

Edith Cowan University
Research Online


ECU Publications 2011

1-1-2011

Recalling Walden: Thoreau's Embodied Aesthetics and Australian Writings on Place

John Charles Ryan
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Ryan, J. C. (2011). Recalling Walden: Thoreau's embodied aesthetics and Australian writings on place. *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, 3(2), 43-57. Available [here](#)

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011/584>



Recalling *Walden*: Thoreau's Embodied Aesthetics and Australian Writings on Place

John Ryan (Edith Cowan University)¹

Abstract

This essay argues that the works of the nineteenth-century American philosopher, poet, and naturalist Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) have molded Australian place writings of the last one hundred years. Beginning with the foundational work into Australian literature done by the American critics C. Hartley Grattan (1902-1980), A. Grove Day (1904-1994), and Joseph Jones (1908-1999), I go on to contextualize my discussion in the contemporary transhemispherical scholarship of Australian literary historian Harry Heseltine and American ecocritic Robert Zeller. I then maintain that, both syncretic and embodied, Thoreau's literary approach to place draws from a fusion of multi-sensory experience, ethnographic inquiry, and bodily participation in the landscape through walking. Australian place writers including Edmund Banfield (1852-1923), Charles Barrett (1872-1959), Jack McLaren (1884-1954), Derek Robert (c. 1920-?), Barbara York Main (1929-), and Rod Giblett (1951-), explicitly or implicitly, reflect the influence of Thoreau's embodied aesthetics.

Introduction: Thoreau's Practice of Place

In his collection of essays *Koonwarra* from 1939, the naturalist and journalist Charles Barrett reminisces about "Walden," a bark hut near Olinda Creek on the fringes of Melbourne, where he convened a society of nature lovers, artists, and writers. Barrett's first book *From Range to Sea: A Bird Lover's Ways* (1907) reflects his experiences at Olinda Creek and his transhemispherical dialogue with Henry David Thoreau, the American author whose works Barrett cited as formative influences on his Walden Hut experiment in Australia (Griffiths 128). In photography and in writing, the Waldenites posited theories about bird nesting behaviour and avian parasitism that, though met with skepticism at first, were eventually corroborated by science. Ornithological developments made by the Waldenites were rooted in Olinda Creek, which thus became a place for pushing the bounds of scientific knowledge through emerging international literary and artistic flows.

Charles Barrett's "Walden" experiment prompts the question: To what extent has nineteenth-century American philosopher, poet, and naturalist Henry David Thoreau influenced Australian literary responses to place? As the American critic Walter Harding (1917-1996) notes in his introduction to *Thoreau Abroad: Twelve Bibliographical Essays* (1971), by the late 1800s, Thoreau's works began to receive considerable attention outside of the United States through an outpouring of critical essays, translations, editions, and

¹John Ryan, Edith Cowan University, jryan9@our.ecu.edu.au

biographies (3-9). In 1982, the American literary scholar Joseph Jones (1908-1999) published *Life on Waller Creek* as a Thoreau-inspired story of his “boot and shovel” conservation of a Texas creek. Prior to this personal narrative, Jones traced the breadth of Australian authors who engaged in a cross-continental confabulation with Thoreau’s writings. In his essays “Thoreau and Whitman 'Down Under': Their Reception in Australia and New Zealand” (1966) and “Thoreau in Australia” (1971), Jones details the ways in which Thoreauvian ideals have been adopted by Australian writers of place. In particular, the critical works of Jones have served as crucial footings for a trans-oceanic dialogue about the formative influence of Thoreau’s writings abroad. Preceding Jones, Randall Stewart published an essay “The Growth of Thoreau's Reputation” in 1946.

Yet, scholars of Thoreau’s international dissemination are also indebted to the foundational American critics of Australian literature, C. Hartley Grattan and A. Grove Day, for opening up intellectual exchange between the United States and Australia in the first place. In *Introducing Australia* (1942), written unambiguously for American readers, Grattan delivers an appraisal of Australian literature, extolling the capabilities of Tom Collins, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Eleanor Dark, and others (165-174). Comparatively, Day’s volume *Modern Australian Prose, 1901-1975* engages core questions of Australia’s cultural identity but also in the context of the nation’s internal “cultural cringe” towards its own literary genealogies: “What makes an author Australian...What constitutes an Australian book?” (xiv).

More recently, the Australian critic Harry Heseltine in *The Uncertain Self* (1986) notes the resemblances between the works of Thoreau and Banfield but argues that, ultimately, “out of an inspection of their obvious affinities will grow an appreciation of their deeper dissimilarities” (57). He then dismisses a close correlation between Thoreau and Banfield and goes on to emphasize the more plausible influences of Milton, Keats, Burroughs, and the English Romantic movement on Banfield’s isle rapture (56-71). Correspondingly, the American ecocriticism scholar Robert Zeller observes that Banfield was familiar with Thoreau’s *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; indeed, Banfield’s *My Tropic Isle* mimics the structure of *Walden* (Zeller 204-205; also Taylor and Perkins 221-222). Moreover, the contemporary Thoreauvian James Porter in “Thoreau and Australia: Sauntering Under the Southern Cross” (1997) and the literary scholar Frank Stewart in *A Natural History of Nature Writing* (1995) continue to explore the extent of Thoreau’s international influence. As a perennially recurring figure in nature writing and particularly canonical to ecocriticism since the mid-1990s, Thoreau has impacted a range of Australian writers, beginning with Banfield in the early 1900s. As American literature specialist Lawrence Buell argues in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), the returning visits to the question of Thoreau’s international significance suggest the increasing contemporary importance of his *oeuvres* to concepts of ecology, philology, and human rights (339-369). I suggest that the essays, journals, and poetry of Thoreau—who during his lifetime was generally dismissed as an imitator of Ralph Waldo Emerson—become increasingly significant for their textual heterogeneity and sensuous empiricism.

