

Places We Call Home: Representing Place and Identity in Contemporary Dance Performance

Abstract

In this article I discuss ongoing research investigating methods of representing place and identity in contemporary dance performance. A feminist and phenomenological perspective provides the basis for this creative practice as research, in which I bring environmental concerns, moving images, choreographic and place-based pedagogical practices into dialogue with autoethnographic approaches. Initially I developed a range of creative methods in creating a solo dance, and then applied these methods to the development of a trio dance work titled *Places we call home*. Guiding the research was a general question regarding experiences of 'place' and 'home', with sub-questions relating to the use of embodied and narrative methods and moving images to express sensory experiences. Both the solo and trio dances were presented in a theatre to conference and public audiences. I will discuss the practical application of these creative practice research methods, the lived experiences of the dancers and myself as choreographer, and the outcomes of the research in response to the research questions. This discussion provides a context to contribute to interdisciplinary methodological innovations in creative practice as research, and also to current socio-cultural discussion relating to identity and sense of place.

Keywords: Dance, Place, Home, Feminism, Performance,

Introduction

In this article I discuss ongoing research investigating methods of representing place and identity in contemporary dance performance. Literature in performance ethnography and autoethnography, feminist choreographic practices and interdisciplinary research on sense of place all informs this research (Barbour 2011; Madison 2005; Madison and Hamera 2006; Pollack 2006; Richardson 2005, 1997; Spry 2011; Wattchow and Brown 2011).

In particular, a feminist and phenomenological perspective frames the research I undertake in dance and creative practice. A feminist perspective, as I embody it, provides the rationale for research that deeply engages with the lived experiences of dancing women. A deep engagement with embodied ways of knowing provides a context for asserting that embodied, aesthetic and sensory experiences can contribute to the generation of new knowledge; that women's personal experiences can contribute to political movements; and

that women as dancers and artists, are active and response-able agents in local and global communities. A phenomenological perspective alongside feminism, strengthens the rationale for a deep engagement in embodied lived experience in particular places – an engagement that recognises the simultaneous and holistic way in which each person is cultural, social, intellectual, political, historical, spiritual, biological, artistic, environmental, emotional, gendered and emplaced. Thus, my feminist and phenomenological perspective embodies a feminist agenda to express the personal as the political, and to position the local in relation to the global. A feminist and phenomenological perspective also suggests a range of qualitative research methods that allow engagement with the embodied aesthetics and experiences of dancing through creative practice as research, and drawing on a range of embodied choreographic and improvisational, theatrical and environmental, narrative and discussion-based activities.

An ongoing interest in my creative practice as research has been in experiences of 'place' and enhancing a 'sense of place' in relation to personal and cultural identity (Barbour 2011, 2012). Further, I have been engaged in creative practice in researching and performing site-specific dance in which relationship to particular sites or places has been the focus (Barbour 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014). As a dance artist and educator, I am aware of on-going site-specific practices and research internationally, as well as pedagogical programmes that link dance, environmental education and place-based pedagogy (Barbour 2011; East 2014, 2012, 2007; Olsen 2002). Increasing interest and innovative research has been developing in the areas of place-based pedagogy and in place-responsive pedagogy in other areas such as outdoor education and environmental education (for example: Gruenewald 2008; Wattachow and Brown, 2011). Bringing dance, environmental concerns, site-specific performance methods and pedagogical practice into dialogue within autoethnographic approaches and methods is an intriguing development from my perspective.

In this specific creative practice research project, the overall research question: What are our experiences of 'place' and 'home'? and the following sub-questions were addressed: How can we develop our sensory awareness of specific places through specific embodied, moving image and writing activities?; How can we develop representations of specific places when we are no longer in there (drawing on personal archives of photographs, moving images, memories, writing)?; How might our sensory experiences of specific places be communicated through our embodiment (in contemporary dance choreography), narrative writing and moving images in performance?; How do our notions of 'home' and 'place' relate

to our personal and cultural identities? Each of these questions offered opportunities for embodied methods, and autoethnographic and performative representations.

