If I say I love my place, what’s with the bags I’ve packed? The cultural changes required by landscape memoir and eco-regionalism

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Cultural change best responds to the eco-imperative when we learn to dance more wildly. The arts of the everyday help us develop and honour a collective love of place through both a joyous creativity and a re-imagining of the future. We need such conversations, not just between the disciplines of academics, but across us all – inexpert and expert alike. We need to invoke the role of the beast, the monster, and the furies, so that even scientists and planners (the upholders of rationality and predictability) might be introduced to the wild. We do need to travel more carefully, taking time to inhabit the skins of other places, but we do still need to travel so as to make the personal connections needed to share and decide globally. While the level of decision-making required by climate change may be global, the level of action needs to be local, reduced to the bioregion. But bioregionalism should not necessarily limit culture; it provides us with an opportunity to develop regional identity and embed ourselves through a sense of place. Eco-regionalism unifies this careful knowing of the more-than-human world along with the best of our human creativity and culture. Eco-regionalism offers the opportunities of human scale (a walkable place) that eco-modernism has discarded in its optimism for the global market. Eco-regionalism’s finest tools are drawn, not from the sciences, but from the arts.

Our environment is shaped as much by our words and ideas as it is by our bulldozers and re-afforestation. Landscape memoir tells of ‘tru-stori’ connection to place – a mythic archaeology that creatively speaks that which lies at the heart of every geographic community. Understanding each subculture and exposing its emotive assumptions helps to understand the places we inhabit. If eco-regionalism is the new future (in the face of both climate change and petrol prices), then what are its attendant cultural assumptions? Do we believe country shapes us and our lives as an active force? How do we express small-scale and regional community cultural identity?

Cultural theorists, along with many other experts have practised the objective separation from place demanded by Western modernism. Generally they may study other (by
implication, lesser) communities’ love of place, but not their own. Is examining the assumptions about our own love for locale a necessary self-reflective tool in the transition to eco-regionalism or just another self-indulgence?

How do we unpack a ‘love of place’? Is it simply an opium of the masses, offering solace in the face of conquering materialism or is it a challenge to the generica of capitalism’s everyplace? Academics and other experts have been wary of love – too difficult to analyse and too emotive for the required rigour of rationality. There is too a more general tendency to sneer at those who declare a love of their place, as being unaware of the poverties of the present, the terrors of history, the desperations of the future – of seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses. Certainly, there is a tendency to believe a love of your own place demands a narrower and inexpert focus. Even Val Plumwood pointed out in her last article on shadow places, it is not so much a sense of our geographic place we require as an awareness of our lifestyle’s impact on all places.

In this mobile culture, we leave ghosts of desire for special places only in our past. Our nostalgia for natural ‘contact’ (in Henry David Thoreau’s terms) makes fools of our memories – keeps them childish and wanting. No wonder when we’ve grown up, the awe is gone. So we keep this magic/spirit place buried deep in our hearts, along with the other burdens of childhood. And we confl ate our need for place-based connection with a romantic, immature, foolish self-indulgence.

But love of place goes beyond this limited, unfocused lens. Personal geography is full of shadows and terrors; just as social places are full of massacres and failure – the bunyip lurks, always threatening to eat those who inhabit place without a thorough knowledge of its thick hearsay.
I live inland from Noosa, south of Gympie, in a place perhaps more impacted upon than impacting. It is where the Mary River dam is proposed, piping water to an un-tank-ful city; where a new electricity substation is being built to better provide for the dense electronic walls of Brisbane; it has been one of the sites suggested for nuclear power creation. Truly, it is a shadow place for the more populous of Queensland’s south-east. It is also a place of the Gubbi-Gubbi, a site where ceremony and Bunya Bunya festivals sat alongside massacres by settlers and native police for most of the 19th century. But is it also a place of great beauty with volcanic plug mountains and remaining rainforests pockets. It is my home – a place with ancestral connections, a place I have written myself into with little hope of extrication. My partner, Ross Annels, and I have tried to build more than an economic and environmental sustainability (natural regulation of climate in an underground house, vegies, chooks, orchards, timber trees, wild-ness) but also a cultural sustainability (fine furniture, art, ceramic, contemporary music, visiting artists/writers, exhibitions), and even a spiritual sustainability (sitting stillness in the beauty of the place).

