

# Charting the margins of experience through the lens of a ‘vulnerable observer’

*Genny Blades*

## Abstract

*Peeling back the outer layers – the familiar – is drawing me to the unfamiliar. Just like where I am now – in an unfamiliar place. I feel and live my vulnerability – my body churns; I feel exposed in this ‘space in-between’... Blades (Research Diary 2004).*

Engaging with emotion in my research has been a deliberate choice. In an effort to chart the margins of experience – this ‘space in-between’ that can’t quite be defined yet, this paper is a story of my research journey to date which can be defined as a journey through ‘borderlands’, skirting passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity. My intent is to identify signposts along the way that may bring ‘voice’ or language to the margins of experience. As an educator, this may emerge as being on the margins of pedagogy: power and powerlessness; control and vulnerability. It is also an exploration of how we make meaning from lived experience and the role of language and embodied experience are significant elements of this.

At the core of this inquiry, the tensions and ambiguities between attachment and denial will be explored. Perhaps it is time to challenge the way we express our most deeply held place attachments in outdoor education and question whether we are viewing the land (and ourselves) with a ‘disembodied gaze’.

## Traveler

I am like the traveler  
who reaches the port and no one awaits him;  
I am the timid traveler who walks  
among strangers embracing and smiles  
not meant for him...  
Like the lone traveler  
Who raises his overcoat collar  
On the great, cold wharf...

- Dulcie Maria Loynaz

## Introduction

That evocative piece of writing by Ruth Behar (1996) provides a connection to us as the reader of some sense of vulnerability. It may resonate deeply within you or you may catch it in a moment, but it is there, within you, within all of us. Acknowledging the extent of my own vulnerability has been, surprisingly, an entry point to my research as expressed in my research diary:

*Peeling back the outer layers – the familiar – is drawing me to the unfamiliar. Just like where I am now – in an unfamiliar place. I feel and live my vulnerability – my body churns; I feel exposed in this ‘space in-between’... Blades (2004).*

I have used the term ‘displacement’ to describe this experience. The philosopher, Edward Casey (1993) draws out the meaning of displacement emphatically by positioning it in relation to what he terms ‘implacement’. Implacement, he defines as our ‘immediate placement’ and points out that the ‘...pervasiveness of place and its plurality of forms are such that we can grasp the perplexing phenomenon of displacement...only in relation to an abiding implacement (Casey, 1993, p.xiv).’ This pervasiveness is undeniable, and Casey (1993, p.xv) elaborates on the complexities and the immutable role that ‘place’ has in ‘directing’ and ‘stabilizing’ us as well as to ‘memorialize’ and ‘identify’ us – of “being-in-the-world.” So the experience of displacement can leave us without that orientation in a ‘complex and confusing world’ (Casey, 1993, p.xv).

Therefore, as an emerging researcher, I could not ignore my own experience of displacement. It was in the early stages of having to form a research question for a subject I was doing in qualitative research methods that tensions emerged within me and I experienced ‘fuzziness, confusion and denial’ both intellectually and emotionally. I had originally considered exploring the experience of journey in relation to place. It was in a moment of ‘letting go’ of these tensions that my focus shifted and as Esterson (cited in Reason & Rowan, 1988) pointed out, it can be in this moment when an emerging hypothesis or some interpretation of events can occur. It may appear as an ‘intuitive flash’ in ‘...a moment between active reflection and period of rest...’ where something fresh, new and unexpected – a ‘revelation’ – can emerge (Esterson, 1988, p.169).

Subsequently, following the dimensions of Heuristic research as explained by Moustakas (1967, cited in Reason & Rowan, 1988) through his exploration of the experience of loneliness,

... I entered into formal study of (displacement), taking into it my own growing awareness, the discovery of myself as a (displaced) person, my experiences in (a new job), and my many moments, conversations, dialogues, and discussions with other persons...I steeped myself in a world of (displacement), letting my life take root and unfold in it, letting its dimensions and meanings and forms evolve its own timetable and dynamics (p.213).

So a process of self inquiry emerged, almost unplanned! Journey remained a part of this inquiry but had moved beyond my original literal interpretation of journey in the form of an outdoor education expedition to a metaphorical construct around ones life journey. The methods of this inquiry have involved mapping my personal lived experience with the aim of identifying signposts along the way that may bring ‘voice’ or language to the margins of experience. As an educator, this may emerge as being on the margins of pedagogy: power and powerlessness; control and vulnerability. It is also an exploration of how we make meaning from lived experience and the role of language and embodied experience are elements of this. It touches on transformational approaches to learning but does not apply these directly to educational settings or outcomes at this stage.

This paper also serves to share a story about research as a form of creativity in which ‘...intuition, spontaneity, and self-exploration are seen as components of unified experience... (Moustakis,1967, p.216).’ The outcomes I hope to achieve involve locating “us” in the picture, that is, bringing the invisible to the visible, the unheard to being heard. Engaging with emotion is no accident as Behar (1996) describes this as ‘borderland research’ which she sees as ‘...efforts to map an intermediate space we can’t quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life (p.174).’

‘If you don’t mind going places without a map, follow me (Behar, 1996 p.33).’

## **Starting Point: a personal frame of reference**

The guide to my research inquiry has been, in a large part, from my personal frame of reference. In struggling to come to terms with loss, ‘...I began to bear witness to what my affinity with the sublime in nature...’ as an outdoor educator and nature traveler had repressed (King, 2003, p.146, p.7).<sup>1</sup> So themes around the ‘margins’ began to emerge in terms of loss, grief, denial and displacement. In order to locate these themes within the context of outdoor education has been challenging yet at the same time incredibly revealing. It has been a journey of exploration into qualitative research and as Lawler (1998) pointed out, qualitative research can be ‘...fluid in nature’ where things will change, and you have a sense of ‘feeling’ your way (p.78).