Autoethnographic writing offers an opportunity to write to and fro between self and culture (Richardson 2005, 2000). Acknowledging works by Soyini Madison (2011, 2007, 2006, 2005, 1999), Carolyn Ellis (2004), Tami Spry (2011, 2006, 2001), Norman Denzin (2003), and others, I suggest that autoethnographic dance performance is a practice of expressing through embodiment a consciousness about embodied relationships with place and others. Autoethnographic performance becomes a method of inquiry into our lives, allowing us as dancers to delve into our sensory embodied experiences and engage with issues of reflexivity, identity, place, belonging, embodiment, cultural commentary, transformation and empowerment. As Tami Spry argues,

“Autoethnographic performance can provide a space for the emancipation of the voice and body from homogenizing knowledge production and academic discourse structures, thereby articulating the intersections of peoples and cultures through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity.” (Spry 2001, 727)

Through this research I hope to contribute not only to methodological discussions in creative practice as research, but also to current socio-cultural discussion relating to experiences of cultural identity and sense of place (Bell 1996; King 1991, 1999). Further, bringing these interests together provides a rich and enticing opportunity for representation of methodology and findings through dance performance shared with both an academic and a wider community audience.

Place, ‘sense of place’ and home

In researching and deeply engaging in embodied experience through autoethnographic performance, we are inevitably always operating in a specific place. We are always located in a specific place because we are embodied in the world.

“The concept of place has to do with how people develop and experience a sense of attachment to particular locations on the Earth’s surface. It also has to do with how people are affected by and effect those places. Therefore, place is suggestive of both the imaginative and physical reality of a location and its people, and how the two interact and change each other.” (Wattchow and Brown 2011, xxi)

Place is more than a particular, geographical, physical location. Place “is also a poetic and aesthetic conception and a political strategy. We bring places to play in building meaningful worlds and communities and invest them with cultural and religious meanings” (Macdonald

2003, 3). Writing from the fields of human geography, Anderson & Erskine, (2014) discuss a common concept in understandings of place: that of 'topophilia'. Topophilia is described as "a love of rootedness, dwelling and habituation within a secure geographical location" (Anderson and Erskine 2014, 131; Tuan 1974). While this concept has been contested, particularly as suggesting a static geographical notion of place, a broader reading acknowledges the development of affective bonds between people and place, and recognizes the socially contested and permeable boundaries of experiences of place (Massey 1994, 2005). Paying attention to place reveals that change in meanings of places, as well as changes to the physical environment, are ongoing. Places "are not simply locations or abstract concepts, rather they are sites of lived experience and meaning making" (Wattchow and Brown 2011, 67).

We develop a 'sense of place' over time as we 'put down roots', 'take up residence', 'find our place to stand'. 'Sense of place' acknowledges "the felt sense of a place and the intuitive sensing that is active when one is attuned to, and receptive towards, one's surroundings" (Cameron 2003, 173). In the development of a sense of place, Brian Wattchow describes how we firstly release and open ourselves to experiences in a place, fill our senses such that "the body's fleshy perimeter seems to be breached and what was outside floods in while what was in drifts out" (Wattchow and Brown 2011, 114). And it is from these experiences that "a powerful sense of connection" may arise (Wattchow and Brown 2011, 114). Sense of place is significant in our experiences, and, as Park and Potton argue, perhaps we can suggest that, "a sense of place is a fundamental need" (Park and Potton 1995, 320).

According to Henderson (1995, 100) deeply felt connections with community and ecology through relationships with particular places "can lead to a transformation of self... the ability to 'realise' oneself and one's connection to the world differently." James Raffan, (1992, cited in Wattchow and Brown 2011) provided an understanding of four ways in which land itself shapes our perceptions and experiences of place. Firstly, we have an experiential, personal link to land, strengthened when "dependence on the land for survival necessitated a much deeper attention to land" (96-97). We may have a toponymic sense of place based on the origin, significance and process of naming places, as well as stories - narrative sense of place derived from stories of how the land came to be, cultural significance and travelling stories (Raffan 1992; Wattchow and Brown, 2011). And further, a numinous "sense of divine presence in spiritual encounters with the land" (Wattchow and Brown 2011, 97) is another way in which land may teach people about place.

