



Children sensing place

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ABSTRACT

While geographers have a long fascination with the concept of place, the study of place is less than straightforward due to the temporary and shifting nature of both place and people's relationships to place. However, investigations of people's sense of place remain an important avenue of inquiry to help understand how people develop relationships with their selves and with their environment. This paper builds on feminist and humanistic frameworks to better understand the interconnections between the self, the body, and place, specifically in childhood where a sense of place begins to take shape. Drawing on an ethnographic study which incorporated a photography project with 19 children aged 9–11 years in a rural New Zealand town, I argue that places become meaningful based on a complex set of embodied sensory emotions the children experienced with their environment. This paper provides a prescriptive approach to untangling each of the five senses, additionally incorporates the sense of movement, and introduces the concept of a sense of voice, to bring attention to how prevalent embodied sensations are to children's sense of place.

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1. Introduction: sense(s) of place in childhood

Geographers have a long fascination with the concept of place and its many structural and post-structural theorizations. Currently, place is predominantly understood as a process, one that is created through the coming and going of agents, through the repetition of norms, stories and experiences shared in place, and entangled in a web of socio-economic and ecologic relationships spanning across both geographic space and time (Cresswell, 2004; Massey, 2005; Larsen and Johnson, 2012). With this understanding, place is never 'finished' but is always in a state of 'becoming' (Pred, 1984).

As places are always temporary and shifting, so, too are people's relationships with place(s). Places exert a powerful influence on people's feelings and knowledge productions, while people exert a powerful influence on and within place (Harvey, 1989; Massey, 1993; Cresswell, 1996). For geographers, the study of place provides an exciting, fresh, and original way of exploring the co-constitution of power, identity, meaning, and agency. And yet, because places and people's relationships to places are always changing, studying place is not necessarily a straightforward endeavor (e.g. see Larsen and Johnson, 2012). For example, the study of place at the macro-scale uncovers the historic and global

dimensions of networks, relations of production and consumption, boundaries and P/politics, while the micro-scale can lend significant insight into the nuances of more intimate relationships between people and their environment. I argue in this paper that studying place through the scale of the emotional and sensual body helps explore some of the ways a sense of place may arise in childhood. I draw on Relph's (1976) definition of a sense of place as an "affective bond that develops between people and locations over time" (cited in Matthews, 1992: 201, emphasis in original), in other words, an emotional attachment to place.

To study the development of a sense of place in childhood, I worked with 19 children between 9 and 11 years old living in a rural village on the South Island of New Zealand. Studying the development of place in childhood is important because, on the one hand, childhood is arguably where the development of an adult's sense of place begins (Chawla, 2007); environmental psychology and environmental education scholarship suggests that the sense of place developed in childhood has positive repercussions for 'pro-environmental' behavior in later years (Orr, 1994; Sobel, 1996; Kahn and Kellert, 2002). On the other hand, feminist and humanistic geographers argue that the co-constitution of self and place have larger repercussions for not just our relationship with the environment (or the non-human world), but with our selves, others, and our wider socio-natural environment (e.g. Tuan, 1977; Butler, 1990; Longhurst, 1997; Casey, 2001). This paper does not attempt to deliver evidence for the development of a child's future sense of place per environmental psychology or environmental education;

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rather, it draws on feminist and humanistic frameworks to explicate that children's emotional and sensory responses to particular locations contribute to the development of a sense of place in childhood.

In Section 2 of this paper, I elaborate on these feminist and humanistic perspectives that discuss the interconnections between place, the self and the body. In Section 3, I identify the site where this research took place and the methodologies I employed with the children. In Section 4, I analyze examples principally from a photography-based research method through the lens of the senses (i.e. vision, smell, sound, etc.). Analytically differentiating between the senses can be problematic because most of our engagements with the world are multi-sensory and very rarely uni-sensory (Rodaway, 1994; Paterson, 2009). Nonetheless, for the purpose of organizing the evidence on which I draw in this paper, dividing the senses into distinct categories provides a novel way to bring attention to the multiple and various ways that the children engage their senses through their experiences in their environment, and to what their sensory engagements may suggest for their emotional responses to place.

2. Emotionally and sensually in place

The relationship between self and place is not just one of reciprocal influence... but also, more radically, of constitutive coingredience: each is essential to the being of the other. In effect, there is *no place without self and no self without place* (Casey, 2001: 684, emphasis in original).

