

# Place and Human Being

## Jeff Malpas

One of my favorite descriptions of sense of place is poet Seamus Heaney's discussion of English romantic poet William Wordsworth. Referring to the Westmoreland landscape that figures in Wordsworth's poem "Michael," Heaney writes that the landscape is both "humanized and humanizing."<sup>1</sup> The landscape or, more generally, the place, is thus seen as itself having a human character, while it also makes human those who live within it.

The mutuality between place and human suggested by Heaney has been a fundamental theme in much of my work, and, if we take it that such mutuality is a real feature of the relation between places and persons, it goes a long way in explaining why it is that place and the sense of place take on so much importance in human life and experience.

Of course, we don't need to turn only to poets to know the importance of place in our lives. As a philosopher who frequently talks to both academic and popular audiences about place and the sense of place, I am struck by how readily ideas of place strike a chord in just about everybody. We all have our own stories about the places that matter to us, and about the ways in which our lives have been affected, and even shaped, by the places in which we live.

In Tasmania, where I now live and work, this is particularly evident, and the island seems somehow imbued with a stronger or more self-evident sense of place than anywhere else I have been (a phenomenon undoubtedly connected both with the character of Tasmania as an island as well as the darkness of much of its history).

## Putting Place in Question

Although it seems an obvious, though not uncontested, fact that place is important and appears easily recognizable as a key element in our lives, it remains a question as to why this should be so. Is our connection to place merely a contingent—an accidental feature of human life and experience? Is our connection to place merely a residue of the way human beings used to live—tied to a particular town, village or locality, and often having little or no experience of the world outside a certain narrow region?

Perhaps in the globalized contemporary world, in which air travel brings everywhere to

within little more than a day's journey, and in which the electronic media can connect us with just about anywhere, the idea that we have a special connection to place will come to seem rather old-fashioned, and the very notion of a special sense of place merely another form of nostalgia for a past that is no longer relevant or real.

If our connection to place is indeed merely contingent and so can change as the circumstances of human life change, then much of the discussion of place and sense of place may well have to be viewed as of only passing interest and as really a discussion that belongs to the past rather than to the present or to the future.

This possibility is a significant challenge in itself. Those of us who think that place matters, even in the era of globalization and commodification, must be able to provide an account of the nature and significance of place that is grounded in more than just our own individual experiences or responses, no matter how widely they may be shared. What is needed is an account that gives insight into the necessary character of place itself and that allows the connection to place to be seen as a necessary part of what it is to be human.

In the absence of such an account, it will always be possible that the significance of place may be open to question. And more than that, in the absence of such an account, we cannot be certain whether our positive evaluation of place and of the sense of place is itself legitimate, or whether it may even be misleading or dangerous.

Certainly, there are many contemporary theorists who would argue that, if the advent of globalization does imply a loss of any real sense of place, then this is no bad thing and that the sooner we can discard the idea of a special connection to place, the better. In fact, for some, the idea that place has a special importance in human life, and that particular places have a special role in making us what we are, is itself one of the most dangerous and pernicious ideas in the whole of human history.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Danger of Place?**

The argument for the inherent danger of place often proceeds by historical example: There are countless instances in which the idea that some individual or group has a special connection to some particular place, whether village, town or region, is the basis for acts of violence and exclusion, of varying degrees, against those who are seen as *not* of that place—as “other.”

The examples are easy to cite: In the Middle East, the conflict between Israeli and Palestinian is centered around the claim that each makes to the same “homeland” and in

which the city of Jerusalem is the central focus for intractable disagreement and division; in the Balkans, the conflict in Kosovo is only the most recent example of a long history of conflict in which notions of land and identity play a crucial role; in Nazi Germany, the event that is the great horror of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the Jewish Holocaust—was enacted on the basis of an ideology of “blood and soil” and the pre-eminence of the German “homeland.”

Even in Australia, we have seen recent attempts to defend particular areas by violent means against those who come from “outside,” the most striking example being the Cronulla beach riots of December 2005.<sup>3</sup> The idea of a sense of place, some might say, is thus not just the vestige of a past we have outgrown but is also the root cause of inhumanity, conflict, violence and much suffering.

Occasionally, one finds that this claim is reinforced, not merely by reference to examples, but also by a set of conceptual considerations that, in general form, run as follows:

1. Consider what is implied by the idea of a special sense of place. For many people it means that the place “speaks” to them, that it has a significance for them, and usually this means that the place plays a role in either reflecting something of their own sense of themselves or else that it actually shapes or is a part of that sense of self. Thus, when we say that we feel we belong to a place, we really mean that the place is part of who and what we are.

2. Think of what it might mean for this sort of special relationship between place and self to hold. If the relationship is one that plays a role in shaping my sense of self or in determining who and what I am, then one might suppose that the relationship must be one that is somehow peculiar to me or to people who share a similar sense of identity and self—otherwise the relationship would not have any special sense for me, nor could it serve to shape my identity, as distinct from that of others.