However, in our contemporary world, people become connected to multiple places, develop a sense of these places and also move on, sometimes becoming disconnected and relocated (Wattchow and Brown 2011). Pacific anthropologist David Gegeo (2001) reflects on the migratory patterns of Pacific peoples and suggests that identity and place can become portable. There is potential for both “being rooted in place, yet free to move to other places and to return to the home place” (Macdonald 2003, 4). People are mobile, arguably to a much greater extent than ever before. While the concept of topophilia is useful for some people, the ways in which land informs our understandings about place depends on cultural context. Not all immigrants are free to return home, and not all indigenous peoples have a deep sense of a place that is home. However, a nostalgic, remembered ‘home’ and relationship to ‘place’ may nevertheless shape personal and cultural identity, both positively and negatively (Macdonald 2003). “The sensory events of our daily lives trigger memories of the places in which we have dwelt and thus help us to remember whence we have come and how we have been shaped” (Macdonald 2003, 6). Consequently, there is an “unavoidable reciprocity between people and places” (Wattchow and Brown 2011, 54). For some, journeys away from familiar ‘places’ provide the opportunity to recognize the significance of relationship to home and the way in which place clearly shapes personal and cultural identity (Barbour 2011; Gegeo 2001; hooks 2009; Tuan 1974).

Adding to the concept of topophilia and discussing sense of place, Anderson and Erskine, (2014, 135) argue that increasingly mobile people in increasingly globalized cultures has meant that some people have a “need to move and be moved and to be stimulated and challenged in relation to place”. Consequently, they suggest that the concept of ‘tropophilia’: a love of movement, “mobility, change and transformation in the person-place relation” is important to embrace in understanding place (Anderson and Erskine 2014, 142). Obviously, as an artist whose medium is movement, this concept has appeal. For many people, regardless of our intergenerational connection to specific places or our mobile relationships with many different places, we can come to understand some places as ‘home’ (Tuan 1974; Wattchow and Brown, 2011). How we understand ‘place’ and ‘home’ and how we might represent the ‘places we call home’ in autoethnographic performance, was the focus in the performance works to which I refer. This research reflects experiential relationships with specific local places (topophilia) and broader experiences of multiple, diverse places experienced by increasingly mobile people (tropophilia).

Creative practice research methods

Initially, I developed a range of creative practice research methods in creating a solo autoethnographic dance performance work called *A place to stand*, and subsequently I wrote about the methodological fusion of autoethnographic writing and solo dance performance (Barbour 2012). In developing this first solo, it was significant that

these methods of inquiry were based on dance performance experience, encompassing improvisation, choreographic, theatrical knowledge, and movement training, as well as creative writing: “creative practice as research” (Barbour 2006, 2010, 2011). My aim in dancing [was] to embody through autoethnographic performance that which I am unable to write on the page. (Barbour 2012, 67-68).

In brief, my experiences of creating and performing solo led me to realise that my own understanding of place and of home was deeply rooted in the specific place in which I grew up, suggesting that the concept of topophilia would be a relevant concept to apply my experiences. Regardless, unpacking my understandings further, I became interested in the extent to which my sense of place, my sense of home, is now rather nostalgic and contestable, and how I have developed other ‘homes’ over time. However, my sense of home still has fostered a commitment to conservation and environmental engagement. I wrote:

“My home is a memory, a place I have neither ownership of, nor any claim to guardianship, nor any of my people still there keeping the home fires burning. My embodiment of home, my deeply felt sense of place, transforms into a call to action. I make a commitment to this land and to all the peoples of Aotearoa, imagining a partnership between peoples and with the land. I belong here.” (Barbour 2012, 69)