But my place’s offerings are not enough. I still pack my bags at least twice a year to visit other places, hear other stories, make other contact. Is this now a bad? If I really love my place, what am I doing in another flight-away city? I’ve planted a lot of trees at my place, so should I still pay the airfare’s climate change tax? The mediated capitalist response to earth hour suggested we drank imported champagne in huge houses (with more toilets and electronic equipment than people), the environment just another add-on consumer benefit. Perhaps all we really needed to do was to step outside? Outdoor inhabitation away from the electrified airconditioning of our houses is what might bring us back to reality. But my bags are not just full of clothes and books; they have a computer and a mobile phone. They are the tools for connection as well instruments of oppression (when they divorce us from the world of the real for the virtual). There is, of course, no one sacred/holy way.

Amidst this all, whither eco-regionalism? How might we adopt its requirements, not as limitation but as release; not as lifestyle, but as life (thereby, in Freya Matthew’s terms, ‘re-inhabiting reality’)? Perhaps, we practise the many creative celebrations of landscape memoir (some contemporary examples include Two Fires, Splash, Return of the Sacred Kingfisher, the Eel festival, but also the Festival at Kurnell that seeks a re-membering of Australia’s many
firsts amidst a most polluted landscape). And change emerges when we do so with an emotive and deep understanding (of both the light and the dark) of our place. Are there places you love and fear deeply? How do you celebrate them? How does your community celebrate such places of awe? Does publicly declaring such an emotional connection to place – making awe of place overt – change the way you (and surrounding others) live? Hearing a scientific or indeed economic analysis of climate change continues to make us feel helpless, powerless in the face of institutional force; the J-curve, a superhuman juggernaut. Participating more creatively and imaginatively, perhaps drawing upon our own and others’ indigenous traditions, using green art to acknowledge more than the beauty of the natural, helps to build up community connections to place, as well as demonstrating (and thereby lessening?) the impacts from other places.

There is a requirement for more sustainable regionalism, but it does not have to lead to xenophobia. We still need forums in which to collaboratively guess at change, but they might be less subject to the dictates of an academic rationalism. Imagine new universities of festival – places of creative debate, of music as well as science, of performance as well as thought. Places where the sum is indeed greater than the whole, because we are forced to emerge from our rooms of economic rationalism (occupied with funding and other justifications) and learn from other disciplines and ways of living. We might then all make greater acknowledgement of the wild that lies in the depths of our hearts, full of excitement, love and terror, deeply connected to this earth and the many differing regions and places that we each inhabit. The solutions that emerge from such meetings would not lie as bureaucratic recommendations for consideration, but would be already lived – taken home and practised – by us all. I speak with too many questions – not of the future, but of more ceremonial time – a place which we already inhabit.

In unpacking my bags, I find that I love my place with a self-reflective awareness that might be told better through ceremony and festival. Eco-regionalism requires imagination and creativity as much as (if not more) than carbon taxes and water pricing. Love of place is awe for country – an active land that requires dancing in its hills in order to remain respected. (To misquote Emma Goldman: ‘If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of the eco-regional revolution.’) In expressing your landscape memoir, the world and its metaphors (choose between bunyips or Wall Street) will change. Without the imagination of the arts, we will never dissolve the problems that confront our troubled times. The arts will reconnect us with the places in which we now need to live. While science may paralyse us with fear, the arts make movement possible. A fear of the bunyip or of the furies means an awe of an active land, perhaps itself able to take a key role in changing human impacts; the arts allows us to act as if such bunyips mattered.

So, here’s our choice of recipes:

1. Combine media’s preference for bad news with more accessible global awareness; add in the depressing J curves of our scientifically plotted destruction; and continue to hope that rationality will save us from ourselves.

Or

2. Allow for our love of, and connection to, place to form an informed eco-regionalism; our identities defined through the creativity of landscape memoir. The arts draw down our gaze to more human-scale changes, uplifting regional identities along with (self-)sustainable cultural models.

Given the choice between weeping and dancing, I know where you’ll find me ...

Notes:

1. A version of this essay was presented as a paper to the Australian National University symposium, *Climate Change and the Crisis of Reason*, June 2008, honouring the work of Val Plumwood (1939-2008).


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