However, most studies of Thoreau’s international influence focus on his philosophies of nature or politics, and not necessarily his exemplification of embodiment in a place. Thoreau exhibits a practice and aesthetic of place that is both *syncretic* (drawing from the fusion of natural science, ethnography, and intellectual traditions) and *embodied* (drawing from sensuous bodily encounter with the environment and especially with plants, both indigenous and naturalized). One of his legacies is the seamless integration of landscape

philosophy and ethnographic observation with literary voice. Viewed as writings on place or writings sculpted by place, Thoreau's works are stylistically heterogeneous; the author takes on multiple perspectives and identities including naturalist, ethnographer, cultural theorist, and philologist. Thoreau switches adeptly between styles and traditions towards syncretism, arguing for broader experiential and ethical considerations of ecology. In his posthumous essay "Walking," published originally in 1862, anecdotes collected by Thoreau of a Concord farmer filling his swamplands alternate with references to the classics *Hamlet* and *The Iliad* in an effort to elicit from the reader empathy with the swamp as "the wild that attracts us" (*Walking* 28).

As a writer of place, Thoreau's diverse identities coalesce. His most concerted and sustained investigations into natural and cultural histories *took place* at Walden Pond and in the forests and fields of Concord. In a journal entry from 1856, Thoreau expresses his contentment with the Concord environs and the futility of searching elsewhere for wildness. For Thoreau, wilderness is a disposition, "the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord" (*Journal Volumes VIII-XIV* 1063). Thoreau scholar Bradley Dean (1954-2006), who edited and introduced *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*, characterises the perambulator of Concord as a "protoecologist" (xii). Thoreau's posthumous works on flora reveal extensive travels by foot within his region, surveying the land and conversing with local farmers. First published in 1993 as *Faith in a Seed*, his most botanically inquisitive and ecologically rigorous writings propose novel theories about then-controversial subjects such as seed dispersion. As with Barrett's Olinda Creek, Thoreauvian place is a site of empirical, field-based enquiry for the development of progressive scientific ideas linked to literary expressions.

Most importantly for this discussion, Thoreau's writings are embodied expressions in a place that is experienced through sense multiplicity. Embodiment points to the ways in which "human and extrahuman realities are apprehended through the body" and often responds to the objective values of the empirical sciences (Sellers 487). The onset of the Age of Reason in the early 1600s began with the rationalism of René Descartes (1596-1650) and the empiricism of his contemporary Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and inheritor John Locke (1632-1704). Whereas the rationalists and empiricists contended that all knowledge can be achieved through reason, Thoreau "insisted on bringing senses and soul into alignment in every act of his life, whether surveying or writing," a quintessentially Transcendentalist unification of knowledge entailing an attack on Locke (Packer 20-31; 262). The rationalists and empiricists sought to dominate nature through epistemological grids. For the Transcendentalists, nature was a living source of intelligence and "a more amenable environment for the discovery and definition of the self than human society, because less corrupt" (Heseltine 60). To a great extent, Thoreau embodied the ideals of Transcendentalism, practicing bodily in place the phenomenological notions inherited from the German poet and botanist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Indeed, place can be viewed corporeally as a body and in possession of the same requirements, contingencies, and interdependencies of biological corpora. Using first-person somatic sensuality, Thoreau describes place as electric in a journal entry dated December 11, 1855: "My body is all sentient. As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if I touched the wires of a battery" (*Journal Volumes VIII-XIV* 941). In this regard, place becomes a site for corporeal investigation into nature through the invigoration of human sensuousness, falsifying the ascendancy of objective naturalism since Descartes.

I hold the position that Thoreau's syncretic and embodied practice of place, though germinating in the Northeastern United States, has been translatable to writings on Australian landscape, place, and plants of the last one hundred years. This essay roves from the islands of tropical Queensland popularized by ex-journalist Edmund Banfield to the paddocks of southern Victoria where itinerant sailor Derek Robert conducted his Thoreavian experiment in living; to the Wheatbelt bushland of Western Australia where biologist Barbara York Main observed the cycles of native flora and fauna; and finally to the suburbs of metropolitan Perth where cultural theorist Rod Giblett recalls *Walden* at an ecologically critical lake in *Forrestdale*. Thoreau's methodology has reached far into Australian place consciousness. Yet, Australian writers adopt varying aspects of Thoreau's aesthetic of place, based in bodily contact and reflected in contemporary eco-humanities scholarship (for example, see Giblett *People and Places of Nature and Culture*). Some works derive inspiration from Thoreau's empirical prowess and insatiable curiosity as a naturalist while others read, in part, like ethnographic accounts.

Writing Place Across the Pacific

Urban or rural, settled or wild, conceptual or bodily, microscopic or expansive, place is an elusive concept with diverse meanings. The geographer and phenomenologist Edward Relph defines place as a nexus of social, cultural, and environmental activities, whereas "placelessness" entails the standardization and homogenization of space (311-323). A landmark study of Western Australian place, *Sense of Place*, by the ecologist and essayist George Seddon, is a meticulous exegesis on the geography, geology, and botany of the Swan River region in which Perth is situated. Seddon generally asserts that place is not only defined by human activities as an urban centre of human commerce and expansion, but also by natural history and non-human interdependencies. The environmental historian Ian Tyrrell observes that "place and identity are of key importance in Seddon's work...He has strong affinities with local landscapes, as historical interactions of people and land...His sensibility is bioregional" (752). Simply put, acquiring a sense of place, in Seddon's view, involves becoming conversant about the plants, animals, and landforms of a region, as well as knowing human history. Echoing Thoreau's seamless bridging of nature and culture, Seddon and Relph invoke place as a heterogeneous complex of cultural and natural variables, rather than a monolithic biogeographical unit or an abstraction of space.

