ALIVE TO STORIED LANDSCAPES:
Story-telling, sense of place and social inclusion

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Stories can help create a sense of belonging to local places that can (I don't say will) encourage people to treat their local lifeworlds with more respect. However, I want to start my journey towards that point at a rather unusual place – an undefined spot on a lonely stretch of highway where you might join poet Mark O'Connor in getting out of the car, '…not because here seems special,' O'Connor notes, 'but because no place is real inside a car'.

From the verge of the road the grass in the adjoining paddock looks monotonous but as you enter it you notice a beaten wallaby path and begin to wonder how a hunter once contemplated the same scene.

'But you cannot focus – your attention is global
Crushed grass has no meaning on Tokyo's computers….

You could walk on a snake
with your mind on another continent.'

You soon feel a need to get back into the car

'But for now you are in this place and of it
and all its million years'

O'Connor's poem, The Visit, reminds us that nowhere is nowhere and that every place has its stories if we can attune ourselves to them. However, we live in a society that has a low level of attentiveness to the particular places we dwell in or pass through. I wonder, for example, how many people in this room will know the story of how the street or suburb you live in got their names and I wonder how many have pondered the relevance or otherwise of the place names we have inherited.

Yet, the complex processes that are often lumped together under the title 'globalization' appear to be increasing our appetite to have a sense of belonging to one or more locales in the world; to know where 'home' is at any one time. In the Globalism Institute we are interested in identity politics and the politics of belonging and not belonging. These things have a big impact on social tensions and the prospects for social cohesion. They have a major impact on the sustainability of local communities. And sense of place, or the lack of it, is a good place to begin an exploration of issues related to belonging and not belonging, and of social inclusion and exclusion. It is the ground on which questions of environmental sustainability and social sustainability of local communities overlap.

In Australia it is always instructive to compare the deep and complex sense of place that underpinned the identity of Aboriginal people with the more shallow sense of belonging that non-indigenous people have had. As the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner observed in his Boyer lectures in 1968, Aboriginal people tend to feel sorry for the rest of us because 'the whitefella has got no dreaming' and it's a pity that remark was not taken more seriously before now. Of course, we cannot replicate the depth of place relationships that Aboriginal people built with their modes of living over many thousands of years – and nor should we try – but we can work on our own kind of whitefella dreaming that will 're-enchant' the places in which we live and we can sensitise ourselves to the stories that are embedded in those places.

In a series of paintings completed in 1953 and 1954, Russell Drysdale tried to capture the strength and resilience in the faces of

Aboriginal people who refused to be separated from the land. In the painting called 'Shopping Day' we see a group dressed up in their 'finest' for a trip into Cairns. In this image it's the buildings and the exaggerated war statue that seem surreal and, as Geoffrey Dutton has suggested, the suggestion is that a colonization that worked from the head down failed to disrupt the connection of bare feet to ground.

Getting our feet to the ground can be a useful metaphor for sensitizing ourselves to local places and landscapes that we might otherwise glide across. And I think it is useful to combine that with the idea that anywhere we do stop to pay attention we can dig up the stories that have turned spaces into places. As the Nobel-winning poet Seamus Heaney has put it, places are both 'humanised' and 'humanising' at the same time.

There are two connected points that I want to emphasise as I develop my line of thought today.

The prevailing discourses on 'sustainability' tend to be a bit dry and a bit stale. The word 'sustainability' has been used glibly by many; overworked by enthusiasts; partially corrupted by others. It is not a word we can abandon because it fills a void in our language and consciousness. However, I welcome the idea that cultural work can add a 'fourth pillar' to the discourse and I would even go further in suggesting that the pillar should be a wedge that will penetrate the rest of the discourse and then infect it with colour, feeling, creativity and intense dialogue. I think David Malouf had an important point when he told an interviewer in 1996 that the job of a creative writer should not be to simply describe a place but rather to mythologise it so that readers will think more deeply 'the lives we live here'. We westerners have debased the concept of mythology, even trying to deny that our consciousness is shaped by our prevailing mythologies, transmitted through our cultural practices. Perhaps another way to talk about the fourth pillar is to say that we need to work on a mythology that can inspire people to live with more respect for the natural environment and other people. Is that another way of saying we need to work on our 'whitefella dreaming'?

Much of what we learn and communicate takes the form of stories, even though attempts have also been made to marginalize the importance of stories on the basis that they are 'not reliable' ways of constructing and communicating 'the truth'. Fortunately, the modernist belief in a single road to a universal 'truth' has been exposed as a dangerous illusion and stories are making a powerful comeback, even for social scientists. We have all experienced the power of good storytelling – in books, films, even in advertising when it works. For my purpose today, the important thing about rich stories – like any good 'art' – is that they only purport to offer partial insights and tend to defy universal interpretation. They might be manipulated for particular purposes but they can also be 'read' in other, perhaps contradictory, ways. So they stimulate — rather than close down — thought, reflection and dialogue. They can be interpreted and reinterpreted, recycled and revised as the 'data' for collective attempts at meaning-making. Through rich stories we can build a mythology that can connect the past to the future; an evolving mythology that can challenge, inspire and reinspire. And, of course, good stories – lived and 'found' – can be told by all kinds of people in all modes of communication (from a yarn to an art installation). They can make a serious discourse more aesthetically pleasing and this makes the discourse more sustainable.

