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Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education*

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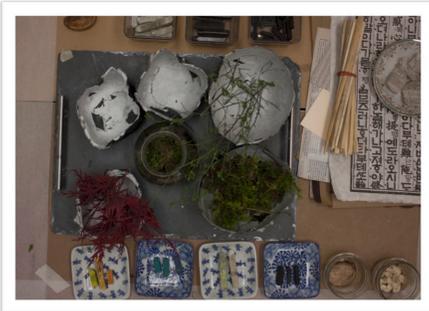
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Editors:

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Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw

Dr. Affrica Taylor

Dr. Mindy Blaise

Dr. Sandrina de Finney

Publications Chairperson:

Dr. Iris Berger,
University of British Columbia,
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Walking With Place: Storying Reconciliation Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education

by Catherine Hamm

Author's Bio

Catherine Hamm is an early career researcher in the College of Education at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. Her doctoral study investigated the connections between teacher identity and curriculum practices in early childhood. Catherine has a strong commitment to social justice and is interested in exploring the ways in which localized, specific Aboriginal knowledges can inform reconciliation pedagogies in early childhood education. Catherine's current work involves investigating children's relations with place, exploring the ways in which children might engage with the plants and animals that constitute the local places that children inhabit in postcolonial Australia.

Email: Catherine.Hamm@vu.edu.au

Abstract

Knowing and understanding the land with Aboriginal cosmologies requires seeing much deeper than the surface. It involves feeling those deep connections that have existed for thousands of years and understanding trees, rocks, and rivers. Drawing on Vanessa Watt's concept of *place-thought* and Latour's emerging *common world* framework, I explore the notion of *country* in a specific place in the Australian context. This paper pays attention to the stories of Australia's colonial pasts, presents, and futures as I set out to generate new reconciliation pedagogies and engage with place during an experiential learning exercise: *place-thought-walk*. I argue that place-thought pedagogies that are inclusive, respectful, and reconciled to people of the local Aboriginal group can be put to work as a decolonizing practice. This practice exposes the layers of colonial inscription in the landscape, creating space for the land to be reclaimed and reinscribed with Aboriginal knowledges as the central frame.

This Place

It is a mild, sunny southern hemisphere spring day in this place, and the wind gently rustles the grasses on the volcanic plain. Here in this place at the edge of a city are rocks and trees, a network of creeks full of small

freshwater crustaceans called yabbies; birds call to one another in beautiful voices. A network of creeks run through this place, hidden from most of us, known only to the few who have been able to hear the stories of this place. This place, significant for people of the Wurundjeri clan of the Kulin nation, holds many stories. The story of the seven brother volcanoes, charged with responsibility of watching over the grasslands and its peoples. Stories of thriving communities on the way to trade, celebrate, and conduct ceremony at the Werribee River, the meeting place of three of the Kulin nation clan groups: the Wurundjeri, the Boonwurrung, and the Wathaurong. The stories of this place are present in every leaf, rock, and particle of dirt.

Acknowledging Australia's Aboriginal history, culture, and ways of knowing as central to understanding the land around us requires thinking about place in a different way than the "Whitefella's way of 'coming up blind' and bumping into everything" (Rose, 2004, p. 9). In this paper, I draw on Watts's (2013) concept of *place-thought* as a method of thinking about place in a different way, drawing on the idea that the land is "alive and thinking" (p. 21). I extend this idea by exploring the ways in which thinking differently about the land, focusing on Australian Aboriginal ways of knowing, can be used as a decolonizing practice. I frame this thinking by drawing together Watts's concept of place-thought and Rose's (1996) definition of *country* as a way to think about the land in a different way. I also engage with Latour's (2004) notion of *learning to be affected* and King's (2004) concept of *pastpresent* as useful ways to pay attention, exposing the layers of colonial inscription in the land.

I work with the notion of place-thought as a starting point for thinking about the places around me in a different way, placing Aboriginal knowledges in the centre and privileging this knowledge as the way to think about place. I think about how, for Aboriginal people, place, belonging, and ceremony cannot be separated. As I begin to think about the land differently, I also begin to think about how these ideas could be enacted as reconciliation pedagogies. Thinking about the land in different ways opens up a space to explore the possibilities of generating new reconciliation pedagogies that are respectful and that recognize the local Aboriginal groups. Focusing on specific places that hold specific Aboriginal knowledges makes it possible to disrupt the idea of homogenous Aboriginal culture. This disruption acknowledges that Aboriginal Australia is diverse and that each group has its own stories of place, belonging, and ceremony.