As Tyrrell also alludes, the Swan River coastal plain of Seddon's work is a biogeographical unit comprising several individual watershed basins or bioregions. The neologism "bioregion" was first used by activist Peter Berg in the 1970s and is defined as "one's geomorphological and biological region—the watershed, the valley, the plain, the wetland, the aquifer, etc.—where, or on which, one lives and works and which sustains one's life" (Giblett *People and Places of Nature and Culture* 240). A bioregion is a centre of human and non-human sustenance bridging urban, suburban, and country activities. In a similar vein, the concept of "livelihood," articulated by novelist and critic Raymond Williams, highlights the interdependencies between urban, suburban, and rural inhabitants and the land. The various relationships between city and country entail interdependent sustenance within a region and between regions in which "environment" becomes "working country," a mediating formation between the nature of the pastoral and the culture of the urban.

As eco-humanities scholars Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin explain, place is also the experience of the body within a space—"embodied spatiality"—that expresses human

relationships to non-human nature. As embodied spatiality, sense of place occurs through corporeal sensation—the actions of working or moving through the land—and recollection. You know where you are through the feel, smell, taste, sound, appearance, and memory of a place. The painter Victoria King notes that the “sense of the haptic (from the Greek *haptesthai*, ‘to touch’) is an important, yet often unacknowledged, factor in understanding Aboriginal paintings and culture” (292). Place is that which can be felt through the rhythmic motion of digging yams; sense of place and human belonging to the earth occur through the brushstrokes of a ground painting. Painting becomes “the actual re-creation of...country through the gestures of the body” (King 294). The perspective of embodied spatiality engages permeability between bodies and the substance of a place: “The country ‘gets under the skin’ or ‘gets into the blood’; people become ‘married to’ their country” (Rose and Robin “Connection with Nature and Place” para.6). Through the multiplicity of the senses engaged actively on the land, place is made palpable.

The essay collection *Making Sense of Place* (2008) presents an inclusive spectrum of interpretations and definitions of Australian sense of place. In his essay “Place Matters,” the environmental sociologist Frank Vanclay defines place as “the coming together of the biophysical, social and spiritual worlds. Simply put, place is space that is special to someone. The personal meanings that turn space into ‘place’ become embedded in people’s memories and in community stories” (3). Meaning-making narratives, sensory engagement with landscapes and consciousness of local flora figure into sense of place for many contributors to the collection. For cultural heritage expert Celmara Pocock, touch enables immediate and intimate “sensuous knowledge of place” that is being marginalized as popular tourism locales, such as the Great Barrier Reef, are turned into theaters for visual speculation (77). Additionally, the sound artist Ros Bandt argues that, in Australia, “each region has its own acoustic identity” (96). For Bandt, listening attentively to the aural distinctiveness of places invokes the primary traditional act of knowledge-exchange and space-awareness in Australia (95). Furthermore, the anthropologist Jane Mulcock interviewed plant enthusiasts about the relationship between native Western Australian species and sense of place gestation. Her interviewees express a shared belief that gardening with local flora engenders “sense of identity, sense of place, and feelings of belonging, all of which can be symbolised [*sic*] by their interest in native plants” (Mulcock 186). Memories of the smells of plants particularly generate “embodied ecological knowledge” of place (Mulcock 188).

For Thoreau, place is embodied spatiality and a site for restoring sensory nuance to the written depiction of the natural world. Empirical observation occurs not only through the faculty of sight, but also through sense heterogeneity. Thoreau admits:

Methinks the scent is a more primitive inquisition than the eye, more oracular and trustworthy. When I criticise [*sic*] my own writing, I go by the scent, as it were. The scent reveals, of course, what is concealed from the other senses. By it I detect earthiness. (Thoreau *Journal Volumes VIII-XIV* 410)

In his explorations of the Concord flora, Thoreau tastes, smells, touches, listens to, and sees plants with his “bodily eye” (*Faith in a Seed* 26). In Thoreau’s practice, place is further experienced by walking. As emphasized in his essay “Walking,” rather than horse or rail travel, bipedality determines the scale of place through a bodily sense of belonging and a gestural marriage of the senses and the landscape, a theme also stressed by contemporary historian of walking Rebecca Solnit in *Wanderlust* (2001).

As exemplary place writing, Thoreau's works concretize the idea of place through tangible and embodied language. "Place writing" forges narrative identities: personal and collective, natural and cultural, visual and multi-sensory. I characterize place writing as a variant of nature writing based in seasonality and cyclicity, occurring within the fluid bounds of a locale, and tending to define human and non-human relationships to a landscape. The literary scholar John Murray defines nature writing as "literary works that take nature as a theme" (vii) and traces the genealogy of the term to Thoreau. Both nature writing and place writing, interrelated and kindred as they are, may rely on journals to describe "long-term processes of nature, such as seasonal or environmental changes, in great detail" (Murray 1). The architectural historian Ursula de Jong in "A Personal Account of Place" underscores the complexities of place-formation through the writing of "memories and storytelling, through language, taste and smell, through traditions and history" (25). According to Frank Stewart, nature writers mediate objective and subjective accounts of the environment through the hybridic use of scientific and poetic methods, intermingling facts with metaphors and feelings. However, I suggest that writings on place go further, especially in light of the depth of Thoreau's body of works, by situating human cultural activities in a sphere that is simultaneously biogeographical, scientific, ethnographic, literary, personal, and at times political or socially satirical.