I think it is safe to say that more and more Australian writers, film-makers, visual artists, and musicians are interested in stories emanating from particular people-place relationships. Specific places, or kinds of places, are more likely to feature in the stories that are told. This might range from the romantic escapism of something like the very popular Sea Change to the more satirical take on a kind of undifferentiated form of suburban life in the equally popular Kath and Kim. Leading writers, such as Tim Winton and David Malouf, are very place-conscious in their work and in Melbourne we have writers like Shane Maloney trying to mythologise places they know and love. I think that Arnold Zable's work is particularly important for contemporary Australia because he is exploring some complex — sometimes painful — ways in which different peoples and places have changed each other. Employing some of the traditional skill of a good Yiddish storyteller, he is interested in how people might adapt to new circumstances without necessarily losing a sense of identity that originated in other places. Some of his characters feel profoundly dislocated (a good word for my purposes); others try too hard to remake themselves; and some manage quite well to sustain multiple identities. Their lives are not easy but they sometimes find 'scraps of heaven' (to quote the title of his recent book) within the new lifeworlds they are forging in Melbourne. Public performances by Arnold Zable often feature wonderful songs and music by local musicians working with Yiddish, Greek and Italian musical traditions and when he launched *Scraps of Heaven* the day after re-election of the Howard government, he made the point that just as John Howard heads into his ninth year as Prime Minister, his book is set in 1958 when Bob Menzies was also in his ninth year in charge. Perhaps we can take heart from the fact that the local community in Carlton continued to find ways of making multiculturalism work through the long years of anglo-centric conservatism coming out of Canberra.

Zable's work reminds us that we don't have to romanticize the past in order to bring it into our contemporary discourses on belonging and not belonging. One of the leading scholars on sense of place research in the 1990s, Doreen Massey of London's Open University, has warned against what she called 'place essentialism', in which dominant images of a place, that usually hark back to a 'more glorious' past, hinder an understanding of how a place is changing under the impact of broader socio-economic and demographic changes. Stories from the past can be used to create images of a place that can exclude women and minority communities, so sense of place is an area of contestation that should not be left to those who would practice such exclusions.

In some work I am doing at the Globalism Institute I am trying to use an inclusive approach to the collection of place-related stories. This involves asking the opinions of lots of people about the people I should be talking to (before shortlisting from all the suggestions) and then offering some commentary on what stories were easy to get and and what the gaps appear to be. Let me illustrate this with some examples from the research I have done in Daylesford and Broadmeadows for a report we wrote for VicHealth on sense of place and community 'resilience'.

Daylesford and Hepburn Springs are popular with domestic tourists because of the hilly terrain, cool climate and 'old-world' ambience. The mineral springs are seen as the area's greatest asset and it was interesting to hear that digging for gold during the gold rush was banned in some areas lest it interfere with the flow of water. The area has long had particular appeal for European

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migrants who extoll the health benefits of mineral waters and the two towns have long had a surprisingly cosmopolitan feel to them. During the 1960s and 70s the area fell out of favour as a tourist destination with its European linkages probably unfashionable. The story of the Swiss-Italian families who came to Victoria for the gold rush and chose to settle the area where the springs are found probably had little appeal at the time and visitors would have wondered at the prevalence of Italian names on local businesses. Now the Swiss-Italian heritage is very much in fashion and the story is used heavily in selling the area to tourists; with the Swiss-Italian Festa being the biggest cultural event on a busy calendar. I spoke to a number of people with Italian surnames and very broad Australian accents who were very keen to discuss the relevance of the Swiss-Italian heritage. This is a good story, and it is probably unique in Australia, but it was much harder to find out about the community of Cornish tin-miners who clustered on Cornish Hill during the gold days, or the Chinese gold-diggers turned successful market gardeners who were displaced from their valley to make way for the artificial lake that is now a major attraction of Daylesford. Towns that now want to present a cosmopolitan image of themselves are ambivalent about the past dominance of the logging industry or even the textile factories, the last of which closed down last December. Few visitors to the town would realize that the pleasant hilly terrain you pass through as you approach Daylesford from the south is largely the result of the huge mullock heaps created by intensive gold-digging.

And the stories of the Aboriginal people who lived in this area are largely hidden from view, although some work has been done on the story of the failed 'settlement' at Franklinford (just north of Dayleford) where a number of Aboriginal families were lured in the early part of the 19th century to learn about European farming practices.

Of course, history is used selectively, that can't be helped, but a narrow use of history can make a place seem much more one-dimensional than it needs to be. A number of people I have interviewed in Dayleford hate the fact that Tourism Victoria uses the phrase 'Pure indulgence' to attract visitors to Daylesford and Hepburn Springs – arguing that it gives a very misleading impression of what the community is like – but this is partly a product of the way the area has marketed itself in recent years through the selective use of stories.