I give three examples to illustrate how I am beginning to think about place in different ways. First, I show how hearing the stories of place makes me pay attention to place in a different way. Second, I share my experiences of taking a place-thought walk and thinking with the concept of learning to be affected. Third, I show how exploring a specific place, as a way of enacting the concept of place-thought, can be thought of as reconciliation pedagogies.

Thinking With Place-Thought

I draw on the notion of place-thought (Watts, 2013) as the inspiration for thinking about the environment around me in different ways. Watts's concept of place-thought is underpinned by the ways in which an Anishinaabe world view centres on the notion that the land is animate and has agency and that communication with the land is paramount for Aboriginal people. To illustrate the notion of place-thought, Watts tell an Anishinaabe creation story about how Sky Woman fell through a hole in the sky, landed on the back of a turtle, and formed the earth. Watts argues that creation stories are not myths or allegories, but are historical accounts of the interconnections between humans and the more than human. This historical account "describes a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment" (Watts, 2013, p. 21). Watts argues that this theoretical understanding is very different to a Euro-Western way of knowledge construction

and that place-thought “is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (Watts, 2013, p. 21). Watts also argues that land is important in the lives of Indigenous people and that they are part of the land. This relationship with the land requires communication and care, as well as interacting with the nonhumans that also make up the land. Watts states that colonization disrupted the Anishinaabe people’s ability to have agency with the land, and that “our own ability to act and converse with non-humans and other humans became compromised” (p. 24).

Thinking With Country

Canada and Australia share colonizing histories and experiences. The arrival of settler societies to Australia rendered it *terra nullius* (empty land), the basis for which many Aboriginal land claims have been rejected. In fact the land was anything but terra nullius; it was alive and a central tenet to the Aboriginal way of life. The process of colonizing the land and its people resulted in the land being stripped of any sense of agency or role in the lives of Aboriginal people. This process inscribed the land in a settler image, covering traces of Aboriginal knowledges and moving culture and ceremony from the central frame.

Australian Aboriginal people’s deep connection with the land (country) has been well documented. This description from Rose (1996) of country captures the importance of the land in the lives of Aboriginal people:

Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with.... People talk about country in the same way they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel for country, and long for country. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place ... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow with a consciousness, and a will toward life. (p. 7)

Rose wrote this definition of country while working on a number of Native Title land claims around Australia during the 1990s. She was attempting to communicate the role of country in the lives of Aboriginal people to the white settler judges who were presiding over the land claim tribunals. Many Aboriginal people had come before the courts and attempted to explain what country meant in terms of their culture, belonging, and ceremony. A focus of the land claim tribunals was that Aboriginal people were required to demonstrate continuous, unbroken connection with the land. In some areas of Australia this was very difficult because many clan groups had been removed from their country and placed onto “missions.” Most Aboriginal clan groups rely on oral traditions as a method of passing on culture, and moving Aboriginal people onto missions resulted in the loss of language, culture, and ceremony (State Library of Victoria, 2015).

There are synergies between Watts’s concepts of place, thought, and agency framed by an Anishinaabe cosmological perspective and an Australian Aboriginal concept of country. I draw together these two ideas as a useful way to think about the land around me. This different way of thinking serves as inspiration for exploring the generation of reconciliation pedagogies. As I think with the concept of place-thought in an Australian context, I wonder how I can enact these thoughts as reconciliation pedagogies. How can learning about Aboriginal knowledges that are embedded in the places we live contribute to pedagogies of reconciliation in early childhood education?

Reconciliation in an Australian Context

The effect of colonization in Australia has positioned Aboriginal people as inferior “noble savages” for 200 years. The concept of reconciliation aims to build stronger relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people and non-Aboriginal people. The vision of reconciliation is “for everyone to wake to a reconciled, just and equitable Australia where stereotypes and discrimination are broken down” (Reconciliation, 2013). The message of reconciliation is a positive one, attempting to create a space in Australia’s future where a spirit of peace and a shared future for Australia’s Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can be enacted. In thinking about this positive message, it is also necessary to consider some tensions between the concepts of reconciliation and decolonization.

