Making Sense of Place

Exploring concepts and expressions of place through different senses and lenses

Edited by Frank Vanclay, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

MAKING SENSE OF PLACE

Making Sense of Place explores place from myriad perspectives and through evocative encounters. The Great Barrier Reef is experienced through the sense of touch, Lake Mungo is encountered through sound and 'listening', and light is shed on the meaning of place for deaf people. Case studies include the Maze prison in Northern Ireland, Inuit hunting grounds in Northern Canada, and the songlines of the A<u>n</u>angu people in Central Australia. Iconic landscapes, lookouts, buildings, gardens, suburbs, grieving places, the car as place — all provide contexts for experiencing and understanding 'place' and our 'sense of place'.

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Director's foreword

The National Museum of Australia was delighted to be a partner in the Senses of Place conference held in Hobart during April 2006. The several days of discussion provoked lively interest in how and what Australians and others mean by 'sense of place' and how we relate to the places that are important to us. The broad range of backgrounds of both speakers and participants illustrated how important 'place' is to humankind, and how many perspectives there are on place.

So it is with great pleasure that the National Museum of Australia Press has produced this book, stemming as it does from the conference and representing a further development of a number of the presentations made in Hobart. The volume has been an excellent way to expand upon a number of key lines of argument and dissertation.

The accompanying DVD captures, with extraordinary sensitivity, a number of personal relationships with place, recorded in interviews with conference participants during the Hobart gathering. The interviewees' spoken words complement the tone of the written words of this volume.

The National Museum, in exploring its three themes of land, nation and people, is keenly aware of how individuals, societies and cultures are shaped by their environment and by place, and how place is in turn shaped by them. This relationship between people and place — a relationship that exists at a range of levels, from the theoretical and remote to the deeply felt and daily lived — is a rich and worthwhile area of study and research. I am sure that this volume and DVD will make a major contribution to the way we think about and relate to place.

Craddock Morton
Director
National Museum of Australia

Editors' preface

This book and its accompanying DVD are outputs of the Senses of Place conference held in Hobart in April 2006. The conference, with its by-line of 'exploring concepts and expressions of place through different senses and lenses', sought to expand understandings of place by broadening the basis by which it is usually considered. A sense of place can be in the form of a cognitive consciousness (or intellectual abstraction), but full appreciation of the meaning of place can only be experienced through the senses — the smell, taste, feel, sound, sight and spiritual dimensions of place that we experience, whether we are aware of them or not.

The reference to different 'senses' and 'lenses' was deliberately intended to encompass the multiplicity of possible ways of experiencing, embodying and manifesting place, as well as the different ways of looking at and representing place — at different scales, from different disciplinary perspectives, using different media, and from the perspectives of different 'actors'. In the spirit of the conference, this book seeks to convey some idea of the significance that place has in people's lives and the breadth of possible approaches to exploring and examining place.

The Senses of Place conference was a collaboration between four parties: the National Museum of Australia; the Place Research Network; the Community, Place and Change Theme Area of the University of Tasmania; and the Mountain Festival. Held during the Mountain Festival in Hobart, the conference was able to extend to delegates a wide array of place-inspired experiences, including musical performances, an art exhibition, multimedia installations, an interpreted tour of a sculpture trail, a facilitated discussion forum, as well as place-based food and wine.

Unfortunately, the medium of a book (even with an accompanying DVD) puts constraints on the dimensions of place that can be presented. Of course, all topics can be discussed in written form, but reading about the food of a particular place, for example, and enjoying eating it are slightly different experiences! Nevertheless, the abundance of colour illustrations as well as the rich and colourful descriptions of the authors has assisted in imparting something of the experiences and sensations associated with the places that are featured in this collection.

The book format also limited the number of contributions that could be included. While more than 100 presentations were given at the conference, it was only possible to include a much smaller number in this volume. The chapters were selected on the basis of a wide range of criteria, including that of maintaining a broad coverage of approaches to the topic, readability, and of enhancing understanding of place. We thank all those who offered their papers to us and we apologise to those who we had to decline.

A work such as this inevitably incurs debts of gratitude to many people. Without listing them all, there are some that deserve special recognition. First and foremost, we wish to thank Julie Simpkin for her work in copyediting the book. We also thank Po Sung for designing the book. Denis French was instrumental in collecting permissions to use the many illustrations. The other members of the Senses of Place Conference Planning Committee have also been very supportive in the editing process. We thank Jeff Malpas, Jonathan Holmes, Elaine Stratford, Ian Coates and Chris Cooper. Ana Maria Esteves assisted in proofreading the final copy and in providing valued advice.