Another aspect from my personal frame of reference has been a recognition and understanding of the historical antecedents to this moment. Four years ago a professional ‘crisis’ stirred my consciousness and was the beginning of a transformational journey for me that was more than just professional. I had taken leave from full time employment with the Department of Education as my first step in reacting to the disorientation I was feeling, a feeling of being lost or not locating myself in outdoor education at that place and time. I had restricted my interpretation of my experiences to critical reflections and rational analysis until undertaking travel to places such as India and Tibet. This provided me with powerful inter-cultural experiences whereby

...identification of ‘core values’ related to a deep cultural identity...(provided me)... with the personal resources to deal with destabilising moments, especially when immersed in an alien or threatening cultural context (Foster-Smith & Mulligan, 2003, p.4).

The dissonance I began to notice in my work as an outdoor educator was as if I was observing myself going through the mechanics of teaching rather than being absorbed in the creative process of teaching. The ‘doing’ in these activities seemed to get in the way of the ‘feeling and being’ there in a place. The connection between the students and nature was blurred by the attention to physical comfort (or discomfort) and the bus(y)ness of ‘doing’. These experiences are embodied in the term ‘outward bound’.

---

<sup>1</sup> My acknowledgement and thanks goes to Vicki King for sharing with me her work and experiences around displacement and insisting that Ruth Behar’s (1996) book is worth the read.

Cumes (1998, p.64) describes the acquisition of ‘outwardly directed hard skills’ as invoking directed attention that can lead to an increase in:

- Self-concept
- Self-esteem
- Self-sufficiency
- Self-mastery

As Christie (1992, p.7) observed, with the western obsession of the integration of personal experiences into a self, a self which is reduced to its constituent parts only, we can’t make references to our experiences without referring to ourselves. This, of course, alienates us and inhibits the capacity for mutual and reciprocal relationships to emerge from our experiences. In a sense, the very nature of this reality ‘privileges personal abilities, and motivation and individual achievements (Christie, 1992, p.227).’

I began to recognise my privileged position as white and middle class, holding onto values of attachment in relation to my ‘place’ in society. However, there was a contradiction with my evolving feelings of displacement: the sense of being out of place and the incongruities that surrounded my identity.

It became an experience of contradiction which ‘...is inseparable from any real attempt to open oneself up to what is going on. For most of us, this is a painful process because we are not used to it, and our education has not prepared us for it (Esterson, 1988, p.169).’ Recently, through a sudden change brought about by personal trauma, I found myself suddenly exposed and vulnerable. Therefore, within my emerging contradictions I chose to adopt the lens of a ‘vulnerable observer’. Through a combination of exploring connections to nature and place at a personal level of experience in addition to readings, this has enabled me to proceed at both a conceptual level and experiential level. This process, as Esterson (1988, p.169) recognised, has contributed to my current research stance. I have registered phenomenologically the situation and its contradictions giving rise to my ‘revelation’, which I alluded to in the introduction. By positioning myself authentically in my research, this has also enabled me to locate the experience of dissonance for critical examination with the intent of drawing meaning around shared experiences that help put ‘*us*’ in the picture (Bell, 1993, p.22).

## **Place and Displacement**

As revealed in the introduction, ‘place’ is central to my research question and in the unfolding of the experience of displacement, it has revealed the multiple complexities and discontinuities around this concept. As a starting point, Relph’s (1992) description of the fundamental parts of place is helpful:

The word ‘place’ is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other (p.37).

The term, sense of place has become very popular and is used from a range of perspectives. In a review of the work by Malpas (1999), Cameron (2004, p.3) highlights the suggestion by Malpas ‘...that it is the complex structure of place itself

that makes experience, *any* human experience, possible at all.’ In approaching this complexity, his use of the term ‘nesting’ is effective in conceptualising the ‘structural interdependencies’ of: objective and subjective space, self-subjectivity and other-subjectivity, memory and mental states (thoughts, feelings and experiences), action and narrative (Cameron, 2004, p.3). For example, ‘...how memories are nested within each other the way places are nested within other places with multiple and overlapping connections (Cameron, 2004, p.3).’

This allows for incredibly rich narrative to emerge in terms of using modes of inquiry such as memory, imagination, subjectivity and objectivity and embodied experience. Actions are nested in personal projects that are nested in larger narratives that structure place and are structured by place. Consequently,

To have a sense of one’s own identity...is to have a sense, not of some simple underlying self that is one’s own, but rather of a particular place in the world. While the having of such a sense of place consists in having a grasp of a conceptually complex structure – a structure that encompasses different forms of spaciality, concepts of self, of others and of an objective order of things – it is also a sense of place that is necessarily articulated linguistically (Malpas, 1999, p.152).

Pinn (2003, p.42) had observed that her identity had come from multiple places, selves and communities born from an experience of being on the move or ‘nomadic’.<sup>2</sup> She noted that if we try and define place as a totality this can lead to exclusions and marginalisations (Pinn, 2003, p.43). There is a ‘space-in-between’ where differences are contested and there is an important question as to ‘...whose voices are being heard and whose voices are being marginalised (Pinn, 2003, p.43).’ In the context of outdoor education, Wattchow (2003) addresses this in constructing ‘...a fuller text that contains less forgotten and silenced voices (p.161)’ in developing a richer understanding of outdoor education practice in relation to place in Australia.