Reconciliation and decolonizing practices

The concept of reconciliation is a vexed one: How can disconnecting Aboriginal people from their lands and disrupting their culture and ceremony ever be reconciled? In 2008, the Australian prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, made an apology in Federal Parliament to “The Stolen Generations”¹ (Australian Government, n.d.a). This apology acknowledged the Australian government’s role in the history of the forced removal of Aboriginal people from their land, culture, and ceremony. While this apology was welcomed by the majority of Aboriginal people as a gesture of reconciliation, it did not address the issue of decolonizing.

Tuck and Yang (2012) state that “decolonization in the settler context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted” (p. 7). This definition understands decolonization as a process that returns Aboriginal people to their land.

In thinking about decolonizing practices, I acknowledge that in order to decolonize, land, culture, and ceremony need to be repatriated to Aboriginal people. I argue that seeing the land differently, with specific local Aboriginal knowledges as the central frame, could be considered as a step in the decolonizing process. Considering the relationship between reconciliation and decolonization serves to create some thinking about broad structural changes that acknowledge more than just “learning about” Aboriginal people.

Reconciliation pedagogies

According to MacGill and Wyeld (2009), reconciliation pedagogies are “concerned with equality of recognition of Indigenous people and Australian Cultural Heritage in general” (p. 558). This definition suggests that it is important for all Australians to become aware of, and value, Aboriginal ways of knowing. MacGill and Wyeld (2009) have explored the idea of reconciliation pedagogies for early primary school students, focusing mostly on historical perspectives as set out in the *Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Generating pedagogies of reconciliation requires a shift in thinking about the ways in which Aboriginal knowledges are framed within the wider Australian context. Aboriginal knowledges are not generally placed in the central frame as a way of interpreting the world around us. It is important to me to think differently about how Aboriginal knowledges are framed within the teacher education program I work in. Are we content to gloss over Aboriginal knowledges in a tokenistic way, or is there a way to embed Aboriginal knowledges as the central frame, as the cornerstone of our teacher education program?

Grappling with my identity

Reconciliation is important to me as a white settler woman, but also as a member of the Aboriginal community. My husband and children are members of the Yorta Yorta nation; their country is a three-hour drive from our home in Melbourne. It has taken some time for me to consider myself a member of the Aboriginal community, grappling with how I fit in. Although I am a non-Aboriginal person, I have been

¹ Aboriginal people who were forcibly taken from their families.

connected to the Aboriginal community for 25 years. At first, my connection was tenuous. Slowly, over time, I was accepted into the community, although acceptance was not easily gained. I had to learn many aspects of both traditional and contemporary Aboriginal ways of knowing. The questions “Who is your family?” and “Where are you from?” are critical to establishing connections, locating where you fit in. Understanding social connections is an integral part of Aboriginal cultural knowledge, and when I began attending community events, members of my family would ensure that my connections to the community were explained. My connection to the Aboriginal community frames my understanding of how important country is in the lives of Aboriginal people. I cannot claim to understand or feel country in the same way that members of my family do, but I am sensitive to the role of country in their lives. It is this perspective that I bring with me as I begin to think about the land around me in a different way.

Exposing the Layers of Inscription: *Pastpresent* and *Learning To Be Affected*

Pastpresent

In thinking differently about the land, noticing the layers of inscription, I draw on King’s concept of *pastpresent*. King (2004) defines *pastpresent* as “quite palpable evidences that the past and the present cannot be purified from each other” (p. 459). Thinking with the concept of *pastpresent* provides the opportunity to look deeply at the places around us, exposing the layers of inscription, acknowledging that the past still exists in the present. *Pastpresent* is a useful way to think about placing Aboriginal knowledges in the centre as places are explored. The land is entangled in stories, ceremonies, and traditions; they are not gone from here, it is just a matter of paying attention in particular ways. As Rose (2004) explains, “country has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time” (p. 153).

Learning to be affected

I also put to work Latour’s (2004) notion of *learning to be affected* as a method of paying attention to the layers of inscription in this place. Latour presents the idea that learning to be affected “means exactly that: the more you learn the more differences exist” (p. 213). I take this to mean that in order to pay attention in different ways, you must be awake to many possibilities and proposals. Latour uses the concept of learning to be affected as a way to move beyond the binary of subject/object to become aware of multiple ways of seeing the world around us. Taylor and Giugni (2012) also take up this idea of being awake to differences as they challenge us to be curious about the places around us: “For it is only when we exercise curiosity to find out more about where we are, and who and what is there with us, that we find hitherto unknown dimensions to our common worlds” (p. 110). Paying attention in this way provides the opportunity to hear the stories of place, trace the layers of inscription, and see what has always been there but perhaps unnoticed by many in recent times. We can begin to notice places in different ways.