3. Yet if the relation between my self and the places that are important to me is a relationship that serves to shape my identity and so to give me a sense of self that distinguishes me from others (or at least from *some* others—from those, let’s say, who are not part of my community), then it must also serve to shape my sense of who is *other* just as much as it shapes my sense of who is *not* other.

Now sometimes the reasoning seems to stop at this point, as if it were enough to demonstrate the dangerous nature of place simply by demonstrating the way in which place can be seen to underpin the opposition of self and other, friend and stranger, compatriot and

foreigner. Yet, clearly, this is not enough to substantiate the claim that the sense of place is itself a dangerous or pernicious notion. Our connection to place may be part of what makes for the possibility of identity and so also of difference, but neither the fact of identity nor difference need be problematic in themselves. Something more must be added here.<sup>4</sup>

4. What seems to provide the necessary additional consideration, although it is seldom made explicit, is the idea that maintaining a sense of identity through connection to place necessarily implies the violent exclusion of others from that place. In essence, so this idea seems to run, my belonging to place must always be based in the belonging of that place to me and only to me (or to my community). Place and the sense of place is thus seen to be dangerous and pernicious because the relationship to place is always a relationship of *ownership*, even if often of *disguised* ownership.

If place is as dangerous as sometimes claimed, then it must be because violence and exclusion are part of the very idea of place—are already implied in the very notion of a connection to place. But this would seem to be so only if our belonging to place is indeed understood to mean the belonging of place *to us*. And, certainly, it is hard to see how one could advance the line of reasoning that concludes in such a negative valuation of place without relying on this idea.

Moreover, when we turn to the examples that are so often cited to support the claims of the negativity of place, we find that what characterizes those examples is precisely a tendency to assert sovereignty, authority, or control over the places to which belonging is claimed. The question that now emerges is this: Is it really the case that the assertion of our connection *to* place is merely another way of asserting control *over* place?

### **Indigenous Notions of Place**

This question can be seen as returning us to the challenge that I referred to near the beginning of this discussion: Since the claim in question concerns the necessarily exclusionary character of place, that claim can only be substantiated or refuted by looking to an account of the nature of place and our connection to it that is based, not in the contingent or the individual, but in the necessary structure of place as such. Yet before we take up this matter in more detail, it is worth considering one way in which the idea of our connection to place is expressed that seems to stand as a direct counter to the idea that such connection is always authoritarian and

controlling.

The idea of an intimate connection between place and human being is a widespread, if not universal, feature of Indigenous life and culture. This idea was given popular expression in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (London: Penguin, 1987), which focused on the importance of place in "nomadic" cultures, both the cultures of Aboriginal Australia and of the North African Bedouin, but it has also been the focus for many other works, both popular and scholarly, and it is an idea that is often taken as marking off Indigenous modes of life from the non-Indigenous.

Significantly, those who would argue for the dangerous and pernicious character of place seldom direct their critique at Indigenous conceptions. One might view this as purely a consequence of political sensitivity, but given the argument I set out above, there may be a more fundamental reason for this.

Indigenous conceptions of place assert an essential belonging of human beings to the places they inhabit. In Aboriginal Australian culture, for instance, one's very identity, one's totemic and kinship relations, are inseparable from one's country and the landmarks—the rocks, trees, waterholes, and so on—that make it up.

Yet leaving aside the complications introduced by European notions of land ownership, there is no sense of this belonging to place in an Indigenous context that entails proprietorship or authority over the places to which one belongs. There may well be a sense of the importance of protecting and preserving those places—a sense, one might say, of guardianship—but this need not entail, except in the case of some ritual places, the complete exclusion of others.

Moreover, for many Indigenous cultures, including that of Aboriginal Australia, the relationship to place is established and sustained, not through the exercise of authority over the place—through ensuring one's own exclusive access to it—but rather through journeying across it and through the stories that such journeying embodies and expresses. The relation between place and human being is thus explicitly seen to be one in which human beings are indeed shaped by place and, while human beings may have a responsibility to respect and care for place, and so there is indeed a measure of mutuality here, it is human beings who stand under the authority of place, rather than the other way around.

### **Place "Topographically"**

Although, as I noted above, the intimacy of the connection to place within many Indigenous

cultures is sometimes taken to be part of what marks off the Indigenous from the non-Indigenous, I take the Indigenous understanding of the human connection to place to provide important insights into the real nature and significance of place for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The sense of place that I referred to at the start of this discussion—the sense of place that Heaney describes in terms of the landscape as “humanized and humanizing”—is a sense that I would argue should be understood much more on the model of Indigenous modes of thought than by assimilation to any disguised form of ownership or control.