In articulating place through voices on the margins, the position of the experience of displacement can be explored more fully. As an example, the Aboriginal experience of displacement is reflected in the denial by white society of the separation by Aborigines from their abundantly rich multiple and overlapping connections to place. This experience was explored through an examination of European and Indigenous art by King (2004). As King (2004) pointed out, perhaps it is time to challenge the way we express our most deeply held place attachments and question whether we are viewing the land with a ‘disembodied gaze’. Are we projecting our desire for a utopia or ‘no-place’, a ‘potential space’<sup>3</sup> that we have created to avoid painful realities (King, 2004, p.147)? This, to some degree, reflects a hierarchical dualism in the sense of a ‘homogenised’ gaze that in this instance, can deny Aboriginal diversity (Plumwood, 1993, p.48).

In reflecting upon where our gaze comes from, the influence of a colonised psyche upon our sense of connection as Anthony (1995) commented, has been filtered by a

---

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Chatwin’s book *The Songlines* is acknowledged by Pinn (2003) as having helped her transform her ‘troubled sense of placenessness’ to an affirming identity (p.41).

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘potential space’ was described by the late art critic, Peter Fuller in *Art and Psychoanalysis*. It is the space where inner reality and external life both contribute. Cited in King (2004, p.144)

‘...false sense of privilege of whiteness’ (p.265). Attachment to things like ‘cleanliness’ and ‘orderliness’ actually increases our degrees of separation which can bring about the experience of displacement. Through my own actions of compartmentalising experiences in nature and out of nature, I was attaching my own interpretation of a sublime sense of nature that avoided the discontinuities of life and reduced the chaotic complexity of nature to a utopia that provided refuge or escape. Critiques of deep ecology have also revealed a cultural dimension to the ways we can filter experience. Anthony (1995) observed the paradox of how we can ‘think like mountains’ but not be able to ‘think like black people’ (p.273). Plumwood’s (1993) critique of deep ecology in terms of its ‘denial of difference’ raises interesting issues around the experience of displacement and the role of denial.

This is at the core of revealing and exploring the tensions and ambiguities between attachment and denial. This dualism reveals a gap in our lives that has been rampantly filled by acts of consumption and domination. Hill (2003, p.181) describes this by the trait of ‘compensatory stimulation’ whereby our ‘adapted selves’ keeps us from:

- acknowledging our woundedness
- confronting our fears, our helplessness and our fundamental disconnectedness and isolation, not just from place, but from all others, and
- deeply investigating and coming to know our own essential nature and biology.

## **Experience and Knowledge**

Hence, different ways of thinking and acting in the world emerge as critical aspects to this inquiry and Spretnak’s (1999) examination of ‘modern ideologies of denial’ draws a useful map in charting these differences. Termed as an ‘ecological postmodernist’ worldview, she described this orientation as acknowledging

...the enormous role of social construction of concepts in shaping human experience, (and)...it also acknowledges our constitutive embeddedness in subtle bodily, ecological, and cosmological processes (p.133).

This perspective emerges from many different directions. One direction being the exploration of the nature of language and meaning, particularly from the ‘experiential insights’ of Lakoff & Johnson (1980) in ‘metaphors we live by’. They have demonstrated that nearly all conceptual and abstract thought is structured metaphorically and most of those metaphors derive from bodily experience in the world. As Heron (1992, p.139) stated, ‘...metaphor is about homology, correspondence in structure, the pattern that connects everything with everything else.’

In outdoor education, the use of metaphor is a significant ‘facilitation tool’ but it has the potential to separate or disconnect us from experience and place. Bell (1993) adopted a critical perspective and questioned prevailing metaphors such as to ‘overcome your fears’. She observed that this

...may be working against the needs of those participants who want to learn to feel their fear physically, when appropriate, and respond in a way that does not put them at risk, but allows them to act to protect themselves (p. 23).

If we don't question this metaphor we disempower the participant and serve to further separate them from their lived experience.

Furthermore, those not involved in defining the dominant terms can only be 'objectified', such as women, "other" classes, races, ethnicities, sexual identity groups, and so on (Bell, 1993, p.21). Therefore,

...it becomes more apparent when the accepted definitions do not match the lived experiences of "others," when they do not "make sense" to those who experience is denied by the dominant norm. Those who do not experience "reality" the way "everyone else" does cannot take it for granted. And, when the dissonance is not experienced by "us," it is easier for "us" to take things for granted as "natural," suppressing calls for change (Bell, 1993, p.21).

As Lakoff & Johnson (1980, p.233) pointed out, having experiences that can create alternative metaphors can contribute towards a greater sense of self-understanding and your place in this world. The metaphor 'courage in vulnerability'<sup>4</sup> has become a source of strength and creativity for me in both my research and my life and so perhaps the exploration of this experience of displacement is a story of renewal.

In addition to language, embodied knowing is significant in drawing meaning from experiences. Haskell (1999) describes embodiment as having

...a double sense of the body as living and the body as the experience, structure, or context of cognition, which tries to bridge the gap between cognitive science and what this means for human everyday experience (p154,5).

However, as Bell (1993,p.20) observed, '...abstract thinking is privileged over embodied knowing'. This is reflected in 'colonised' forms of educational systems that hold narrow, prescriptive linear views (Hill, 2001). To a certain degree, Kolb's (1984, cited in Heron, 1992) experiential learning cycle reflects this deficiency. According to Heron (1992, p.193), he sees this deficiency stemming from its scientific base which lacks a 'phenomenal base' in the psychological modes. Contradictions occur in the lived experience and do not necessarily become visible. It is other ways of making meaning such as critical reflexivity and perception or pre-reflective learning that are transformational dimensions and more attuned to holistic forms of learning and education. The work of Mezirow (1991) is central to this and in the context of experiential education, the paper by Hutchison & Bosacki (2000) addresses this approach.

Following on from those experiences outlined above, the definition of transformative learning by Elias (1997) resonates with my research.