How can Thoreau's practice and writing of place, both syncretic and embodied, be substantiated as having shaped works of Australian place writing? This entails an explicit methodology with reference to the temporal and historical contexts of the authors. Direct quotations of, or paraphrased references to, "Walking," "Wild Apples," *Walden*, *Faith in a Seed* or *Wild Fruits* readily establish some degree of intellectual flow between Thoreau and Australian place writers. Similarly, an interview or personal communication with a contemporary ecological thinker such as Rod Giblett yields irrefutable evidence of Thoreau's canonical role in the eco-humanities of the last two decades in Australia. More indirect or circumstantial evidence is brought forth through structural similarities between texts. For instance, the chapters "Where I Lived" and "Solitude" in Derek Robert's *Bellbird Eleven* are not only patterned after, but taken verbatim from, *Walden*. Lastly, philosophical similarities between texts and authors, although providing no definitive reference to Thoreau's works, do suggest the possibility of influence, as with Jack McLaren's *My Crowded Solitude*.

The Tickle of Contact: Sensuous Naturalist

Thoreau was not only a skilled field naturalist but a "sensuous naturalist," as I will distinguish him. Largely through his inquisitive perambulations, he became an expert in the natural history of the Concord environs. His field practice of ecology drew upon bodily experience to produce writings that coalesce scientific acumen and physical sensation. Pioneer environmental historian Donald Worster remarks on Thoreau's lifelong "search for sensuous contact, for a visceral sense of belonging to the earth and its circle of organisms" (78). Moreover, unlike conventional scientific practice, as the historian Christopher Sellers notes, "Thoreau's natural knowledge veiled neither its geographical ties to a particular place nor its dependence upon individual perspective and experience; rather, his bodily situatedness facilitated his knowledge-making" (493). The sounds, tastes, smells, and sensations, in conjunction with the visual beauty of Walden and the plant world encircling Concord, became signifiers of a felt-place for Thoreau.

His multi-sensory engagement with ecology is expressed initially in his most influential work *Walden*, published in 1854. The chapter “Sounds” exhibits Thoreau’s sense-based exploration of Walden Pond. Referring to the sand-cherry whose “handsome cherries...fell over in wreaths like rays on every side” of the path, Thoreau reveals that “I tasted them out of compliment to Nature, though they were scarcely palatable” (*Walden* 76). Further along, Thoreau recalls the hooting owl as the “*lingua vernacula* of Walden Wood” (*Walden* 180) or the native tongue of place. With similar attention to the senses in *Wild Fruits*, published in 2000, engagement with a swamp-dwelling plant is haptic and gestural, but also empirically descriptive:

I was obliged with my finger carefully to trace the slender pedicel through the moss to the vine, where I would pluck the whole together, like jewels worn on the sphagnous breasts of the swamp—swamp pearls, call them—one or two to a vine and, on an average three-eighths of an inch diameter. (Thoreau *Wild Fruits* 167)

The expression “sphagnous breasts of the swamp” is a corporeal trope that links the human body to the body of the wetland. Thoreau’s practice of place hence encompasses sense multiplicity through the tickle of contact with the natural world and its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Correspondingly, with chapters on water, birds, animals, plants and fire, in *Forrestdale* cultural theorist and environmental activist Rod Giblett evokes a parallel embodied approach to ecology as exhibited by Thoreau. Giblett suggests the importance of human multi-sensory embodiment in the appreciation of plants, emphasizing a synergy between the knowledge conveyed by the intimate bodily senses of smell, taste, sound, and touch. For Giblett, “the plants of the place contribute to the soundscape...The sight, smell, sound and touch of wild plants creates [*sic*] a full-bodied, sensory experience of the place” (*Forrestdale* 87).

Sensuous natural science and multi-sensory ecology further occur in the works of Banfield, McLaren, and Main as they explore, and attempt to define, the character of their places: a tropical island, the remote Cape York peninsula, and a tract of native bushland in Western Australia, respectively. Published in 1908, Banfield’s *The Confessions of a Beachcomber* portrays the natural and cultural history of Dunk Island off the coast of tropical Queensland, and is one of the earliest literary works to recall *Walden* in Australia. In 1897, Banfield resigned as journalist for the Townsville Daily Bulletin and took up residency at Dunk Island (Jones “Thoreau in Australia” 78). The original title page of *Confessions* reveals Thoreau as a catalyst of the author’s personal resolve and transformation through an epigraph borrowed from *Walden*: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears”(Banfield 2). This aphorism is later quoted by Robert in *Bellbird Eleven* (178). Banfield, however, seems bashfully aware of his Thoreauvian footings, stating in reference to his American counterpart’s punctiliousness that “however cheerful a disciple of that philosopher, far be it from me to belittle him by parody” (61). Banfield’s intimation of the disciple-master positioning between himself and Thoreau—a relationship which *Bellbird Eleven* takes to excess—is an early Australian example of what Buell articulates as the canonization of Thoreau by nature writers (339-369).