Finally, this book and the conference could not have occurred without the support of the National Museum of Australia. It is only fitting that Australia's national museum should take a leading role in interpreting 'place', promoting an understanding of place, and encouraging debate around the issues associated with place and our sense of place.

Frank Vanclay, Matthew Higgins and Adam Blackshaw

8. Places of silence

Mike Gulliver

Mike Gulliver grew up in England before working his way though France, Quebec and Russia, and back again. He now lives in Bristol, where he is undertaking research in deaf studies and geography. His main research interests are minority identities, histories and knowledges, particularly concerning linguistic nationalism.

A historical watershed

On Thursday morning, 9 September 1880, the International Congress for the Improvement of the Conditions of the Deaf, in Milan, was preparing for its most important vote. For the 164 voting delegates, representing a wide variety of European, and North and South American schools, religious and charity organisations and governments, this was the moment they had been waiting for. Following years of background correspondence, alliance building and politicking, and four days of intense debate, this was the vote that justified their attendance, that would shape the reports that they would take home, and would set the official path of their own countries' and organisations' future education of deaf[1] children.

It was nearing lunchtime and the delegates were edgy. A series of last minute proposals and counter proposals between French and Italian delegates had threatened to throw the gathering into chaos. Finally, the president called the assembly to order. The motion was read out and a secret ballot taken. In the end, there was no doubt that all the blustering had been little more than the efforts of personal and national egos to inscribe themselves as the authors of what was, ultimately, a foregone conclusion. By 160 votes to 4, the use of sign language was banned from the education of deaf children.

As misguided as this decision may seem to us now, it has to be considered in the context of nineteenth-century deaf education. For over 100 years, a confusion of methods had been used by a wide variety of organisations, and although schools for deaf children had attempted

Figures 8.1 & 8.2. George Veditz signing. National Association of the Deaf, 1913. Gallaudet University Archives

to introduce a general move towards integrating them into wider society by teaching speech, deaf people were strongly resistant to giving up their own 'native' sign language in the pursuit of social integration. The majority of the delegates considered that it was time to act in the best interests of their deaf students by targeting this single, and most obstructive, 'bad habit'.

Two days after the vote, on the final afternoon of the congress, the Italian Government's representative gave the closing address. He spoke directly to the deaf children whose education they had been discussing:

> And to you too who, until now, have been a class of disinherited poor …
> rise up in the hope of a new life resurrected by thought … for even as we
> weep with you in those places of silence … speech — pure and clear, which
> brings understanding — is beginning to blossom.[2]

The aftermath

As the delegates had hoped, their ratification of 'oralism' had a profound effect. Immediately following the congress, official support lent weight to a growing transformation of deaf schools. Over time, the changes the congress hoped to see began to be implemented. Speech training, coupled in the early twentieth century with new hearing-aid technologies and a revolution in state-governed education, meant that the linguistic and social barriers of deafness could be challenged. For the first time, it was possible to envisage a life of integration for deaf people alongside their hearing peers. The framework adopted in Milan, with its stated aim of 'abolishing deafness',[3] continues to influence most of the world's official provision for deaf people today.

Despite the apparently integrated utopia offered by oralism, however, the only deaf people at the conference remained unconvinced. The four dissenters at Milan included two deaf men and two hearing brothers who had grown up surrounded by deaf family members. At the time they warned the other delegates not to ignore the power of sign language:

> What is education? Is it speech? Are the two the same? Is it speech that
> gave civilisation to the world? Not at all … I don't think that all those who
> are born deaf can learn to speak … for these, a completely different system
> from speech is necessary … In all schools, the natural language of those
> born deaf is sign language.[4]

Their warnings were disregarded as symptomatic of a deaf, 'stuck-in-the-mud' reluctance to freely abandon sign language. However, they appear to have been well-founded. Despite the adoption of increasingly draconian measures — including the removal or 'reassignment' of deaf

teachers unable to teach through speech, and an enforcement of linguistic control over deaf children that ranged from extensive surveillance throughout the day to the physical binding and beating of signing 'offenders' — deaf people persisted in using the outlawed language.