---

<sup>4</sup> This metaphor was posed by a participant at a Sense of Place Colloquium I recently attended in April, 2004

...transformative learning is the expansion of consciousness through the transformation of basic worldview and specific capacities of self; transformative learning is facilitated through consciously directed processes such as appreciatively accessing and receiving the symbolic contents of the unconscious and critically analyzing underlying premises (p.3).

Embedded within this definition are two important aspects: one is the '*rational capacities*' of the conscious mind – the presence and development of the 'witness self' or 'conscious I' which was integral to Mezirow's definition of transformative learning. The other is '*appreciative capacities*' of the conscious mind as well as the '*symbolic contents*' of the unconscious mind. The latter stems from Jungian theorists and this process is described as 'discernment', which is an appreciative and receptive process (Elias, 1997,p.3).

Over the past year I began to map symbolic contents from a range of experiences including dreams. I began to recognise the significance of the dissonance I was experiencing professionally as many dreams emerged relating to disorienting experiences in teaching as the following excerpt from my dream diary reveals:

*I was giving outdoor education information to a very large group of students. I was feeling frustrated as they were noisy and not paying attention – too large a group I protested to myself. I tried sharing the information (minimal impact topic) to the other outdoor education staff there so that they could help by working with smaller groups. They were laughing and joining in with the students – an overall chaotic scene!* (Blades, 2003)

It is these disorienting experiences both at a conscious and subconscious level that have prompted a change in my consciousness and as Elias (1997) points out, transformational learning often happens as a result of a disorienting experience.

## **Feeling and emotion as methodology**

As I foregrounded in my introduction, I entered into the experience of displacement and this was about being present in this world amidst the discontinuities of experience of body and psyche. This, I believe, falls into the realms of new paradigm research where Reason & Rowan (1988) highlighted the need for some changed way of looking at the world and interpreting it. They kept returning to the ways of thinking and states of consciousness as key parts to this and found the Hegelian position of levels of consciousness<sup>5</sup> particularly helpful (Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.115). Very briefly, a 'realised level' emerged as enabling a creative and active presence in research including things such as entering into an awareness whereby the researcher can 'unfocus' and give up existing preconceptions. In other words, 'to suspend thinking yet at the same time 'stay aware of your experience' so as to avoid 'tramping round the circle of existing preconceptions' that takes *us* out of contact with reality (Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.122). This is similar to the process of 'discernment' that Elias (1997) describes and in a sense it parallels

---

<sup>5</sup> Hegel (1971) says that there are three levels of consciousness available to people. They are the primary level, social level and realised level. See Reason & Rowan (1988) Chapter 10 for a full account of this.

..personal growth work or general self discovery, whereby these patterns are questioned in such a way that they can change. The self-image gets taken apart, and the rich realm of subjectivity which was pushed down as being too dangerous and too weak is now opened up and entered into and allowed to exist and be used and transformed. There is a feeling which then comes in, of being real instead of unreal (Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.124).

The ontological perspective that informs my inquiry does stem from a spiritual philosophy, similar to that outlined by Heron (1992). This recognises the ‘differentiated centres of consciousness within a cosmic presence’ and is congruent with Spretnak’s (1999) ‘ecological postmodernist’ worldview. Also, further interpretation comes from a hermeneutic view in relation to embodied knowing as well as aspects from critical theory since social and cultural factors are a part of this. Hence there is a cross-over between the interpretative paradigm and the critical paradigm (Higgs, 2001).

My research has taken the form of an experiential mapping process in which I have attempted to record immediate experiences via observing ‘bodily’ experiences. As Abram (1996, p.74,75) points out: “..the bodily gesture speaks directly to our own body, and is thereby understood without any interior reflection ...thus we learn our native language not mentally but bodily.” Taking a more sensual and fluid approach, I hope to negotiate the abstract, intellectual with the experience itself in order to draw meaning from the experience.

Therefore, in what Heron & Reason (1998) offer in terms of a ‘four-point epistemology’ comprising experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing and practical knowing<sup>6</sup> is relevant. This provides for multiple ways of knowing to emerge which helps in interpreting the experience with truth and authenticity. For my inquiry, I have found it helpful to combine them with Heron’s (1992) four ‘participatory modes’. Very briefly, they present a dynamic interaction of four world views that are ‘parented’ by each of these modes. Thus,

- The affective mode – the world of presence
- The imaginal mode – the world of appearance
- The conceptual mode – the world of essence
- The practical mode – the world of existence

In the affective mode the roles of emotion and feeling are paramount and Heron (1992) carefully draws out the distinctive aspects of these two modes. He locates feeling as a ‘participatory’ form and emotion as the ‘individuating’ form which gives us locus within that network (p.119)<sup>7</sup>. Within the imaginal mode exists perception, dreaming, memory, vision, creative imagination and gives rise to the conceptual mode (Heron, 1992, p.138).

In navigating through these modes a ‘dialectical process of engagement’ occurred in terms of allowing contradictions to emerge and exploring their interactions (Reason &

---

<sup>6</sup> I won’t go into specific detail with regards to each of these epistemologies. However, in terms of their application to outdoor and environmental education, Nichol’s (2003) account is very comprehensive and informative.