Banfield exhibits Thoreauvian immersion in Dunk Island, recounting its sensuousness with sardonic barb. Heseltine comments that “there was a genuine scientific concern as well as romantic delight behind Banfield’s scrutiny of nature” (67). The convergences between

Banfield and Thoreau are stylistically evident throughout descriptions of the island's flora. "In Praise of the Papaw" summates the scientific botany of the plant and its medicinal, cosmetic, and gustatory usages, peppered with a dose of political humor: "the papaw possesses social influences more potent than many of the political devices of this socialistic age" (Banfield 244). Additionally, Banfield echoes Thoreau's essay "Wild Apples" with both authors similarly arguing for the reappraisal of the wondrous virtues of these two plant species common to their distant locales. Recalling Thoreau, Banfield references the American apple, stating that "the moral life and high standard of statesmanship [*sic*] of an American senator are cited as examples of the refining influences of apples" (241). Of a particular wild apple tree, Thoreau recounts the bodily experience of it as a "peculiarly pleasant bitter tang not perceived till it is three-quarters tasted. It remains on the tongue. As you eat it, it smells exactly like a squash-bug" (*Wild Apples* 2). Likewise, Banfield's depiction of flora is embodied with the papaw issuing "a delicate perception of musk—sweet, not florid; soft, soothing and singularly persuasive...Its effect is immediately comforting, for to the stomach it is pleasant, wholesome, and helpful" (Banfield 247). On Banfield's devotion to the sense of smell, Heseltine observes his "unalloyed pleasure" and "the intensity of his delight in the sweet odours [*sic*] of his tropical island," attributing such rapture to a Keatsian or Wordsworthian "pleasure in pleasure" and a quasi-religious Romantic worship of nature (61). Although Heseltine offers plausible support for the influence of such literary figures, he underplays the primacy of Thoreau's embodied engagement with ecology in molding Banfield's response to Dunk Island. For sensuous botanists such as Thoreau and Banfield, bodily interaction with plants circumscribes place as corporeal experience, rather than a purely geographic or political delimitation.

Appearing in 1926, adventurer Jack McLaren's *My Crowded Solitude* exhibits Thoreauvian aspects in relation to the author's interaction with the Cape York landscape in Northern Queensland. However, readers are only left to speculate that among McLaren's "plentiful supply of books" was a copy of *Walden* (89). Joseph Jones maintains that McLaren fits the tropical recluse figure of Stevenson's Samoan exploits and could have taken literary cues from elsewhere (196). Using bodily metaphor, McLaren demarcates place geographically in the first pages of the narrative, describing Cape York with an anatomical trope as:

That tremendous and very little known peninsula which, after half a thousand miles of paralleling the mighty Barrier Reef, thrusts up amid the islands of Torres Straight and towards New Guinea *like a pointing finger* [emphasis added]. (10)

The similarities between the works of McLaren and Thoreau are compelling enough to warrant the possibility of the New Englander's influence on the writings of the Australian. McLaren's philosophy of personal transformation in nature through a change in perception—a vein of sensitivity also running throughout Thoreau's writings—is a pre-eminent theme in *My Crowded Solitude*:

Hitherto I had carelessly generalised [*sic*] with regard to Nature. Now I particularised [*sic*]. I noted individuals and individual characteristics...Even a tree, I discovered, was not just one of a thousand trees, but an individual with a history of its own. (McLaren 20)

The particularizing McLaren recalls the equally individualizing Thoreau who in his 1862 essay "Wild Apples" poignantly describes an errant young apple tree. Thoreau rues the tree's

neglected history, lamenting that “the day was not observed when it first blossomed, nor when it first bore fruit, unless by the chickadee” (*Wild Fruits* 78). McLaren’s chapter “In the Absence of Humans” is an exquisite piece of Australian nature writing and, recalling the exemplar of *Walden*, verges on the scientific with vivid, anthropomorphosing accounts of the group behaviour of birds feeding on a snake:

Then one made off with the snake, instead of returning it to the tree-top...they went after the thief and, cornering him, denounced him—harshly, threateningly, accusingly, telling him he was a traitor to his tribe, one who could not be trusted...(McLaren 92)

Later in the same chapter, embodiment is prominent in the author’s account of an enormous snake that entered his dwelling at night, with the McLaren enacting a visceral struggle against the creature to preserve himself: “The great coil [of the snake] about my arm was hard as iron, and as cold. It was a little slimy. I felt the muscles tauten against mine” (McLaren 102). The author’s aesthetic perception of the Cape York landscape arises directly from bodily experience, both pleasurable and life-threatening. His engagement is corporeal rather than visually distanced. As Thoreau does, McLaren becomes a part of the body of place through physical immersion.

Barbara York Main’s *Between Wodjil and Tor* is a salient example of place writing in Western Australia that draws from Thoreau’s paradigm of sensuous field engagement. For Main, a professionally trained zoologist and a leading expert on trapdoor spiders, place is the Wheatbelt, or more specifically, “somewhere around the ‘middle’ of the Wheatbelt, in this patch of wodjil, the granite tor some miles away” (4). Main is interested in experiencing “the unfolding of a year’s life of an animate landscape” (4). In the Preface, she explains that the work attends to the “annual rhythm—the changes wrought by the seasonal cycle—within a particular landscape, its dominant plants and a selected group of animals.” Although the Western Australian author qualifies the book as an objective account of the Wheatbelt tract, Main admits that “her own responses to the subtleties of seasonal change in the natural landscape” (Main “Preface”) pervade the literary tone of the book.