Both humanistic and feminist frameworks seek to dismantle Cartesian dualisms between mind and body (Tuan, 1977; Longhurst, 1997; Casey, 2001). The humanistic tradition in geography drew inspiration from the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) who introduced a phenomenological notion of “being-in-the-world” arguing that the lived body is an important conduit of knowledge, not just a thing to be studied objectively. With a focus on the body and being embodied, Merleau-Ponty's work largely inspired a break from focusing on the mind as the locus of ‘true’ or ‘certain’ knowledge, and instead, “locates intention and consciousness in bodily awareness and sensation” (Bondi, 2005: 435).

The focus on the body and embodiment emphasizes the ways the self is the body, “which is always already both *in and of the world*” (Wylie, 2007: 148, emphasis in original). As opposed to the idea of the body as a self-contained unit, the concept of the body inspired by phenomenology focuses on the ways that through interacting with the environment, the environment becomes part of the self, and in turn, the self becomes part of the environment (Ingold, 2000). This concept is referred to in Casey's quote above: “there is *no place without self and no self without place*” (2001: 684, emphasis in original).

Similarly, feminist geographies also challenge dichotomies such as rational/emotional, subject/object, and feminine/masculine (e.g. Rose, 1993; Massey, 1994; Valentine, 2007). Specifically related to place and self, feminist scholars have sought to bring attention to the variety of ways that places have more or less political power based on the discourses embedded and reproduced in these places (e.g. Butler, 1990; Cresswell, 1996; Staeheli, 1996). In turn, people who reside in, pass through, or engage with these places may embody various forms of empowerment or disempowerment. Sharing features with phenomenology but arguably more interested in power dynamics, feminists view the body and the environment as co-constituted whereby there exists a ‘complex feedback relation’ between the discourses, representations, desires, and sociality that (re)produce both the body and the environment culturally and biologically (Grosz, 1992; Longhurst, 1997).

As the body is both deeply connected to the idea of the self, and the self is deeply connected to place, a focus on the body provides a useful starting point to begin to uncover *how* the processes of place-making occur. Later in this paper, I approach this inquiry through my analysis of how children's bodies *feel* place, literally through the senses. In the remainder of Section 2 below, I elaborate on the connection between emotions and the sensuous body and the implications this has in and for the study of children's emotional geographies.

2.1. Emotions and bodily sensations

Emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations. (Ahmed, 2004: 12)

In her book, “The Cultural Politics of Emotion,” feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2004) discusses the complicated ways that emotions occur in the body, both cognitively and through bodily sensations. While emotions can be understood to be based on a series of judgments, evaluations and significations, our bodies can also be ‘overcome’ by emotions, irrespective of particular thoughts or appraisals. Ahmed argues that we feel a certain way toward some thing/subject because of the ‘contact’ we have with that thing/subject. The contact we have with an object is largely dependent on the histories we have with the object (and the relational histories of that object with other objects) as well as the moment we are confronted with the object. “If the contact generates feeling, then emotion and sensation cannot be easily separated” (Ahmed, 2004: 6). In other words, the emotional feeling created through contact with an object is stimulated by and stimulates a physical embodied response to this object. In this way, she argues that “emotions cannot be separated from bodily sensations” (Ahmed, 2004: 12). Therefore, when we talk about ‘feelings’, it is important to talk about how the body literally *feels*: “...our first and foremost, most immediate and intimately *felt* geography is the body, the site of emotional experience and expression *par excellence*. Emotions, to be sure, *take place* within and around this closest of spatial scales” (Davidson and Milligan, 2004: 523, emphasis in original). One specific way to try and better understand feelings is through a more focused attention to the body's sensations, which I discuss below in Section 2.2.

Before moving on, it is important to recognize that as place and self are constantly changing and shifting, so too are our emotions. Since we experience life through multiple and continual collisions with what is around us (both human and non-human ‘others’), these points of contact go on to create an ‘impression’ on us and our sense of self as distinct from or connected to what is around us. While emotions have the potential to move us, they are also moving between us, and simultaneously influencing our level of connection to another. “Feelings may stick to some objects, and slide over others” (Ahmed, 2004: 8). These feelings and impressions of the other that are laid down over time “hold us in place” (Ahmed, 2004: 11). It is when our bodies are being held in place through the influence of our emotional bodily sensations that we can begin to develop an emotional attachment to place.

2.2. Sensuous Geography

The ‘feel’ of a place... is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic, repeated day after day and over the span of years. It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms... registered in one's muscles and bones”. (Tuan, 1977: 184)

While the discussion of bodies and the senses in geography is not common, Paul Rodaway introduced the concept of “Sensuous

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