I think many Victorians are surprised to hear that Broadmeadows is an area of significant natural beauty with a rich and interesting history. The prevailing image has been of a depressed community living at the edge of the city, at the end of the railway line; in houses plonked in empty paddocks. There is an interesting and complex story told by people who were placed in public housing in the area in the 1950s and 60s but now the community is genuinely cosmopolitan; Broadmeadows, for example, has the highest proportion of residents from Middle East origins in Melbourne. This created specific concerns about the tensions that might erupt in the community following the September 11 events in the US and the Bali bombings the following year, and I was inspired to hear what religious and civic leaders in the area did to calm those tensions.

However, an interesting story I want to share with you now is that the construction of a very large shopping centre in what has become the Broadmeadows CBD has led to the demise of smaller shopping centres in the surrounding areas. However, in both the Olsen Place (Broadmeadows) and Dallas shopping centres, people from the 'ethnic' communities have stepped in to revive sagging businesses and both shopping centres have become 'centres of excellence' for Middle-Eastern food in particular. Not surprisingly, older residents see this as a 'takeover' and they mourn the loss of the old and familiar shops. However, the Council is convinced they will get used to the idea that these have become specialist shopping centres and they have tried to reflect this in a major refurbishment of the Dallas shopping precinct. When I talked to the Turkish mayor of Hume City Council a year ago, he pointed out that Turkish people from all over Melbourne had gathered in Dallas shopping centre to watch the progress of the Turkish national team in the 2002 soccer World Cup on large screens and there had been no problems at all.

We used stories like this for a report to VicHealth called Creating Resilient Communities and you can get a copy of that report from VicHealth if you are interested. However, there are, of course, many ways in which such stories can be shared. Some local histories are good – we have a good one for Brunswick, for example – but some are very dry and narrow. Some local museums are interesting but they struggle for funding and resources. Local history enthusiasts often do a very good job in collecting oral histories but they often don't know what to do with it all. Personally, I like the idea of more stories being put into signs at appropriate places because you can get a glimpse of stories in situ.

One of the best examples I have come across for the sharing of place stories is the 'Memories, Margins and Markers' project that was overseen by the artist Julie Shiels in the Port Phillip area. I understand that Julie collected hundreds of diverse stories and then turned some of them into art installations, some temporary and others fairly permanent. Others will speak of this at the conference; I particularly like what Julie did with Maria's story, a local South Melbourne character better known as 'Diamond Lil' and her story is carved into her old chair now located, along with her old shoes, outside the Temperance Hall in Napier Street. And I love the representation of 'Tommy's Story' to mark the fact that dockworkers like Tommy often left their 'street clothes' on the sea wall around Middle Park and Port Melbourne to swim to work in the docklands where they would change into workclothes.

A DiamondLil in the making?

The second photo of Tommy's clothes includes my five-year-old daughter Indu who just may be a Diamond Lil in the making. She was certainly fascinated by the clothes on the sea wall.

Highlighting Tommy's story is, of course, a selective use of history. But in this case it is a way of telling stories that are quickly fading from view. A real problem for social diversity in a place like Port Phillip is the 'gentrification' that is turning the area into the preserve of the wealthy and upwardly mobile, thus marginalizing people who look increasingly out of place in such environments. I know that the Port Phillip Council is fighting a noble fight to sustain social diversity in the area. They need ongoing community support to succeed in this aim and I think that this is better achieved by demonstrating that diversity makes local life more interesting for all, rather than by appealing to a sense of charity for the 'needy'. I recently wrote a paper called 'The Aesthetics of Messiness in Sustaining Social Diversity' because I think that we need to demonstrate that an obsession with tidiness can create boring social environments.

Let me conclude by saying that stories are the way to catch public attention and stimulate thought and debate, because:

There are so many stories that there is much to choose from. A good storyteller has much to work with in crafting powerful narratives that will circulate widely. Stories can range from recent events to local legends that have long escaped the constraints of verisimilitude and have entered the realm of mythology. Stories can move people emotionally and they are often remembered far into the future. It may be difficult to tell when a story that is carried in the heart of an individual will be revived to work its magic once again. Stories can circulate for a long time.

Stories tend to defy single interpretation, although they may be abused in that way. Certainly the interpretation of stories can be challenged by other interpretations. Stories can be shared in many ways, in many settings, and in many modes of communication. They can be fun to work on and share.

However, we should keep in mind that this kind of work faces some strong impediments. For example:
Gentrification and related socio-economic trends can re-segregate communities that have known real diversity and marginalize those who can be the memory of the past. The privatization and commercialization of public spaces makes it harder for people to meet and talk in spontaneous ways. People have become more fearful of strangers and tend to live more completely inside their individual homes. Prevailing fashions in building landscape design can destroy local idiosyncrasies and local icons.

Organisations like VicHealth need support to continue their emphasis on community wellbeing as preventative health care, rather than the more traditional emphasis on addressing downstream health problems. In our busyness, most of us have little time to take an active interest in our local communities and to connect with local lifeworlds. Those of us who can engage with local stories as part of our paid work are probably lucky because it is a fascinating thing to do.

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