I return now to the place where I began, as a site for exploring reconciliation pedagogies. I draw together the concepts of place-thought, country, *pastpresent*, and learning to be affected as I participate in an experiential learning exercise.

Thinking With Place

This place, the Iramoo Grasslands—the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation—has been overlaid with a university campus. Buildings, car parks, concrete paths, and fences have been constructed as a representation of colonial Australia. Trees and plants that came with the settlers are not as well equipped as the local plants to respond to the southern hemisphere seasons.

A group of white settler early childhood teacher educators have come to the Iramoo Grasslands to hear the stories of this place. As we walk on Wurundjeri land, we seek to reimagine, to think with Aboriginal knowledges. We each come to this place with different understandings and experiences, but we share a commitment to “acknowledge Aboriginal people as the first people of this land and that their voices have held and continue to hold unique stories of place, belonging and ceremony” (Victoria University-College of Education, 2014). We have come to hear the stories of this place in the spirit of reconciliation and value the importance of placing Aboriginal knowledges in the centre of the teacher education program that we deliver to early childhood students. We are exploring the concept of place-thought as a decolonizing process that will be embedded as a central tenet of our teacher education program.

Aboriginal histories of place

An Aboriginal colleague shares the stories of this place. Like in Anishinaabe creation stories, the land around us was formed in partnership between humans and nonhumans. We hear the story of how the volcanic plain was made by the seven brother volcanoes that keep watch across the plain. We hear how the spirits came to this place and transformed from animal to human form. We hear how this place has always been a vital part of Wurundjeri, Boonwurrung, and Wathaurong culture. The stories of this place highlight the connections between these local groups of the Kulin national and their country.

As I listen to the histories of this place, I imagine the spirits descending and creating the volcanoes, the rivers, and the trees. Listening respectfully provides the opportunity for us to reimagine this place, to wonder how Kulin knowledges contribute to paying attention to the land in a different way. How can my understanding of the Kulin knowledges of this place inform the exploration of reconciliation pedagogies?

The grasslands

This place, the Iramoo Grasslands, is part of the greater Western Basalt Plains Grassland. The grasslands are a characteristic of the Victorian Volcanic Plain that stretches from the central north to the southwest of Victoria, Australia, covering an area of 2.3 million hectares (Friends of Iramoo, n.d.) The Iramoo Grasslands have been described as a “remnant” of the once-vast grasslands that covered much of the volcanic plain.

These descriptions of this place were inscribed by the settlers after they arrived in 1837. Before the white settlers arrived, the grasslands acted as a natural bushfire barrier that was carefully managed by Kulin people. This management included burning the grasslands in a seasonal pattern to encourage new growth of the diverse plant species. The new growth also encouraged game to the grasslands, providing a food source for the Kulin people that came to them, rather than requiring Kulin people to travel to hunt (Australian Government, n.d.b).

The settlers could not hear the Kulin people’s stories of this place. They removed the Kulin people and their stories, reinscribing this place with plants, animals, and ideas that did not belong here in this southern hemisphere. They ignored the creator spirit Bunjil’s teachings. The settlers did not hunt when the time was right and they let their cattle loose in the Murnong (yam daisy) gardens. They did not regenerate the grasslands with fire; instead they created fields and fences. The grasslands are a site of entanglement in the pastpresent; they are entangled in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial time and space. The grasslands are entanglements of fences, concrete, birds, creeks.

Place-thought walk with the grasslands

When I walk with the grasslands, I feel the warm sun on my face. I close my eyes to better focus on what is around me. I engage all my senses as I attempt to pay attention to “who and what is in this place with me”

(Latour, 2004a as cited in Taylor & Giugni, 2012, p. 110). I begin with what is immediately noticeable. I can hear the sound of the rustling grasses and it raises my sense of curiosity. I want to move off the concrete path that runs beside the fenced-off grassland. I want to walk through the grasses, get close to the sound of the wind in the grass husks. I have been warned to “be careful of the snakes.” I look at the grasses fenced off in the “nature” reserve (see Figure 1). The grasses are “protected” and humans are not allowed to walk through them for fear of damaging them. These grasses have been “saved” in an attempt to restore a natural order.



Figure 1. The grasslands.