To further extend my research into sense of place, home and identity, I applied the methods I used in creating my solo work to the development of a trio dance work titled *Places we call home*. Guiding the research was the general question regarding our experiences of ‘place’ and ‘home’, with sub-questions relating to developing sensory awareness of place, the use of embodied and narrative methods as well as moving images to express sensory experiences, and consideration of how our notions of ‘home’ and ‘place’ relate our personal and cultural identities. I worked with three experienced professional contemporary dancers, two of whom had lived in various parts of the world and currently resided in New Zealand, alongside myself and another New Zealand born dancer. All of us have a strong sense of our relationship to places within New Zealand, and all have connections through family and ancestry to multiple, different places in the world. My intent was to delve into our sensory experiences of the places we call home.

To engage with the research question regarding how we could develop our sensory awareness of specific places, we worked in the studio using photos and movement tasks that evoked memories of place as well as working at local sites, deepening our somatic awareness of place, improvising and developing choreographic movement material. Visiting local places, we took photographs and moving images to record our embodied experiences and to use to evoke the experience of place when we returned to the studio. We individually wrote and then collaboratively crafted short poetic and narrative representations of our embodied experiences in both remembered places and in visits to local sites. We discussed issues of reflexivity, cultural and personal identity, home and belonging, as women living in Aotearoa throughout the creative process. I integrate our experiences now to weave autoethnographic and creative practice research together with photographs of our contemporary dance as I share our findings.

Places we call home

In creating *Places we call home*, the focus of the performance work was equally artistic and ethnographic, aiming to claim a space for us as women artists to speak back to the academy through our embodiment. The major representation of our research findings were embodied in the live performances of the trio dance *Places we call home* presented to both the Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines international conference hosted in New Zealand and in a public performance season. Evaluating how we developed our sensory awareness of specific places through these embodied, moving image and writing activities, as well as how written activities and use of images added to our embodied expressions of places, we were able to better understand the relations between place, personal and cultural identity. Writing about creative practice research in this article allows me to more specifically articulate my engagement with notions of place as discussed in the literature and kinesthetically sensed in performance.

During the creative process we worked collaboratively together in a wide range of creative activities both in the dance studio and at specific local sites. This work built on those activities I developed in creating my solo (see Barbour 2012). Activities included movement tasks that focussed our attention in our sensory experience within our own embodiment - turning inward, as well as in relation to others and in relation to specific local places - turning outward. These embodied activities drew on somatic practices in dance and the teachings of outdoor education through acclimatization exercises - both of which foster the development of a sense of place and a sense of self. Further activities were designed to help us in

remembering home, reflecting on belonging and being with others – all of which foster the development of an understanding of place and self in relation to environment and culture (Barbour 2012). These activities all contributed to the development of our movement – individual solos, duets and group ensemble, - as well as discussion and reflection. Using a combination of methods, I then sought to develop representations of specific places for theatrical performance.

During the choreographic process we spent time at specific local places that we connected to as representative of ‘home’ and that stimulated a strong sense of place. With moving and still cameras we documented our improvisations and also collected images of environmental details of the places. Again, these experiences enriched our choreographic processes, as well as suggesting visual aesthetics for the performance work and generated new and shared embodied experiences that we could draw on for performance. Some moving images, both of dancers in places and details of trees, water and environment were then incorporated into the performance as projected images that literally brought these local places into the theatrical space to enhance overall relationship to place.

Photograph 1 below documents an example of movement improvisations in a local place that were then developed choreographically for the theatre. The images and experiences of dancing in place fed into the performance aesthetic, in terms of colour and light, use of space and actual movement.



Photograph 1: Movement improvisations in place.

Photography by Molly McCabe of Marie Hermo Jensen and Patti Mitchley.

While we each had many strong memories of 'home', we found that photographs and moving images elicited a deeper sense of the places we had called 'home'. In response to our shared personal images of home, I led somatic movement improvisations, and we brainstormed associations, wrote short narratives for each other and collaboratively developed short poetic representations of home. During the creative process we crafted these short poetic texts together as informed by our choreographic processes and were incorporated into the final performances. These poetic texts were projected onto black screens, the words shifting and changing as they interacted with the stage lighting and haze effects. Four poetic texts with performance photos are included below.