<sup>7</sup> An example of this connection is given in this statement: “I feel your presence and it fills me with delight.” Heron (1992, p.119)

Rowan, 1988). This unraveling became my research framework and I adopted the research cycle model outlined by Reason & Rowan (1988) as an initial guide. My starting point was the ‘encounter’ of displacement and by ‘...resting in my own experience’ I opened myself up to my own sense of vulnerability and guided by heuristic inquiry informed by Moustakis (1967, p.214), I explored my experience of displacement with the data emerging from:

1. A crisis which created a question or a problem: *this was referred to in my account of my starting point (p.3)*;
2. A search of self in solitude (emergent recognition of vulnerability/displacement): *Personal Research Journal and personal writing/reflection*;
3. An expanding awareness through being open to it as a lived experience (through watching, listening, feeling, conversations etc.): *Personal writing and research Journal*;
4. A steeping of myself in the deeper regions (centre of my world): *Prose*;
5. An intuitive grasping of the patterns of this experience (of related aspects and different associations), until an integrated vision and awareness emerged: *My own experiential knowledge*;
6. Further clarification, delineation and refinement through reading and research;
7. Creation of a report on this experience and implications for further study.

Writing is a significant element to this and as Richardson (2000) argues, the act of writing as an ethnography or autoethnography can be a valuable creative analytic practice involving critical reflexivity (p.505). She noted that a particular kind of postmodernist thinking she found helpful was poststructuralism in that it linked ‘...language, subjectivity, social organization, and power (p.502).’ Brown (2003) pointed out the contributions that this style of research, amongst other ‘alternative’ approaches can make to understanding in more depth and richness, the experience and knowledge of outdoor education.

## **Re-stor(y)ing journey and place – discussion**

In presenting my ‘findings’, I will situate my writing and reflections around emerging meanings that came from my lived experience of displacement. These writings are a mixture of genres: personal narrative, journal and reflection writing as well as some writing drawn from other writers that have resonated with me. It does position me in a state of ‘illegitimacy’, a term borrowed from Richardson (2000), whereby I have written about contradictions: in this case, being in a profession called outdoor education and yet at the same time exploring my place within that. ‘How is my story like and unlike the stories of others struggling to make sense of themselves, to retrieve suppressed selves, to act ethically? (Richardson, 2000, p.509).’

This discussion weaves a range of luminous experiences such as imaginative moments, emotions, considered reflections in combination with some key conceptual understandings that will hopefully resonate as shared human experience. The sequence of readings is not chronological but rather, an attempt to unfold the experience in a way that goes back to Malpas’s (1999) conceptualisation of place and experience where ‘...memories are nested

within each other the way places are nested within other places with multiple and overlapping connections (cited in Cameron, 2004, p.3).’

*As you read selected writings, take time – pause – soften your focus.*

To begin with, the intense emotional force within the experience of displacement bears witness to the fact of how excruciating the paradoxes of attachment and place are, a point made by Behar (1996, p.81). The following prose combines memories, emotions, feelings, and imagination:

### **Unveiling the cloak of fear**

*Climbing on rock in this fragile place – the glasshouse mountains  
The heat is with me and sweat exudes through my pores  
Is it fear?  
The crack is long and well defined  
And the has the name – ‘bridge over troubled waters’  
My hands grasp the edges and my fist turns and compresses  
But in a moment the line is less predictable  
My heart pounds and I look far below to my last piece of protection  
Protection from what?  
I lose my grip with this rock  
Falling!*

To another place -

I have settled into an easy rhythm with this place by the river. It is the fourth morning and I decide to go for a paddle and have breakfast somewhere. I paddle through the ‘everglades’ and let myself just glide. The mirror-like reflections of the surrounding paperbark trees are here to greet me again. I venture through a narrow channel and ‘play’ with the trees, going under and around their extended, embracing arms. I think about how I have taken many students through this place. I pop out at a lake and the wind is blowing a strong gale so I look for a sheltered lakeside retreat to have breakfast.

Paddling back to my campsite, I notice body sensations that are arising in me. I feel a welcoming sense like, I am going back home. My body has a warm sensation. Then I am drawn towards a distinctive tree by the river. It is dead but has intricate patterns and diverse textures that call me there. I know this tree. I visited it yesterday but there is something unknown that it wants to tell me. I hold it and look closely as though it held my gaze. I explore its fine detail with my hands and tears well up in my eyes. We eventually parted, and I sensed a shift in my body sensation – it was a churning sensation in my solar plexus, a sense of impending change..

One week later – at ‘home’  
My partner tells me she is going to leave me  
I am falling!!  
Fear envelopes me like a dark, heavy cloak in the night  
My body goes numb...

*Back at Ngungun  
Amongst the family of mountains as told in Aboriginal legend  
I re-imagine my body on rock*

Here, the incongruities within nature and life were opened up to me as I became attentively aware of the sensate qualities and its animated possibilities as revealed in my encounter with the 'bark patterns' and in a personal crisis. Not only was an external world brought forth but an internal world as well through perception and emotion – a living process (Capra, 1996). Through an immersion in one place for a few days, my senses were slowly energised and awakened, '...combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns (Abram, 1996, p.63).' When I observed and felt the bark patterns it was as though their 'rhythms and forms' were composed of '...layers upon layers of earlier rhythms, and in engaging them (my) senses (were) led into an inexhaustible depth that echoes that of (my) own flesh (Abram, 1996, p.64).' 'Nesting' that encounter within other experiences in other places and repeated visits to places has revealed overlapping connections where fear and loss exist and allowed to rest in acknowledgement as a means of identifying my place within that experience.

Such evocative memories and emotions exist in my body consciousness and emerge as bodily sensations, something which periods of meditation can attune oneself to (Broomfield, 1997). The immersion into this experience of displacement from a researcher's perspective is reflected in my research journal entries (Blades, 2004). One excerpt follows:

### **Staff room conversations**

*I notice the intimate knowledge of place others have  
The contours of the land  
The cultural history  
The environmental impacts*

*I seek associations, connections*

*Feeling lost*

*My thoughts wander*

*I feel like I am an onlooker – like I'm outside of my body – disembodied – a part of the conversation but having to seek my location.*

I also observed my leadership on various outdoor education trips with university students. It was through an 'appreciative and receptive process' that I attempted to discern the complexities of the experience and place.