I try and imagine this place as it was in precolonial times, before the white settlers arrived. I am curious to know how the grasses might have affected others who have walked in this place before me. I am becoming entangled with this place in the way that Anderson (2006, as cited in Instone, 2014) describes: “the emergence of affect from the relations between bodies, and from the encounters that those relations are entangled within, make the materialities of space-time always-already affective” (p. 80). The notion of entanglement of bodies, time, and space is also what Latour (2004) describes as learning to be affected. In learning to be affected, I begin to pay attention to the grasslands in ways that I have not done before. I begin to be concerned with the ways in which the grasslands might be “alive and thinking” (Watts, 2013, p. 21). Thinking about the grasslands in this way, I acknowledge that the Kulin creation stories that have been shared with me are central to my understanding about this place, rather than the layers of colonial inscription that I can also see around me being in the centre. In thinking with Kulin knowledges, I am also becoming entangled with grasses, animals, and pastpresent of this place in particular. This entanglement connects me to the knowledge, ceremony, and traditions of the grasslands as a way of thinking about and enacting reconciliation pedagogies.

The burning

One morning as I arrive at the campus, I see a lot of smoke: the grasslands are being burned. The university works with the Australian Government Department of Sustainability to “manage” the land using “traditional methods.” These methods include the Kulin people’s strategy described above of burning the grasslands in a regular cycle to regenerate the growth of the grasses and other plants. The government workers are dressed in coveralls to “protect” them from the burning. I stop to take a photograph (Figure 2), wanting to pay attention to how the grasses are being affected by this burning.



Figure 2. The burning.

The burning is causing a lot of smoke, and soon there are several cars stopped behind me. People are worried that something is “wrong.” I explain to the worried onlookers that the grassland is being burned as part of managing its regeneration, using Aboriginal land management practices. I wonder how Aboriginal knowledges about caring for country can become part of everybody’s knowing, “a proud part of everyday life” (Reconciliation, 2013).

Generating reconciliation pedagogies

I turn now to generating reconciliation pedagogies. How can the Iramoo Grasslands contribute to generating pedagogies of reconciliation? I have shown that it is possible to pay attention to the land in different ways. Thinking with the concept of place-thought provides an opportunity to place Aboriginal ways of knowing in the centre of understanding about the places where we live. In my role as an early childhood teacher educator, I can work to generate pedagogies of reconciliation with preservice teachers and colleagues by ensuring that I illuminate “alternate sites for productions of knowledge and the crossing of boundaries between them” (King, 2004, p. 459). I can work to expose the layers of colonial inscription on the grasslands, raising curiosity and enthusiasm to find out about this place. I can take preservice teachers into the environments where they are educated, on a place-thought walk, just as I did with my colleagues. I can ask the preservice teachers to notice things in their environment in a different way. Rather than looking at the environment in an innocent or romantic way, we can think about questions like these: What type of trees, animals, others are here with us? What can you see, hear, and feel in this place? How do you think this place might have looked before settlement? What plants and animals belong here from precolonial times, and what plants and animals came with the settlers? We can talk about the creek, the reconciliation rocks that symbolize coming together in the spirit of reconciliation, propagating seedlings of grasses that once dominated this place. Raising curiosity about the places around us provides the opportunity to think about place in different ways. Thinking differently has the potential to generate respect and knowledge of localized Aboriginal stories, traditions, and ceremonies, thereby disrupting the notion of homogenous Aboriginal culture.

Conclusion

Every day as I come to this place, I pay attention in a different way. I do not just see the buildings or the car park. I notice the creek that runs under the bridge I cross, understanding that the creek has an essential role in nourishing the grasslands. I notice that in this place with me are legless lizards, water holes, and the sound of the wind in the grass. I look across the plain and see one of the brother volcanoes in the distance. I hear the call of Waa, the crow, and I look to see what she is doing.

When I talk with my colleagues and preservice teachers, I try to inspire them to also notice who or what is in this place with us. I do this by ensuring that Kulin knowledges are central to talking about this place in a respectful way, by restoring these ways of knowing to the centre, where they belong.

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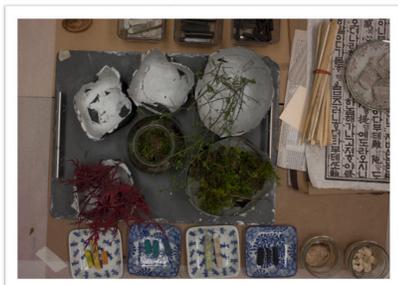
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