Despite claims towards objective science, Main’s prose is sensorially rich and embodied (for a more extensive treatment, see Ryan 69-71). The author extends, or perhaps inverts, Thoreau’s idea of wilderness as “the raw material of all our civilization” by suggesting that the scientific conventions of civilization permit a greater appreciation of wilderness. This is most conspicuously evident, Main asserts, when we look at “the dry floor of a summer-withered bushland and see only barren soil with a dry, speckled crust” (Main “Preface”) whereas, with the instruments of science, we can marvel at the microscopic workings of the bushland, rather than its sterile appearance. In Main’s view, landscape appreciation occurs through deeper understanding brought about over time through the various senses and actual knowledge of ecology. As with Thoreau and Banfield, her methodology of place is syncretically seasonal, successional, scientific, and sensuous. The taxonomic account of plants is no more important than her embodied responses, and Main deploys the sense of smell throughout her account to particularize plants: “The acrid smell of the cypress pines (*Callitris morrisoni*) rose and permeated the surrounding bush and mingled with the tannic scent of drying bark and the volatiles of eucalypts” (16). Indeed, the task of particularizing the landscape, through senses and science, and hence redeeming the bushland from its perception as monotonous “summer-withered” drabness, is her core aim. Bridging scientific

and literary voices, Main is a hybridic writer, fitting the definition of nature writer offered previously in this essay by Frank Stewart.

Magic of His Spade: Early Environmental Ethnography

Unlike Thoreau, Main paints a landscape largely devoid of its history of human habitation. Simply put, place for Main is located in natural history. The works of Banfield, McLaren, and Giblett, however, evidence ethnographic tendencies, advancing the proposition that place is also a nest of cultural knowledges and histories. The critic Lawrence Willson (1911-1996) writing in the 1950s and, more recently, Timothy Troy in the 1990s have noted Thoreau's concerted interest in the cultural anthropology of Native Americans. Thoreau, however, employed anthropological techniques, particularly person-to-person interviews with local residents, to understand landscape disruptions occurring around the Concord environs. For instance, Thoreau shows a kind of early environmental ethnography in reference to the management of wetlands by farmers who plan to "put a girdling ditch round the whole in the course of forty months, and so redeem it by the magic of his spade" (*Walking* 13).

Similarly, Banfield's *Confessions* is nearly half a cultural and environmental ethnography of Dunk Island, with Part II exhibiting the significant anthropological side of Banfield's investigation into his remote existence. Using both scientific terminology and Aboriginal botanical names, the section enumerates the island's edible plants, furnishing an impressive ethnobotanical record of its inhabitants' dietary regime with attention to the gustatory qualities of the species. For example, Banfield describes *murl-kue-kee* or the berries of *Eugenia suborbicularis* as "vapid, and as insipid as an immature medlar" (316). With the cooperation of a knowledgeable local person, Banfield ascertains that the species red mangrove and grass tree are used for spear-making, and, further along in the section, he produces a lexicon of Aboriginal terms for the island's geographical features. However, as Heseltine notes, there are racist tones in Banfield's representation of Aboriginal peoples (63). *Confessions* is both a literary and anthropological work, a slippage between genres identified by the twentieth-century American anthropologist Clifford Geertz that engages metaphor, myth, and poetic voice to record vital ethnographic information. A multi-vocal, sensorially plural writing of place that mediates natural and cultural histories, *Confessions* reflects Thoreauvian syncretic sensibilities.

At Cape York, Jack McLaren settles at Simpson Bay and constructs a hut with the help of Aboriginal people. Henceforth, *My Crowded Solitude* enters into the brackish waters of literary ethnographic accounts, as per Geertz's adumbration. Although McLaren is consumed with the task of converting the jungle into a productive coconut plantation, he partakes in ethnographic observation that goes beyond his commercial interests. For instance, discussion of the craft of Aboriginal smoke signalling in "A Father by Purchase" reveals the mysterious intricacies of the practice as it relates to the broader perplexities of Aboriginal communication. As with Banfield and Thoreau, McLaren mediates the natural and cultural histories of the Cape York locale. His observation of natural history is sensuous; his approach to cultural history is ethnographic.

In the southern suburbs of Perth, Western Australia, Rod Giblett summarizes *Forrestdale: People and Place* as "an oral and natural history of a cultural and natural place" (xiii). Along with excerpts from Giblett's nature journal provided in the chapter "Living by the Lake in the 1990s," the transcriptions of interviews with local residents evoke Thoreau's dual consciousness of sensuous ecological history (place as natural) and ethnographic inquiry

(place as cultural). A dozen interviews conducted by environmental historian Cath Drake form the basis of *Forrestdale*, and the interviewees reveal various ecological disturbances that the lake has undergone. Nyoongar elder Richard Wilkes notes differences in the lake's vegetation: "Flora grew around the waterways and the root shoots and herbs and everything was there. I mean the berries and the season of the berries. The season of the tubers, and the season of the reptiles, and the season of the birds" (qtd. in Giblett *Forrestdale* 3). In a similar fashion, Forrestdale resident Steve Salmeri confirms that "there wasn't the horrible mess of reeds and what not that we see today and all the introduced plants and trees that are there today" (qtd. in Giblett *Forrestdale* 22-23). More self-consciously than Banfield and McLaren, Giblett deploys ethnography of place to confirm a progression of anthropogenic environmental changes in the landscape.

Discoverable Harmony: Walking the Body of Place

For Thoreau, place is not only a natural setting or a cultural demesne but a body, an interdependent complex of nature and culture. More specifically, place becomes body through the act of walking, which is a mode for continually experiencing the unfolding of place to the senses:

The walker in the familiar fields which stretch around my native town sometimes finds himself in another land than is described in their owners' deeds, as it were in some faraway field on the confines of the actual Concord where her jurisdiction ceases. (Thoreau *Walking* 18)

Thoreau stresses the relationship between place and his ambulatory body where "there is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life" (*Walking* 4). Despite distractions, Thoreau remains sentient during the act of walking as a means of embodied participation in the living land: "The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses" (*Walking* 4). A similar theme of place as a body traversed by walking bodies occurs recognizably in Derek Robert's *Bellbird Eleven* but is most theoretically developed in recent writings by Rod Giblett.

