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Writing ourselves in Waikawa: Bitter (sweet) waters

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors, three migrant academics, involved in counselling education, use a process of collective biographical memory work (CBMW) to explore the influence of landscape in forming new identies in new lands. Our aim was to extend the investigation of subjectification, transgression and relationship to include the non-human, nature and landscape. Our transitions were made at various ages and stages from the United Kingdom to Aotearoa New Zealand and are caught up in the post-colonial struggle of how to be with Other. The project is based on the premise that people's relationships with the places of their existence and the ecosystems that surround them matter, and that this is especially so for migrants. However, we note that the influence of place is often subsumed in sociocultural interpretations. In this paper we foreground the human–nature relationship through a collection of shared, embodied, memories of landscapes, in order to explore the influence of the non-human spaces in which we have lived on our re-subjectification. We offer this piece as an example of 'transient convergence' [Anderson, J., 2009. Transient convergence and relational sensibility: beyond the modern constitution of nature. Emotion, Space and Society 2, 120–127], reflecting our belief that our lives depend upon building a more respectful relationship with our planet.

1. Setting the scene

We are three migrant academics who have created a playful space to explore the influence of landscape in creating new identities in a new land, Aotearoa New Zealand, using collective biographical memory work as our starting space. We hoped to engage the transformative possibilities of this methodology to make sense of the somewhat uneasy creases and folds that continue to disturb our identities as we speak ourselves into a new place. What might this form of memory work tell us about our re-subjectification, and how useful might it be in foregrounding our relationship to the non-human, nature and landscape which had so forcefully impacted upon us all? Our escape to this particular place on the Kapiti coast, Waikawa, which can translate as 'Bitter Waters' in Te Reo Māori, allowed us transgressions beyond our more formalised work identities. Here we have literally, and litoraly, 'gone to the seaside', played with words, and bounced ideas off each other, finding resonance in each other's memories. We have infected and been infected by each other's humour in this release from the everyday. This has become reflected in the language we have chosen through which to (re)present ourselves. We found that poetry allows the spaces in which to play – as does Waikawa – a place in which to be enlivened. We begin by setting the scene:

Seascape
Airspace
Landscape
Escape

2. Claiming our ground and whakapapa[3]

We approached this project from a variety of positions, and from previous groundings in a variety of theoretical perspectives: two of us are involved in counsellor education, and one in educational

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[3] Whakapapa in Te Reo Māori represents the stories that provide a foundational base for people, representing their lineage. Other Māori terms used in this piece are in common parlance in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where some moves have been made towards bi-culturalism and the revival of the Māori language, Te Reo.

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policy. We work in two different universities, and made our transitions at different life stages, and from different geographical regions within the UK. Although we are a disparate group, representing different ages, stages, genders, and bodies, our commonality is a commitment to creative qualitative methodologies, to an ethic of relationship, and to opening spaces for new knowledge. We are all practising counsellors. We thus approached this project in the spirit of exploratory research, collegiality, and curiosity.

One further consideration binds our work. As new arrivals, or Tauiwi, to Aotearoa New Zealand, we were aware of the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) in negotiating a respectful relationship with Tangata Whenua, the indigenous people of the land. This foundational document, although abused over time, has been used to provide legitimation for settlement (Kawharu, 1989). The Treaty requires non-Māori, enjoined with Tangata Whenua, to respect what are sometimes called 'the three P's': partnership, protection and participation. We three are mindful of this obligation and its central position in our educational roles. Aware of our position as outsiders, we have all paid particular attention to building respectful relationships with Tangata Whenua, and have all struggled with the challenges inherent in enacting Treaty responsibilities (e.g., Cornforth, 2000, 2001; Lang, 2007). We are also aware that Tangata Whenua treasures a unique relationship with the land, approaching it not through the lens of landscape, but through a more embodied connection. Our relationship with the indigenous peoples thus presented us with the possibility of difference, for to be in relationship with Tangata Whenua is also to be invited into respectful relationship with the land (e.g., Bell, 2006; Bergin and Smith, 2004; Lang, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2007; Walker, 1990). Tangata Whenua re-frame land as placenta: the place of origin and spiritual home, whenua, is also the cord that binds baby, mother, ancestors, and land (Ryan, 1989). This complex set of relationships is unable to be articulated in our mother tongue, English, yet our bodies resonate in response. How to be with 'the Other' becomes a key theme in our reflections, whether that Other be each other, Tangata Whenua, other Tauiwi, or, indeed, the land itself.

