

Deconceptualising place: disrupting discourse & privileging practice with help from WG Sebald

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Some key authors

- Peter Willis – Illuminating practice
- John Cameron, Margaret Sommerville – place practice, critical place pedagogy
- Ecopsychology – Paul Shepard, James Hillman
- Use of images & texts to disrupt & evoke
WG Sebald
- Encountering wildness – Robert MacFarlane

Some key ideas

- Use of 'place' rather than 'environment'
- Sustainable place practice
- Problem of disjunctures between theory and practice
- Stories and their 'fatal allure'
- Deconceptualisation
- Practical application of ecopsychology

What is driving this research?

Academic & professional level – Milbraith (1999) asks how can we learn our way towards sustainability? But we have an opportunity go beyond this, beyond, information, polemics – we learn from practice from actions taken and attempted.

On a personal level – my place relationships heightened by a series of migrations (connection & disconnection). Resulting in a 'divine discontent' (Nick Cave But also WH Auden, James Hillman). A search for depth connection?

3 places

- In the tradition of Simon Schama (1994) and more recently Robert Macfarlane (2007)

Mountain

- Statue of Christ hundreds of metres up a mountain - Connemarra Ireland



Meadow

- In 'the great work' Thomas Berry (1999) writes of the vital importance of an image he holds of a meadow he encountered in his childhood (alone). A place full of life..etc
- This he holds this place in his mind whenever contemplating matters of environment or conservation. He asks how would the meadow be effected..?
- (Do we all have a similarly imagined or remembered place?)



Creek

- Cemetery Creek in Bellingen NSW. The place of 14 years of regeneration and rejuvenation projects











Place studies..

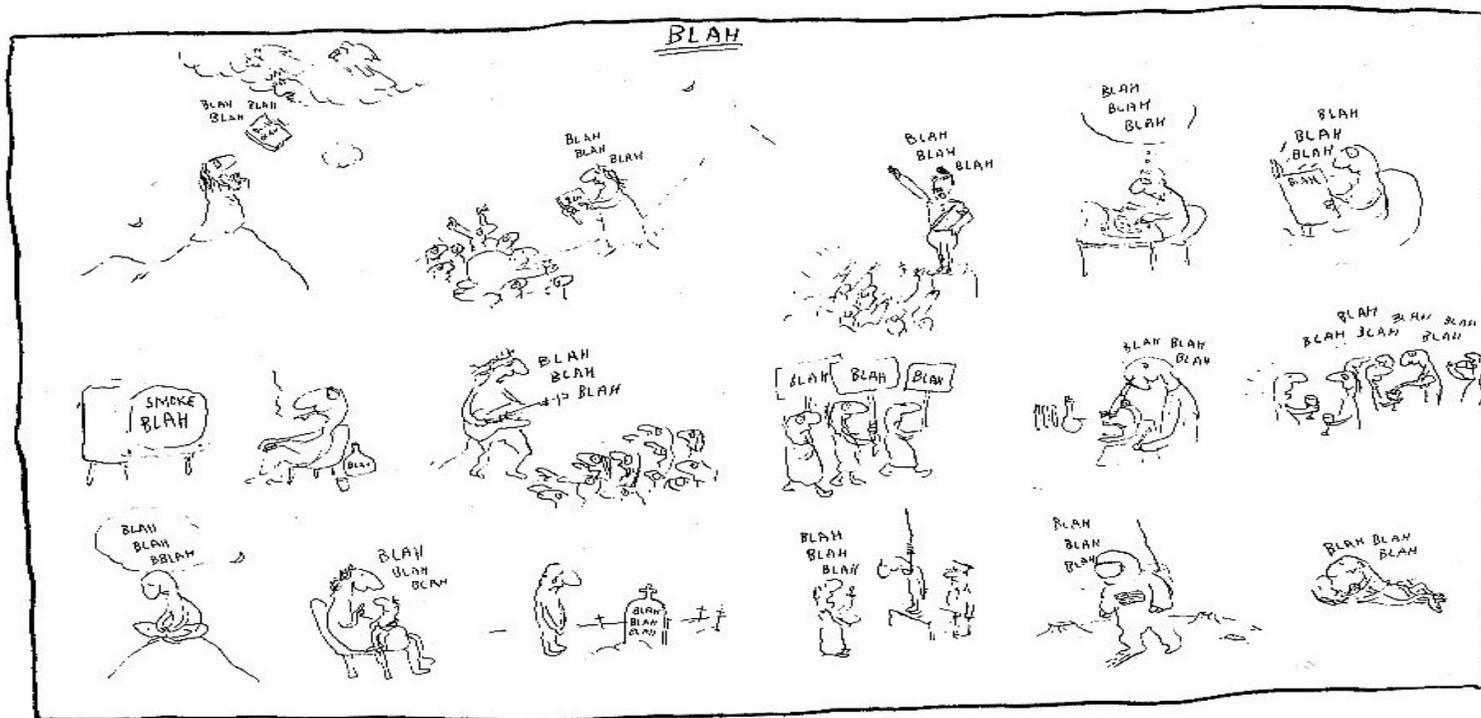
- According to Sommerville (2008) place pedagogy has 3 key concepts -
 - 1) Place relationships are storied
 - 2) Place relationship is embodied
 - 3) Place is a framework for contestation especially western verses indigenous stories