Robert declares the act of walking a social protest, as well as a sensuous engagement with place. *Bellbird Eleven* is explicitly patterned after Thoreau as an expressly Australian meditation on *Walden*. Robert establishes his geographic parameters early on: "The countryside rolled gently for twenty or thirty miles up from the coast before fetching up against the Delphinine escarpment to the north-west; below the escarpment lay a vast swampy area, a conglomeration of ponds and marshes" (2). His experiment in living responded to the "growing materialism" of Australian society, and hence walking becomes a symbolic act of social critique (Robert 178). Jettisoning his Land Rover, an icon of rampant Western consumerism, Robert takes to bipedality in defiance of materialism. Correspondingly, Rebecca Solnit theorizes walking as "a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences" (12). Stylistically, Robert recalls Thoreau with ironic humor and witticisms, even likening land ownership to certain diseases of the male genetic line (14). However, by the book's end, Robert is consumed by the domestic tasks of the experiment and ultimately lacks the depth of investigation into natural history that typifies the works of Banfield, Main, and Giblett.

More contemporarily, Rod Giblett cites Thoreau as a primary influence on his writings on Forrestdale Lake in the southern suburbs of Perth, as well as his philosophy of landscape aesthetics throughout his published narrative and theoretical works of the last fifteen years. For Giblett, Forrestdale Lake structures the experience of sense of place. Living within one's own locality and walking between natural features such as waterways are acts that create belonging. The nature journal section of *Forrestdale* was inspired by Thoreau's journals, as a space for both rhythmic observation of landscape and commentary on proposed development around the lake. The journal as a space for the convergence of sensuous experience of nature, eco-political barb, and Zen-like self-reflection is further developed in his unpublished manuscript *Black Swan Lake*, half of which is devoted to a Thoreavian nature journal, seasonal and cyclical in design, and based around the traditional six seasons of the Nyoongar, the Aboriginal people of the Southwest corner of Western Australia.

For Giblett, body and place are inextricably linked; place is a body, both metaphorically and substantially. Thoreau's embodied practice of place has been a formative influence on Giblett's refiguring of swamps in the colonial imagination. Forrestdale has been an intellectual space for the development of ideas relating to the human perception of wetlands in Western Australia and abroad (Giblett *Postmodern Wetlands; People and Places of Nature and Culture*). According to Giblett, "Thoreau expressed in writing and corroborated what I was discovering about wetlands both ecologically and culturally, both the positive and the pejorative" (pers. comm. March 2010). In *Postmodern Wetlands*, Giblett goes on to say that "Thoreau sees himself as part of nature, as circulating in the body of nature not via the circulatory system of rivers, but in the stagnant system of marrow through immersion in the swamp by a kind of secular baptism" (3). Thoreau's progressive view of wetlands as places of fertility and ecological significance—rather than miasmatic disease—has led Giblett to dub the American author the "patron saint of swamps" (*Postmodern Wetlands* 229-239).

In a recent collection of essays, Giblett further develops Thoreau's concept of the "quaking zone" (*Landscapes of Culture and Nature* 1-14). In fact, allusions to the quaking zone marks Giblett's earliest theoretical writings published in *Postmodern Wetlands* (1996) and continues to this latest work *Landscapes of Nature and Culture* (2009). Thoreau reflects on the swamp as a quaking place of immense fear and fecund hope: "Hope and the future for me are not in the lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" (*Walking* 11). Viewing the swamp as a sacred place, Thoreau then comments that "I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my native town than from the cultivated gardens in the village...I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature" (*Walking* 12). For Thoreau and Giblett, quaking zones are actual hallowed places of fear where the land trembles, but also metaphoric places of inspiration and liminality.

Conclusion: Thoreau's Aesthetic of Place

Thoreau's influence reverberates in Australian writings through the legacy of his approach to place and his writing on the natural world. His works evoke place, and literary engagement with it, as a complex site of convergences and interdependencies. Place is the intricate amalgamation of its natural history, human cultural significance, and philological resonance. For Thoreau, place is not merely a geographic location, but rather a plenum between the human body, the natural world and the histories and traditions of culture. His aesthetic

philosophy of place is embodied and multi-sensory; his practice of place is empirical and ethnographic. As with many of his Australian place-writing literary progeny, Thoreau employs the heterogeneous perspectives of multiple disciplines and traditions to elicit the spirit or essence of place.

Ultimately, Australian authors adopt various aspects of Thoreau's approach. For example, although *Between Wodjil and Tor* is a rich account of bushland flora, the work lacks the cultural dimensions of plants evident in Banfield's *Confessions*, McLaren's *My Crowded Solitude*, and Giblett's *Forrestdale*. Thoreau's syncretic and embodied approach to place asserts that to extract any single factor—place as only a cultural milieu or solely a natural feature—from the intactness would be comparable to eviscerating a body, since place, in Thoreau's view, functions as a self-perpetuating corpora. I suggest that embodied aspects of place will feature further in emerging Australian ecological writings of the early twenty-first century and beyond.

