the moral rights of Aboriginal people to justice in relation to historical dispossession. However, I also believe the matters of positive emplacement, sentiments of attachment and identity construction among many sectors of Australian society need more systematic and empathetic analytical attention than is currently given.

We need a more adequate intellectual framework for engaging with the facts of *cultural* co-existence among those with Aboriginal ancestry, descendants of early settlers, migrants of first-, second- and third-generations, refugees seeking lives in this post-settler nation, and so on. In my view, and indeed in terms of my own personal senses of multi-dimensional emplacement, this involves addressing difficult questions about *multiple* cultures of belonging and *emergent* senses of indigeneity across an Australian population that is richly emplaced yet linked fundamentally to locations beyond this vast continent.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 See Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000; and *Returning to Nothing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.
- 2 Linn Miller, 'Longing for belonging: A critical essay on Peter Read's *Belonging*', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 14, 2003, pp. 406–17, 409, 414, 416.
- 3 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999; Miller, *ibid*.
- 4 Tom Measham, 'Learning about environments: The significance of primal landscapes', *Environmental Management*, vol. 38, 2006, pp. 426–34.
- 5 www.aliyah.org
- 6 I am indebted to Geoff Levey, University of New South Wales, for this point.
- 7 Loretta Baldassar, *Visits Home: Migration Experiences from Italy and Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2001.
- 8 Personal communication from Susanna Iuliano and Loretta Baldassar.
- 9 C Nash, 'Setting roots in motion: Genealogy, geography and identity', in D Trigger & G Griffiths (eds), *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2003, pp. 29–52.
- 10 Les Murray, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, 1996, p. 47.
- 11 Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*, p. 19.
- 12 Veronica Brady, cited in Read, *ibid*.; Read presents many similar views from various writers and poets.
- 13 Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim, 1181 Federal Court of Australia, 'Reasons for ruling on admissibility of evidence', Olney J, 29 October 1997.
- 14 *ibid*.
- 15 Michele Dominy, *Calling the Station Home: Place and Identity in New Zealand's High Country*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, USA, 2001, p. 27.
- 16 Justin Kenrick & Jerome Lewis, 'Indigenous peoples' rights and the politics of the term "indigenous"', *Anthropology Today*, vol. 20, pp. 4–9.
- 17 Jane Mulcock, 'Searching for our Indigenous selves: Belonging and spirituality in Anglo-Celtic Australia', PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2002.
- 18 A verse from Archie Roach's song 'Native born' is a good example: 'So bow your head old Eucalypt and Wattle Tree; Australia's bush is losing its identity; While the cities and the parks that they have planned, look out of place because the spirit's in the land'. (Archie Roach, *Charcoal Lane*, CD, Festival Mushroom Records, April 1990.)
- 19 Scott Cane, *Pila Nguru: The Spinifex People*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2002, pp. 84, 110, 211.
- 20 Gillian Hutcherson, *Gong-wapitja: Women and Art from Yirrkala*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1998, p. 33.
- 21 David Trigger, 'Indigeneity, fertility and what belongs in the Australian bush: Nature, culture and identity in a settler society', in *Law, Plural Society and Social Cohesion in the 21st Century: Proceedings of 14th International Congress, Commission on Folk Law and Legal Pluralism*, University of New Brunswick, Canada, 26–29 August 2004.
- 22 Interestingly, anecdotal evidence suggests that the identity label 'Indigenous' is not necessarily preferred among many Aboriginal people. The term has arisen especially over the last decade, largely within government bureaucracy, initially as a way of including Torres Strait Islander people among the descendants of the colonised. It has nevertheless developed a strategically political cache that envisions the situation of Aboriginal and Islander people in Australia as linked to that of other similarly colonised minorities across the world.
- 23 The 2001 national census notes 284 countries of birth across the population of Australia.