more on place

- To this Cameron (2007) adds that place relationship is -
- Felt, personal,
- Often unconscious
- Engagement can be shallow or deep

research questions

- As researchers how do we approach any significant disjuncture between lived experience and theory?
- How do we give lived experience (felt, ambiguous..) a research voice?
- How can we use personal (autobiographical) experiences of place-practice in/for research?



Nation Review 18 August 1977; pen and ink; 15.5 x 24.5 cm

Interrogating encounters

- A series of 'encounters' (after Willis, Kippax & Bourdieu) personally experienced turning points, stepping stones, aha's, significant memories, ideas/readings are identified and written up.
- Then subjected to critical interrogations....focus, comparison, discussion, reflection, doubt, iteration and 'so what's ?

Pitfalls

- Pitfalls of autobiographical accounts include the problems of -
- Generisability ie how does apply to others?
- Tendency to narcissism
- Fatal allure of story (Alverman 2000)

Question

- How can dominant or culturally conditioned stories (narratives, discourses..) be broken?
- This is more than a process of theoretical maneuvering, of reconceptualisation but one of deliberately unlearning, deconceptualising

How? some possibilities

- Phenomenology
- Be open to fractured unresolved understandings?
- Practice 'kenosis' (Hillman & Ventura 1992) ie the suspension of certainty.
- Encourage hidden transcripts (Scott) transforming the 'idiosyncratic to the emblematic' (Bourdieu)
- Focus upon experience/practice as touchstone to theory/story

WG Sebald

- Use of techniques of WG Sebald who was German born academic from UK
- Use of unframed & untitled grainy black & white photos
- Use a text (long sentences & paragraphs) that obliquely wander under culturally conditioned sentimentality and forgetting

Reanimating the world/place

- How can the world around us (the places) be related to by us humans as more than just 'behaving matter' (Evernden)?
- Can places have their own advocacy, intelligence, emotions...memories even?

What emerges?

- What emerges following a process of deconceptualisation?
- What new impressions, emotions, connections, possibilities and new narratives are then possible?
- What emerges from the personal and collective unconscious?

Emergent experience

- After years of working on practical projects in this area rather than feeling 'at one' I felt increasingly uncomfortable.
- I discussed this and reflected upon it and realised that... this land, country is full of unexpressed grief....Also the subject of inquiry of Sebald.

Some relevant quotations

- 'Find the story you are living or the story will live you' (Joseph Campbell)
- 'Where does the self end?' (James Hillman)
- 'Fracture renders the familiar explicit' (Hiedegger ??)

2 questions to end with

- 1) If it is accepted that there is a tension between practice and theory then does it follow that there is a challenge in presenting a practice based thesis in academia? The peers of practice and experience may well not be in academia?
- 2) Why are there so many churches and other spiritual places and symbols in my place practice photos? Tension between writing and reading & what some other part of me is drawn to.....