In this paper, our goal is to extend the investigation of subjectification, transgression and relationship to include the non-human, nature and landscape. We describe a project in which we used a form of collective biographical memory work in order to disrupt normative discursive constraints that set the individual against the socio/cultural environment, and human against non-human. This transgressive experiment allowed us glimpses of something new emerging – a new respect for the land and ecosystems of which we are part.

We structure our paper in three sections. We begin by addressing the theoretical landscape within which this project is located, and posit that collective biographical memory work might be a useful way of making visible the interrelationship of landscape and identity. In selecting this methodology we also express our solidarity with those indigenous perspectives that give emotional valence to the connection between land and bodies. In the second section we describe the collective biographical memory work project, and present three poems representing our shared memories of three significant stages in our translocation: pre-migration, early migration and later migration. We discuss some of the discourses which prescribe our engagement with landscape, nature and the non-human, and the subject positions that these discourses offer. In the last section we reflect on the potential of this methodology in considering how landscape is imbricated in our subjectification. We note some discursive constraints, and interdiscursive possibilities that might allow us to be otherwise in relationship. We hope that this project will add to the body of literature that works against the separation of the human from the natural, and be of interest to those recent geographers who, according to Whatmore (2011: 602) 'are returning to the rich conjunction of the "bio" and the "geo"' in order to develop a new ontology, in line with the 'transient convergence' (Anderson, 2009: 121) of transformative inter-relationships.

3. The earth matters

The earth, and our relationship to it, matters on many counts. For some it is restorative (e.g., van den Berg et al., 2007; Willis, 2009); for some it has intrinsic value, and as such must be a major consideration in human lives (e.g., Leopold, 1970); some recognise a spiritual component in their relationship with the nature (e.g., Selby et al., 2010); for others it is the ground on which community is built (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2008), in which learning occurs (e.g., Gruenwald and Smith, 2008), and in which stories are located (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2008). For many indigenous groups, it is progenitor and ancestor (e.g., Phillips and Hulme, 1987), and the source of wisdom (e.g., Basso, 1996). For Tangata Whenua, it is a taonga, or treasure, and to be protected (e.g., Walker, 1990). For those concerned about environmental degradation and global warming, people's relationships with the earth are crucially important, and attain ethical significance (e.g., Jamieson, 2008).

All these perspectives concern us deeply. In particular, as counsellors, as academics, and as Treaty partners, we are at pains to avoid harm, to respect and support indigenous views, and to help clients access spaces for restoration. We also acknowledge the place landscape plays in the important task of looking after ourselves so that we are 'fit for work'. We are sensitive to the damage caused by reductionist categories that are the legacy of colonisation (Willinsky, 1998); we know that the ontology of modernity has cracks and flaws, and that, as Anderson (2009: 120) suggests, 'the creation of discrete categories such as "humans" and "nature" are increasingly questioned'. We are also all troubled by the ethical implications of global climate change, and the challenge it poses for our responsibilities to those at a distance. We are also aware that many ethicists have over the years argued that it is the anthropocentric nature of our thought that is at the root of our failure to agree on an adequate response to climate change (e.g., Naess, 1984). We therefore wanted to take up the implicit challenge, and investigate what happens when we allow the non-human to take centre stage in our biographies.

4. Migrating through landscape

Although we are not geographers, we note that interest in migration has become a cross-disciplinary phenomenon, loosely subsumed under the heading of globalisation. As educators we approach it through the lens of inclusion, diversity, and global citizenship; as counsellors we are concerned about issues of belonging, identity, and working with difference; as Tauiwi we are concerned about the rights of indigenous peoples, the ongoing effects of colonisation, and the possibilities of bi-cultural partnerships. We find some resonance with what Waite and Cook (2010: 2) describe as 'the burgeoning area of emotional geographies' and the affective bonds that connect people to society and space, and contribute to a sense of 'home'. Yet we are also aware that migration is more commonly defined as a social phenomenon, and, as such, the influence of the natural environment or landscape is often downplayed. Gastaldo et al. (2004), however, have argued that the concept of therapeutic landscapes, an important field of study in geography, should be extended to include specific remembered landscapes which may or may not include human presence.

Little appears to have been written about the experiences of academics who are also migrants (Bönisch-Brednich, 2002), and nothing, as far as we know, that links academic migrants to