The course of the following century did little to convince many deaf and hearing commentators, who continue to condemn the power and arrogance of oralist philosophy that has single-mindedly pursued speech at the expense of deaf learning and wellbeing.[5]

There remains an enormous distance between those who are pro and anti the oralist philosophy. However, what is particularly interesting is that there is little argument over what actually happened at Milan. For proponents of speech and sign language alike, Milan represented a milestone in deaf education that brought about an official promotion of speech over sign language, and led to an era of integration that drew tens of thousands of deaf people into the hearing world. Instead, the argument is much more about what these changes actually meant for those concerned.

In the midst of the complexity, the issue of place — and particularly the question of deaf people's place in the world — is one way in which the confusion surrounding these opposing views can be addressed. To do this, I will borrow the words of Augusto Zucchi (the Italian Government representative at the congress). He provides a starting point by assuring deaf children that 'we weep with you in those places of silence'. It is this concept of 'silence' and particularly the deaf places of silence that I would like to explore.

Experiencing and imagining silence

The idea of silence is somewhat iconic of deafness and has been extensively used to illustrate the lives and experiences of deaf people. Books and films that describe deaf experiences, or events and festivals that showcase deaf arts or performance often include the word 'silent' in their title. The image of deaf people living in a world of silence is familiar to hearing people because the deafness described is akin to notions of silence we recognise and perhaps fear. We each have our own threshold of comfort regarding the length of voluntary *quiet*. However, we live lives that are so immersed in sound from nature, technology, other people and our own bodies that our idea of complete *silence* is as a foreign, almost tangible blanket of numbness, smothering us in isolation and cutting us off from the surrounding world.

This experience of silence is supported by the experiences of those who lose their hearing through accident, illness or ageing. Evidence gathered by the United Kingdom's Royal National Institute of the Deaf shows that unless some form of auditory compensation is made, those with significant 'hearing loss' often experience grief, worry, paranoia, isolation and depression. The principal reason for this appears to be that while they still consider the hearing world to be their home, they find themselves forcibly separated from it and from any significant involvement in its affairs, particularly over time. This is not the experience of those who

'like their own company', but rather the gradual but inexorable dislocation from a hearing community that includes everything and everyone who is familiar and loved.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the hearing delegates at the Milan congress who chose to support the oralist movement acted as they did. With this concept of silence in their minds, the effort of bringing large numbers of deaf children together and educating them must have seemed futile if it only resulted in creating a larger community of silence in which the children then chose to live. Any of those 160 voters who might have struggled with their own conscience over the imposed nature of the decision may have consoled themselves with the knowledge that they would have welcomed the outcome of others doing the same for them, even against their initial wishes. As one of them stated: 'As for us, we will be happy if we succeed in giving our children intelligible speech to re-establish them in easy relationship with society'.[6]

It is perhaps this continued belief that deaf people live in silent isolation or have no choice but to retreat into a silent ghetto that has motivated, throughout the twentieth century, the continued intervention into deaf lives and the perception that, along with other disabled groups, the solution to deaf people's apparent displacement from mainstream society is a policy of integration. After all, isn't it now possible, and indeed morally preferable, for doctors and therapists to preserve and train what hearing remains and direct a deaf child down the path that leads to a place in mainstream society before they become 'trapped' in silence?

It is at this point — where deaf people are encouraged to leave the silence of a disabled world and take up their place in a hearing world — that a significant number of those affected by deafness vehemently disagree:

> This is all very well for people with hearing loss who are desperate to rejoin the hearing world … But it doesn't describe our situation … We are not disabled hearing people living in a world of silence … We are people of the eye.[7]

Perhaps, surprisingly, it is 'silence' that gives us the key to what these deaf people are saying. While those with their origins in the hearing world consider silence to be a loss of sound, this is only because their interaction with others is sound-based. For someone who has never known significant sound and for whom communication has always been visual, it is not a lack of sound that constitutes the experience of silence, but a lack of visual communication — *visual silence*. Paddy Ladd explains this experience from a deaf perspective: 'Interaction with hearing people can take place slowly and patiently on a one-to-one basis. However, given the necessity of lip-reading … interaction with groups of people is virtually impossible'.[8] Compare this with a quote from one of Ladd's friends describing interaction within the visually rich deaf community:

> They would bring me to the [deaf] club every week, and I would just stand there in amazement and delight, drinking it all in, all that [sign], and that sheer information, whole range of informations about life, I just absorbed it all, just learning, learning all the time.[9]

Thus, in the same way that silence can appear unnatural, oppressive, fearful and isolating to a hearing person, visual silence may be equally so to a deaf person. What irony, then, that in opting to resolve the perceived isolation of deaf people by removing them from the 'silent' world of deafness and immersing them in the speech-based, sound-saturated hearing world, oralists actually achieved just the opposite, imposing enforced separation and isolation in a visually poor communicative environment. Furthermore, by explicitly linking speech to success, what they ultimately succeeded in doing was constructing a situation in which deaf people became powerless to challenge the status quo unless they could somehow do so verbally!