### **Gliding on water**

*I feel the familiar grip of the paddle,*

*The glide of boat on water, the guidance of the paddle.*

*I listen to my voice speak to the students – it sounds unsure,*

*This river is unfamiliar to me – I do not know its history, its story*

*Yet it is familiar – the reflections, the silence, the conversations of birds, wind and trees...*

*I receive maps and see the abstract representation of this new place which gives me some comfort*

*I feel like I am a 'beginner' leader – just keeping up with the group – I feel vulnerable.*

*I find my senses searching for connection – silent time on the river – talk to me – comfort me;*

*My world open and laid bare – not trapped in particular ways of doing, of being familiar.*

### **Walking**

*We walked with compass and map*

*Noted colour, light and shadows*

*Dead trees*

*Wombat yawning rock*

*Look at the night sky: emu, warrior, pointers, fun, aussie slang*

*Sleep under a rock ledge – crystal, granite, solid*

*I feel the support of one wall and the shelter it provides me*

*A cool breeze brushes over my face*

*We walk without map*

*We engage in a ‘mapping’ exercise of storied landscape and perception. Different stories and perceptions – littoral, imaginative, sensorial.*

*We walk to the caves and do a similar activity, this time using written descriptions to guide people to find a part of a poem. We then read it in the cave below. I set candles. We all crawl like lizards through the narrow caverns and explore the darkness.*

My earlier dissonance certainly located me in a ‘potential space’ that has had me re-vision my place as both an educator and in relation to place. Venturing into new places and having a vulnerable lens, I found myself encountering qualities of attentiveness and listening as part of my leadership approach. It has felt much more responsive and attuned to the place and participants compared to previous approaches I have adopted in the past that were more linear and prescriptive. This area of the intuitive aspects of outdoor and experiential leadership is worthy of further exploration and something to which Ringer (1999) has alluded to.

Furthermore, Elias (1997) noted that the conditions for the process of discernment are first and foremost ‘relational’: relational at an external level (eg. the help from an external guide) and relational at an internal level (eg. inner dialogue between the ego and other components of the collective unconscious). In providing that condition of ‘relation’, Ruthellen Josselson’s eight expressions of relational learning in western societies represents for me a helpful ‘external’ guide as an educator. This includes the extension by Hill (2003) in developing abilities to relate to nature, the environment, and other species. He expresses this in terms of a mutually supportive process that develops autonomy, mutualistic relationships and a sense of place.

It has been my repositioning of intention and receptivity in nature whilst utilising techniques of body, breath, all the senses and mind that have shaped and created significant conditions of self awareness. As an educator, this points to ways I can reconsider enabling the learner to be more connected to their experience in ways to support a learner’s journey to their ‘cosmic home’. Citing the work of Broomfield (1997), provisions could be made in the following ways:

- simplicity – *bring meditative silence into the learning environment*
- creativity – *delight in the unknowable, taking risks into strange places to ‘shake ourselves’*
- healing – *foster a sense of belonging*
- resolve conditioning – *teach self-trust and foster the ‘conscious I’*
- relate harmoniously with the environment – *provision for sensate experiences*

Mindell's (1995) insightful discussion around an approach to 'large group transformation' called "worldwork", provides an exciting platform to enact these opportunities, particularly in educational settings. As he stated that when you bring into the open the hidden content of your face-to-face interactions, you are working on the world's issues (Mindell, 1995, p.206).

"Bring your inner work out, speak about your powers, use them to shine a light on prejudices, and discover what nature does exist" (p.207).

The dialogue is about listening and about articulating an authentic experience that is not filtered by privilege. Rather, it is about being aware of privilege, enabling the dialogue to be open and help develop shared and common understandings.

Finally, other stories have resonated with the themes of my inquiry and I have found that they add to the richness of meaning. The following piece of fiction by Michael Leunig (2001) is an example:

Dear Mr. Curly,

I have not written to you for quite some time, I suppose because there has been very little to report. My journey appears to have developed into a process of steady plodding which I rather like. When you plod, everything seems to take forever and forever is a lovely thing once you stop being scared of it.

Strange, how something that takes a lot of time can give a feeling that there is a lot of time – and a lot of space and a good measure of ease. So onward I plod, through beautiful things and terrible things, too numerous to mention, with my duck ahead of me and my gargling angel to protect me from above. I am well and I hope you are too.

Best wishes; yours truly,  
Vasco Pyjama.

p.s. Is it "gargling" angel or "guardian" angel? Somebody once suggested it should be "guardian" but I grew up believing it was "gargling" – "My gargling angel" and that's how I think of it. Oh well, whatever; it seems to care for me!

Leunig (2001, p.9,10)

This story reflects 'courage in vulnerability' for me and links journeying and a sense of place to broader cultural conditions such as a sense of belonging where the interplay of attachment and displacement are beautifully played out (with the help of Vasco's 'gargling angel'!). As Mulligan (2003) stated, '...the aim of poetics is to resonate and not convince...(and)...with patience and an open heart we enter more ethical relationships with people and land (p.287).' It has a depth and resonance that speaks of discontinuities, hope, good things and care. It is a 'pilgrim's wisdom' where the categories of the 'ordinary' are '...marvelously opened up on foot' (Murphy, 2003, p.233). Mulligan (2003) referred to this 'dialogue between foot and ground' in the sense of 'drift lanes' (p.270)<sup>8</sup>. To travel on 'drift lanes' is to travel in '...circular movement of deepening associations where 'homecoming' cannot be assured because traveling and remaining at home become the same thing (Mulligan,

---

<sup>8</sup> 'Drift lanes' is a term Mulligan (2003) borrowed from the writer Bill Harney.

