

*An Elastic Feeling of Space, Images and Imaginings*

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‘Travel is not so much a movement towards cultural discovery, but towards *recovery*. And it is home which is the object of most journeys’ (Gerster, 1995, p.2)

So here I am, at the immigration desk getting a stamp to record the date of my entering this foreign place Australia officially for the first time, but actually a place which my mind has inhabited for long. I am a ‘temporary visitor’, welcomed but with a *deadline*—not taken it literally I hope—to remove my bodily presence from Australian frontiers. I will seek to break them though, and if I cannot prevail here physically, hopefully I will symbolically remain in the minds of the people I bond with.

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‘I want to look at the land. I want to walk on it. I know that sounds silly, but I want to be there, and imagine what it was like for the people then’ (Morgan, 1987, p.271)

The officer looks at my passport, smiles and says with a strong Australian accent: ‘Have a g’day, Sil’. Does she put on the accent and shorten words just to confirm the newcomers’ preconceptions of stereotypical Australia? And what are mine anyway? This country has been a landscape of desire since Mum began telling me about her travels here. She would describe it as a vast, isolated land where distances were long. Was that a warning? And the fact that she made me read Sally Morgan’s *My Place...* I cannot make sense of it. What was she trying to tell me about this place? All I can think of is that, Australia being a huge space, I can certainly find *my* place here. Moving to a vast and unknown territory offers the possibility of transfiguring my identity. Am I seeking to enact a different personality—or rather will it be this place that ascribes one to me? Am I taking advantage of spatial distance to leave some flaws *behind*—then, in spatial opposition, Australia is what lies positively *ahead*? Or perhaps I have just come to memorialize mum’s past experience by (re)visiting with my body—which after all is made out from hers—the ‘very same’ places—excuse the paradox, for places are

constantly (re)constructed and never literally the ‘same’—she visited and people she met thirty years ago?

Too many questions. I smile at all the special/spatial connections and pick up my luggage, my few belongings from ‘home’. But the shirt I am wearing does not even come from there. Made in China, a French girl bought it in Germany and left it to a friend in America who visited me in Barcelona and gave it to me, and I brought it to Australia. It has a tiny hole, a missing button and a black stain, signs of a well-travelled and worn-out life.

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‘Names make habitable or believable the place that they  
clothe with a word’ (De Certeau, 1984, p.105)

Through the bus window I see a sign announcing we are entering New South Wales. The name evokes my time in Britain, but the subtropical scenery awakens me of any nostalgic mental journey. This is not Europe, but a remote spatial reproduction of European values at the cost of the displacement of other societies. Is this site-hardening? Do I have to emulate colonizers and explore the whole region in order to map it enough in my mind so that I feel part of it?

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‘What term should be used to describe the division which  
keeps [...] physical space, mental space and social space  
[...from] overlap? Distortion?’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p.14)

Standing puzzled on the threshold of my new home, I wonder why there are fly-nets on the windows. It looks like a prison. The front door is unlocked but I cannot see anyone inside. They are scared of flies breaking in, but not thieves? Why is the living room full of bongos, guitars, ukuleles and amplifiers and yet it is so silent? What is the common space where the seven housemates meet? Have they developed one or is everyone shut in their rooms speaking to each other on Facebook? How will I share my intimate space after years of living on my own? Why is there a floor carpet with such a hot climate? I raise my eyes towards a window and it reveals a tropical banana tree, but my nose transports me somewhere else. Somebody is cooking with Indian spices. Where exactly am I?

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‘One motivation for developing the ‘garden suburb’  
[...was] to clean up slums and keep people ‘off the streets’  
by putting them in backyards’ (Muecke, 1999, p.130)

My housemates walk around barefoot—is that a form of resistance? But they do not walk much anyway. Everyone here drives—have cars taken the streets? Are drivers colonizing the space? I certainly see and *feel* their intimidating and condescending gaze when they cross me on my twenty-minute steep walk to the nearest shops. They cannot imagine the peace and pleasure in walking under such a beautiful sky. Locals hardly sit or wonder around the streets—apart from a few dates of national ‘pride’ when some march bombastically to restate their ‘belonging’ to this place. They are missing its greatness. They are all too busy cuddling up in their cosy homes. Is this the suburbia experience? The streets of this town look naked. Even rubbish bins are kept within the boundaries of private houses. Would having them outside turn public space too vulgar? These streets are already disturbing anyway: when I go for a jog in the evening, there is not much street lighting, there are few pathways, and all I bump into are thick spider webs wrapping my face, but no pedestrians rubbing my shoulders...Could this not be a description of a marginal space?

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Emotional space is ‘elastic’ It feels like one thing but then, all of a sudden, it changes to something else [...] Being in space is difficult but obligatory’ (Koskela, 2000, p.259)

Lying in bed, I look at my bedroom’s empty walls. I have not dared to contest the landlord’s strategy of keeping the rooms transient and depersonalized by not allowing renters to hang anything anywhere. I do not own this place, so no nostalgic photographs, no material evidence of my previous existence...or of my present one. I cannot leave traces of my time in this bedroom—this blank *space* represents my (ful)filled *time* here. Thus, my tactics to reconcile time and place here is to take refuge in my mind. My daydreaming reflects Bachelard’s description of it as blending memory and imagination across dwelling-places.

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‘Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography [...it is] about images and imaginings’ (Said, 1994, p.6)

My mind cannot still come into terms with life in this ‘habitus’. Not even my senses can. This place is still visually and sonorously shocking. The university evokes a natural park with streams, subtropical flora, koalas up in trees and birds penetrating my eardrum. Perhaps it is because I come from a city. Or perhaps mine is the tourist gaze of not seeing the literal reality but a figured one with echoes of the ideal and extraordinary...My exotic understanding and feeling about this place has been predetermined. And on a darker note it continues to be informed by surveillance cameras warning me to fear its immensity at night time. And yet I struggle to resist reading this landscape in an unpleasant way: it was one night sitting under a tree in the university forest that I saw my first shooting star.

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‘Soon, if we don’t know where we are going, we no longer know where we are’ (Bachelard, 1994, p.185)

Never as before have I lived a place with so much emotion. It has definitely been the people here—both the ones I met and the ones I read—, their deeply felt and expressed spirituality and care for places, that have awoken in me endless questions and sentiments about location. Yet I feel more disoriented than ever.

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