Poetic text 1

beating heart
blood, water
bone, stone
in the womb
of the land,
home.



Photograph 2: Beating heart of the land - *Places we call home*

Photography by Karen Barbour of Marie Hermo Jensen, Caterina Laschke and Patti Mitchley.

In reflection, we considered the extent to which we were able to evoke an experience of place/site and/or home. Each of the dancers identified different aspects of the dance in

which they felt mostly strongly connected to place and home. Referring to the opening section of the dance (shown in Photograph 2) and the poetic text we created (above), Cat responded:

“the beginning - that was my home moment. When I started rolling over those two bodies, the track sounds like the sound of a volcano erupting and that’s one of my first memories in life, as a baby next to the volcano where my family lived... that was the most significant moment for me - the sense of the home feeling and the sound of the track and the lights with us and the floor with the red going over each other’s bodies, that sense, that was lava for me.”

This particular scene evoked a strong sense of place and of Cat’s home during the dance.

Poetic text 2

*black sand,
ocean meets land,
swirling wind
calls
until horizon’s
breath holds...
and we return home.*

Marie and Patti both commented specifically on their solo sections within the overall dance as particularly significant in evoking memories of landmarks. Marie commented:

“I felt very connected to home in [my] solo... as it was particularly created that way... I miss the snow... but I had ice cracking. I walked on the snow... I was there... And in terms of the rest of the work I felt close to nature.... not necessarily my home, but a home... sense of home changes as life progresses and as you move... I’ve called Oslo home, I’ve called London home... [and now] I come home to New Zealand... I do feel like I have to be in one spot for a for a while before I start feeling that it’s home...”

Again, in reflecting on our creative process and on the performances together, we discussed the extent we felt our experiences of ‘home’ related to particular places. Patti’s reflections revealed that:

“...in my solo I had... images in my own mind that I was able to really connect with and process while I was dancing ... for me it’s not, it’s not one place, it’s more like a settling and an understanding. It’s a sense of belonging, so it’s not a singular place... [But] I’d miss the mountain, definitely, and the bush.”

I commented that specific environmental features evoked home for me:

“when I go somewhere where there’s a quite a high skyline and deep valleys, there’s rivers and there’s bush and it’s remote - that’s what home is for me.”



Photograph 3: Aspects of home - *Places we call home*

Photography by Karen Barbour of Marie Hermo Jensen, Caterina Laschke and Patti Mitchley.

Our comments relate to both generic and physical aspects of home – such as snow and ice, the mountain and the bush, high skylines, deep valleys, and rivers. Cat summarises her reflections in a similar way:

“I think that we all are drawn to certain things that make us home. For some people it’s the forest, for some people it’s lots of high mountains and snow, for some people it’s lots of view and straight land. For me personally it’s where the water and the land meet, it’s islands and where one big mountain is. That’s, that for me is the landscape. It doesn’t matter where that is in the world, for some reason I feel connected.

These reflections support understandings of ‘sense of place’ and ‘topophilia’ discussed in wider literature and research on place. Some of our reflections also support understandings of ‘sense of place’ in relation to multiple places as we move about the world, and thus the concept of ‘tropophilia’ discussed may be applied (Anderson and Erskine 2014).

Poetic text 3

a safe place

to return to

*-family, memories,
sounds,
landmarks -
here we belong*

While landmarks and some specific places clearly evoked a sense of home for us, we also discussed the significance of family and belonging in developing and reinforcing a sense of home. Patti commented that 'home' was not necessarily a singular place for her, and that it was "more to do with raising family there, cos then you start looking at home in a different way..." Marie and I agreed with her comments. For me, bringing up our son has meant my sense of home has evolved as well as drawing nostalgically on my childhood experiences and family memories. Marie acknowledged how her sense of home has changed as her life changed and she created new 'homes'. These experiences of home in relation to family and belonging are expressed in this poetic text and the choreography.