2003, p.270).’ This has shifted my view from a linear and static sense of journey to one which is interconnected and multi-layered.

Walking ‘in dialogue with foot to ground’ has become another metaphor of renewal for me.

**Diary excerpt 21/7/03:**

I’m on the train and eventually arrive at my destination. The sky is so blue and I soak in the air and feel nourished. I commence my walk laden with a few bags of groceries I have attached to the outside of my backpack. I notice my feet walk over the disturbed earth. Odd bits of rusty metal appear here and there, twisted and half buried. I imagine in another 40,000 years what archeological digs will reveal! I follow the railway tracks and listen to their high pitched humming and on the other side of me I notice the continual line of cars following the curved highway. Juxtaposed between the two linear paths I place foot to ground and notice the difference in pace between the three pathways. I have time to imagine, to notice. I finally enter this place I have come to visit and pause for a moment. I listen to the birds and the breeze. I arrive in this place and feel like I have come home.

The imaginal depths explored from walking along a seemingly ordinary stretch of land were extraordinary. This walk is an example of an approach I have explored over the past year in attempting to create a sense of not walking *through places* but places *going through me*. My view from and within place has become less marginalised as I am restor(y)ing my journey from the heart (Blades, 2004) and acknowledging difference and distinctiveness along the way.

**Conclusion**

It has been an interactive process along the lines of hermeneutic inquiry in that I have moved back and forth between my own lived experience and broader concepts. Here an existentialist form of thinking helps me contain or manage the complexities of this research. An ‘existential emotional position’ explains this evocatively:

(This position) ...is characterised by emergence of alternatives, by choice and commitment, by responsibility for the choice you made or you accept, and a willingness to work for personal contribution even if all is dark, depressed and uncertain...(Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.127).

More so, this allows for the ‘contemplative mode’ to occur during the ‘making sense’ phase and ‘...allows a more relaxed approach to the problem, where values and meanings are allowed to suggest themselves rather than be driven into a corner (Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.127).’

Furthermore, this process of reflexivity can be viewed as a study of ‘reciprocities’ as persons are always in relation (Esterson, 1988, p.167). Not only does it involve reflecting and acting, it also moves in depth and a ‘new mental stance’ emerges where an increase in insight and ability to act occurs. I must emphasise however, that this is an ‘early cycle’ and is limited to an exploration of emergent meaning of this experience from a largely autobiographical account.

So my story of displacement does turn into a story of renewal. From my ecological and existentialist perspectives, the intention was to demonstrate the choices possible

in terms of drawing meaning from different ways of knowing. In looking for patterns of connection, in this case in relation to place and journey, has involved ‘...*personal, circular, contradictory process* of knowing, of inquiry...(Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.136).’ This, in turn, has given voice to experience on the margins.

In unraveling the experience of displacement, the tensions between attachment and denial revealed itself as an attachment to the sublime of nature and at the same time, in nursing woundedness, this experience became an opening up of repressed feelings and emotions: a vulnerability. It isn’t about being stuck in these emotions but rather, acknowledging them and seeing them in relation to ‘other’ as a means of renewed change.

I have sought to be authentic in my mode of engagement in terms of the congruence between my positions as a researcher and the actions I have taken (Higgs, 2001, p.70) and what emerges is that ‘...truth becomes much more personal (Reason & Rowan, 1988, p.136).’ However, it is important that writing vulnerably is not beyond criticism and the forms of criticism presented ‘...respond vulnerably, in ways we must begin to try and imagine (Behar, 1996, p.175).’

The next phase of research may involve more mapping but in a collaborative sense.<sup>9</sup> It will also involve further refinement in terms of the choice of research methods as well as the role of the writing process as a form of inquiry.

I will also keep in mind the importance of dwelling in the present moment:

‘Don’t sacrifice the journey for the sake of the arrival (Behar, 1996, p.161).’<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> ‘Collaborative mapping’ was an approach discussed by Pinn (2003) in terms of re-stor(y)ing place more explicitly in relation to self and community (p.47).

<sup>10</sup> This is a quote from the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Naht Hanh.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abram, D. (1997) The Spell of the Sensuous. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Anthony, C. (1995) 'Ecopsychology and the Deconstruction of Whiteness'. In Roszak, T., Gomes, M. & Kanner, A. Ecopsychology. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. pp.263-276.
- Behar, R. (1996) The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Bell, B. (1993). What Constitutes Experience? Rethinking Theoretical Assumptions. Journal of Experiential Education 16(1), 29-33.
- Blades, G. (2004) Placing Foot to Ground. Pp.23 – 29 in Hope Like A River: place, art and activism. Unpublished proceedings: 5<sup>th</sup> Sense of Place Colloquium.
- Broomfield, J. (1997) Other Ways of Knowing. Rochester, Vermont, Inner Tradition Press
- Brown, M. (2003) So What? A different way to conduct outdoor education research to build alternate knowledge(s). Pp.76 – 85 in Relevance: Making it Happen. 13<sup>th</sup> national Outdoor Education Conference Proceedings, Outdoor Educators Association of South Australia.
- Cameron, J. (2004) Some Implications of Malpas' Places and Experience for Place Ethics and Education. Environmental and Architectural Newsletter. [http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/cameron\\_malpas.htm](http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/cameron_malpas.htm).
- Capra, F. (1996) Bringing Forth A World. The Web of Life. London, Harper Collins. Pp. 257-288. *Cited in Learning*. University of Western Sydney: Course Reader, pp.239 – 254.