Indeed, the whole point of Heaney’s emphasis on the importance of the sense of place is precisely to direct attention to the mutuality of the relation between place and human being—that while we may affect the places in which we live and so may take responsibility for them, those places also affect us in profound and inescapable ways.

Much of my work on place has aimed at meeting the challenge of providing an account of our connection to place that understands it as more than just an accidental feature of human psychology. In other words, my approach has been *philosophical* in character (philosophy being understood as the mode of inquiry that looks to uncover the fundamental nature and significance of things). As such, the account is grounded in a detailed analysis of the underlying character of human being as well as the character of place. Significantly, it is also an account that mirrors key features of Indigenous conceptions of place.

Indigenous accounts of place emphasize the way in which place is formed and sustained through journey and movement, pathway and track. Not only does this suggest that our relationship with place is always one of active engagement with place and with that which is found within it, but it also means that place has to be understood as itself a dynamic and relational structure in which we are already embedded, rather than some static object over which “ownership” can simply be asserted.

I have tried to capture this idea through an analogy with old-fashioned methods of topographical surveying in which one comes to understand a landscape or stretch of country, not through mere observation from a distance, but rather through one’s engagement with that landscape as one undertakes repeated triangulations between landmarks, measuring distance and angle, as one traverses the distance from one landmark to another. The place that is the entire landscape is thus grasped as made up of a network of places, joined by the paths between, while those places are themselves made what they are through the way they are located in relation to each other within that larger landscape.

On this account, then, place has to be understood as essentially relational in character, and

our own connection to place—our “sense of place”—is seen as emerging through our active engagement with that place and our embeddedness in the relations that make it up. Both these features clearly connect with features evident in Indigenous accounts of place.

Here we have the beginnings of a way of making sense of the underlying nature and significance of place that can help us to see why the connection to place is not merely a contingent or outmoded feature of human being. But just as this account mirrors key elements of Indigenous understandings of place, so we can also see why our connection to place cannot be construed on the model of our ownership of, or authority over, place.

Place has an essentially relational structure, and our connection to place is such that we are always already embedded within that structure. As a result, place cannot be grasped as some possession over which we can take hold. Moreover, while our connection to place operates through our engagement with and movement through place—and in so doing we allow the character of places to appear—we are ourselves inevitably shaped by those places, and so stand under their sway.

We are, one might say, “owned” by place in a way that is quite different from any ownership we might attempt to exercise over particular places. Yet there is a mutuality here that is captured in Heaney’s description of the Wordsworthian landscape as “humanized and “humanizing.” It is through our engagement with place that our own human being is made real, but it is also through our engagement that place takes on a sense and a significance of its own.

### **“Owning up” to Place**

There is no doubt that we can and do make claims of ownership with respect to places, regions, and so forth. But this assertion of ownership operates at a very different level from that of our proper belonging to place. Just as Indigenous conceptions of belonging may co-exist (if not always comfortably) with non-Indigenous notions of ownership so, too, may the idea of a human connection to place coexist with ideas of proprietorship and sovereignty.

The mistake is to conflate these two very different notions. It is precisely their conflation and not the idea of place as such that underpins the violent and exclusionary responses to place that we see exemplified in the Middle East, in Kosovo, in Nazi Germany, and even in contemporary Australia.

When we fail to understand the real nature of our connection to place and refuse to understand that connection other than in terms of ownership and control, then not only have

we misunderstood ourselves, but we have also lost any real sense of place as such. To have a sense of place is not to own but rather to be owned by the places we inhabit; it is to “own up” to the complexity and mutuality of both place and human being.

## Endnotes

1. See Seamus Heaney, “The Sense of Place,” *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber & Faber, London, 1984), p. 145. I also discuss this passage in the “Introduction” to *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

2. Perhaps the best example of such a view is in the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas—see especially his “Heidegger, Gagarin, and Us,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1990), pp. 231–34.

3. These riots, which spread beyond Cronulla to encompass an area of Sydney’s southern beachside suburbs known as “the Shire,” were sparked by the attempt on the part of some residents to defend themselves against what they viewed as the incursion of “outsiders” who were mainly of Middle Eastern, especially Lebanese, background. At a different level, but still within an Australian context, many would view the immigration and border protection policies of the Howard Government (which can themselves be seen as part of the larger context that gave rise to the tensions evident at Cronulla) to be based around a xenophobic desire to defend Australia from those who supposedly do not “belong.”

4. One might suggest, of course, that there is already a basic human propensity to fear those who are different and to try to exclude others from what is our own, and that this is the only additional element required. Whether there is such a basic propensity has no bearing, however, on the question of place as such, since if there were such a propensity, this would mean that the conflict and suffering that is sometimes associated with claims to place is a consequence of a quite general feature of human psychology—it would not be a feature of the human connectedness to place in particular.