Works Cited

- Banfield, Edmund. *The Confessions of a Beachcomber: Scenes and Incidents in the Career of an Unprofessional Beachcomber in Tropical Queensland*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1968.
- Bandt, Ros. "Place as Acoustic Space: Hearing Australian Identity." *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*. Eds. Vanclay, Frank, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008. 95-102.
- Barrett, Charles. *From Range to Sea. A Bird Lover's Ways*. Melbourne: T.C. Lothian, 1907.
- . *Koonwarra: A Naturalist's Adventures in Australia*. London: Oxford University Press, 1939.
- Buell, Lawrence. "The Canonization and Recanonization of the Green Thoreau." *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995. 339-69.
- Day, A. *Grove. Modern Australian Prose, 1901-1975*. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980.
- De Jong, Ursula. "A Personal Account of Place." *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*. Eds. Vanclay, Frank, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008. 23-35.
- Dean, Bradley P. "Introduction." *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*. Ed. Dean, Bradley P. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Giblett, Rod. *Black Swan Lake*. Unpublished Manuscript, 2010.
- . *Forrestdale: People and Place*. Bassendean: Access Press, 2006.
- . *Landscapes of Culture and Nature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009.
- . *People and Places of Nature and Culture*. Bristol: Intellect, 2011.
- . *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.
- Grattan, C. Hartley. *Introducing Australia*. New York: The John Day Company, 1942.
- Griffiths, Tom. *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Harding, Walter. "Foreword." *Thoreau Abroad: Twelve Bibliographical Essays*. Ed. Tempe, Eugene. Hamden: Archon Books, 1971. 3-9.
- Heseltine, Harry. *The Uncertain Self: Essays in Australian Literature and Criticism*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Jones, Joseph. "Thoreau and Whitman 'Down Under': Their Reception in Australia and New Zealand." *Emerson Society Quarterly*. 42 (Spring 1966): 35-46.
- . "Thoreau in Australia." *Thoreau Abroad: Twelve Bibliographical Essays*. Ed. Timpe, Eugene. Hamden: Archon Books, 1971. 184-203.

- King, Victoria. "Embodied Perceptions: Aboriginal Expressions of Place." *Changing Places: Re-Imagining Australia*. Double Bay: Longueville Books, 2003. 286-95.
- Main, Barbara York. *Between Wodjil and Tor*. Brisbane and Perth: The Jacaranda Press and Landfall Press, 1967.
- McLaren, Jack. *My Crowded Solitude*. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966.
- Mulcock, Jane. "Planting Natives: Gardening and Belonging to Place in Perth, Western Australia." *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*. Eds. Vanclay, Frank, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008. 183-189.
- Murray, John. "Preface." *Nature Writing Handbook: A Creative Guide*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995.
- Packer, Barbara. *The Transcendentalists*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007.
- Pocock, Celmara. "Reaching for the Reef: Exploring Place Through Touch." *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*. Eds. Vanclay, Frank, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008. 77-85.
- Porter, James. "Thoreau and Australia: Sauntering Under the Southern Cross." *The Concord Saunterer* 5 (1997): 73-81.
- Relf, Edward. "A Pragmatic Sense of Place." *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*. Eds. Vanclay, Frank, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008. 311-323.
- Robert, Derek. *Bellbird Eleven*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965.
- Rose, Deborah, and Libby Robin. "The Ecological Humanities in Action: An Invitation". *Australian Humanities Review* 31-32 (2004). July 11, 2010.
<<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-April-2004/rose.html>>.
- Ryan, John. "Why Do Extinctions Matter? Mourning the Loss of Indigenous Flora in the Southwest of Western Australia." *Philament* 15 (2009): 52-80.<http://sydney.edu.au/arts/publications/philament/issue15_pdfs/RYAN_Why%20Do%20Extinctions%20Matter.pdf>.
- Seddon, George. *Sense of Place: A Response to an Environment*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1972.
- Sellers, Christopher. "Thoreau's Body: Towards an Embodied Environmental History." *Environmental History* 4 (1999): 486-514.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. London: Verso, 2001.
- Stewart, Frank. *A Natural History of Nature Writing*. Washington: Shearwater Books, 1995.
- Stewart, Randall. "The Growth of Thoreau's Reputation." *College English* 7.4 (1946).
- Taylor, Cheryl and Elizabeth Perkins. "Warm Words: North Queensland Writing." *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland*. Eds. Buckridge, Patrick and Belinda McKay. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007. 213-255.
- Thoreau, Henry. *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*. Washington: Island Press, 1993.
- . *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau, Volumes I-VII (1837-October, 1855)*. Eds. Torrey, Bradford and Francis Allen. New York: Dover Publications.
- . *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau, Volumes VIII-XIV (November, 1855-1861)*. Eds. Torrey, Bradford and Francis Allen. New York: Dover Publications.
- . *Walden; and Civil Disobedience: Authoritative Texts, Background, Reviews, and Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Thomas, Owen. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966.
- . *Walking*. LaVergne: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007.
- . *Wild Apples*. LaVergne: Filiquarian Publishing, 2010.
- . *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*. Ed. Dean, Bradley P. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.
- Troy, Timothy. "Ktaadn: Thoreau the Anthropologist." *Dialectical Anthropology* 15.1 (1990): 74-81.
- Tyrrell, Ian. "Placing George Seddon." *Environmental History* 10.4 (2005): 752-54.

- Vanclay, Frank. "Place Matters." *Making Sense of Place: Exploring Concepts and Expressions of Place Through Different Senses and Lenses*. Eds. Vanclay, Frank, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2008. 3-11.
- Williams, Raymond. "Socialism and Ecology." *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. Ed. Gable, Robin. London: Verso, 1989.
- Willson, Lawrence. "Thoreau: Student of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 61.2 (1959): 279-89.
- Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977.
- Zeller, Robert. "Tales of the Austral Tropics: North Queensland in Australian Literature." *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers*. Eds. Cranston, CA., and Robert Zeller. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 199-218.