- Christie, M. (1992) Exploring Aboriginal Alternatives to Western Thinking. Paper delivered to Conference on Thinking, Townsville, July 2.
- Cumes, D. (1998) Inner Passages Outer Journeys. Minnesota, Llewellyn Publications.
- Elias, D. (1997) 'It's Time to Change Our Minds: An Introduction to Transformational Learning.' Re Vision, 20(1) pp. 2-5
- Esterson, A. (1988) The Leaves of Spring: an appreciation. Pp.167 – 171 in Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (1988) Human Inquiry: A sourcebook of new paradigm research. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
- Fitzgerald, M. (1997) Ethnography. Pp.48 – 60 in Higgs, J. (Ed.) (1997) Qualitative Research: Discourse on Methodologies. Sydney: Hampden Press. p.61-74.
- Foster-Smith, J. & Mulligan, M. Decolonising Psyches for Intercultural Travel. Cited in 'Country' Community and Cultural Interfaces. Course Reader: University of Western Sydney, pp.1-9.
- Haskell, J. (1999). Ecological journey: An enactive view of the nature of experience. The Journal of Experiential Education 22(3), 154-161.
- Heron, J. (1992) Feeling and Personhood. London: Sage Publications.
- Higgs, J. (2001) Charting standpoints in qualitative research. Pp. 44 – 67 in Bryne-Armstrong, H., Higg, J. and Horsfall, D. (Eds.) Critical Moments in Qualitative Research. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann. *Cited in Qualitative Research*. University of Western Sydney: Course Reader, pp.50 – 74.
- Hill, S. (2003) Autonomy, mutualistic relationships, sense of place and conscious caring: a hopeful view of the present and future. Pp.170 - 179 in Cameron, J. (Ed.) Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia. Double bay, N.S.W: Longueville Books.
- Hill, S. (2001) Transformative Outdoor Education for healthy communities within sustainable environments. Pp.7 – 19 in 12<sup>th</sup> National Outdoor Education Conference: Education Outdoors – Our Sense of Place. La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia.
- Hutchison, D. & Bosacki, S. (2000) Over the edge: Can holistic education contribute to experiential education? The Journal of Experiential Education 23(3), 177 – 182.
- King, V. (2004) Examining Shimmer in Nature and Art. Pp.140 – 148 in Hope Like A River: place, art and activism. Unpublished proceedings: 5<sup>th</sup> Sense of Place Colloquium.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. Metaphors We Live By. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lawler, J. (1998) Choosing a research method: matching questions with methodologies. Pp.69 – 80 in Higgs, J. (Ed.) Writing Qualitative Research. Five

Dock N.S.W.: Hampden Press. *Cited in Qualitative Research*. University of Western Sydney: Course Reader, pp.75 – 88.

Leunig, M. (2001) The Curly Pyjama Letters. Camberwell Victoria: Penguin Books.

Malpas, J.E. (1999) Place and Experience: A philosophical topography. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mezirow, J. 1991. Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning. San Francisco, CA: Jossey – Bass *in Transformative Learning*. University of Western Sydney: Course reader, pp.7 – 44.

Mindell, A. (1995) Extracts from Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity. Lao Tse Press, Portland Oregon. *Cited in 'Country' Community and Cultural Interfaces*. University of Western Sydney, Course Reader, pp.178 - 208.

Moustakas, C. (1967) Heuristic Research. Pp.207 – 217 *in* Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (1988) Human Inquiry: A sourcebook of new paradigm research. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Mulligan, M. (2003) Feet to the ground in storied landscapes: Disrupting the colonial legacy with a poetic politics. In Adams, M. and Mulligan, M. (Eds) Decolonising Nature. London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., pp.267-289.

Murphy, S. (2003) The Practice of Stories and Places. Pp.221 – 233 *in* Cameron, J. (Ed.) Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia. Double bay, N.S.W: Longueville Books.

Nichol, R. (2003) Outdoor Education: Research Topic or Universal Value? Part Three. Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning 3 (1) 11 – 28.

Pinn, J.(2003) Restor(y)ing a sense of place, self and community. Pp.38 – 47 *in* Cameron, J. (Ed.) Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia. Double bay, N.S.W: Longueville Books.

Plumwood, V. (1993) Feminism and the Mastery of Nature. New York: Routledge.

Reason, P. & Rowan, J. (1988) Human Inquiry: A sourcebook of new paradigm research. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Relph, E. (1976) Place and Placelessness. London: Pion Ltd.

Richardson, L. (2000) Writing: a method of inquiry. Pp.923 0 948 *in* Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds) Handbook of Qualitative Research 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. *Cited in Qualitative Research*. University of Western Sydney: Course Reader, pp.497 – 522.

Ringer, M. (1999). The facilitation of facilitation? Searching for competencies in group work leadership. Scisco Conscientia 2(1), 1-19.

Spretnak, C. (1999) The Rise and Fall of Modern ideologies of Denial in Religious Business: Essays on Australian Aboriginal Spirituality. New York, Routledge, pp.217 – 226. Cited in Ecology and Spirituality, University Of Western Sydney: Course Reader, pp.115 - 137.

Wattchow, B. (2003) Many Voices Speak the Country: An ecological listening to experience in outdoor education. Pp.161 – 176 in Relevance: Making it Happen. 13<sup>th</sup> national Outdoor Education Conference Proceedings, Outdoor Educators Association of South Australia.

**Other:**

Blades, G. (2004) Personal Research Journal

Blades, G. (2004) Writing around the theme of Displacement

Blades, G. (2003) Personal Diary

Blades, G. (2003) Dream Diary

***About the author***

Genny is currently lecturing in outdoor education at La Trobe University, Bendigo. Prior to this, over the past 18 years, she has worked with the Department of Education in Queensland, teaching outdoor education in schools and outdoor education centres. Genny is also currently undertaking a Masters of Arts in Social Ecology.  
*Email g.blades@latrobe.edu.au*