Delving into our personal relationships with 'home' led to further recognitions that we do have multiple places that we call 'home'. In some cases, there are generic aspects of the environment that we respond strongly to, and that evoke a sense of 'home'. Additionally, and more directly related to cultural and personal identity, we recognised that home may be deeply connected to family and belonging with other people. We can and do develop multiple, strong senses of place after time and engagement in specific places, and we may also experience tensions and affective 'pull' or 'sway' as we move between 'homes'. Cat attempts to explain how her sense of 'home' has evolved in response to her life experiences:

I literally have been travelling back and forth between two countries all my life, and never really feeling home in one place... so I had to learn really early that... home is where I am, where my heart is. I completely sort of surrender to that place where I am, where I decided to be..."

Cat's life experiences of moving between places suggest that her understanding of 'home' may reflect her shifting experiences of personal identity and belonging (or not belonging) in multiple places. As a mobile person and a dancer, change in her relationship to place was something she experienced less as a tension but as a form of surrender.

Poetic text 4

*wild like
the weather,
chaotic like*

*our emotions
ever-changing*

Attempting to surrender, respond to and accept change in our sense of place over time and geographical shifts, we find inspiration, perhaps even solace, in the ever-changing weather patterns of our lives on an island in the middle of the wild south Pacific Ocean. Weather becomes a metaphor for emotions relating to place and home, and we become watchers of the weather flowing through us, emotionally charged and embodied, locally specific and emplaced.



Photograph 4: Wild like the weather - *Places we call home*

Photography by Karen Barbour of Marie Hermo Jensen, Caterina Laschke and Patti Mitchley.

Conclusions and aspirations

In conclusion, in this creative practice research I have investigated our experiences of place and home through dancers' embodied methods. Throughout the creative process I was able to address the research questions, noting that sensory embodied experiences drawing on

memories and photos of places we have called 'home' offered inspiration for movement improvisation and choreographic development, as did visits to local sites that evoked experiences of home. Movement material was developed and choreographed with the intent to represent aspects of our sensory experiences of place and home. Short individual poetic and narrative writing tasks provided further inspiration for choreographic development. Additionally, poetic writing offered an opportunity for critical reflection and resulted in collaboratively written texts that were then projected live during the performance to further represent place and home with the audience. Finally, moving images of our improvisations in local places were then shaped as a further layer of projection in the performance to represent generic aspects of place and home that were significant for each of us as performers. Combined together, these methods contributed findings in response to the research questions that were shared within the theatre context for live performance.

Reflecting on interdisciplinary understandings, I conclude that our research revealed that our relationships with place and home have changed over time with our evolving sense of personal and cultural identity. Potentially, our relationships with place and home will continue to change. For some of us, travelling produced a strong sense of multiple places and homes. As raising a family became important for some, we reflected on the way in which our childhood home shaped our choices about homes for our children, and sometimes triggered a longing for places with generic features we associated with home and belonging. Thus, both topophilia – a deeply rooted sense of a particular place as home, as well as tropophilia – changing relationships between mobile people and multiple places, were useful in theorising our experiences as dancers.

Aspirationally, in sharing this research through performance and academic writing, I contribute to interdisciplinary methodological innovations in creative practice research. As an artist and an academic researcher, I am continually fascinated by creative processes in the arts and in research. Interdisciplinarity adds a richness and texture to creative process and in this research, engagement with ideas from the broad fields of human geography, dance, outdoor education, somatics and environmentalism, provided an opportunity for developing new socio-cultural understandings of home, identity and place. Through our embodiment as dancers we speak from multiple, local places of emerging cultures, responsive to personal, family and cultural 'weather' that swirls around us. Thus I believe our work is about the emancipation of the dancer's voice in the academy! And our practices validate the presence and significance of embodiment in our lives, our lives as artists and the artistry of living.

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