Deaf places

Misunderstanding deaf people's lives as being lived in silence was a major plank of the Milan vote. However, it was not the only one. Zucchi's quote speaks not only of silence, but also of 'places of silence'. A sense of place is not merely created by an ability to communicate with other people (otherwise paper and pencil would suffice). A sense of place implies just that — a place, somewhere in the world that we know, that we call our own (and perhaps that calls us its own), where we share the unwritten and unspoken knowledge of what is accepted and normal, and understood as taken for granted.

Having a sense of place, however, is not only about having a home, it is also about being part of creating that home along with other people. Those hearing people who lose their hearing do not only lose conversational contact with friends and loved ones, they also gradually lose their sense of fitting in to places that feel like home. We could say that they live in the same *spaces* as before, but not the same *places*. Places change, constantly evolving as the people who know them build into them experiences of daily life and memories of events. To appreciate this, one only needs to think of how easy it is to feel out of touch after a time away from familiar places, and how long it takes to feel 'at home' again.

If this is true for hearing people, it is equally true for deaf people, but with a surprising twist. Although deaf people share the same physical *spaces* as the hearing world, we have seen how they are excluded from many of the interactions that define the *places* of the hearing world. Instead, deaf people's places are created by sharing and interaction lived out in the visually interactive world of sign language. This means that deaf places, the knowledges that produce them (and the knowledges that are produced within them) have developed over time in ways that make them profoundly different in nature and priority from those of hearing people.

Little is known about the early evolution of these deaf places. They first appeared thousands of years ago in the form of multigenerational deaf families or spontaneous urban communities communicating in sign language and passing deaf knowledge from one generation to the next.[10] These deaf places developed around these families and communities into a constantly evolving, visually rich network of deaf places that attracted other, unconnected deaf people. This pattern continued until the late eighteenth century with the establishment of residential deaf schools across Europe and North America. Drawing together still greater numbers of deaf people, these schools became the central loci for the deaf community, places through which almost all deaf children would eventually pass, in which deaf people could guarantee to meet each other, interact visually, and pass language and shared knowledge from generation to generation. The network of deaf places gradually became populated by its own culture, folklore, legends, politics, philosophies and priorities for wellbeing — a deaf world, created by deaf people with little connection to the hearing world around it. By the time of the Milan congress, this visually interactive deaf world was a vibrant transnational linguistic home in which tens of thousands of deaf people found their sense of place.

Having understood this, we can finally appreciate the enormous impact the Milan vote had on the deaf community. Far more than a simple communicative tool, sign language — created within the places of the deaf community, by the deaf community, for the ongoing survival and health of the deaf community — was the very mortar on which their sense of place was constructed and maintained. The deaf community, which prior to Milan celebrated not only a unique language but also a unique home, found itself not only silenced but forced to stand by and watch as subsequent generations of oralists single-mindedly pursued the eradication of sign language and, in doing so, destroyed deaf places, cultures and knowledges. Is it any wonder that George Veditz (Figures 8.1 & 8.2) summed up the effects of Milan this way:

> [They] think they know all about ... the Deaf but [they] know nothing about their thoughts and souls, their feelings, desires, and needs ... They do not understand signs, for they cannot sign. They proclaim that signs are worthless and of no help to the Deaf. Enemies of the sign language, they are enemies of the true welfare of the Deaf.[11]

It is this destruction of deaf places that was the greater damage wrought by the Milan vote — the loss of places that were simply unknown to the 160 oralist delegates, but which formed the entire cultural world of the pre-Milan deaf community. It is no surprise that as deaf people struggle to preserve their places against an increasingly 'well meaning' tide of medical, surgical, genetic, educational, therapeutic, linguistic and social interventions that all aim to lift deaf people out of their silence and into the hurly-burly of the hearing world,[12] that Ladd should refer to the post-Milan period as a 'holocaust' of the deaf community.[13] And if this is true for

deaf people, it may also be true for many other groups and individuals who communicate in forms and ways that we simply can't hear and who, also, appear to be living in silence.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Given the nature of this chapter and the plethora of historical and contemporary labels attached to deaf people, I have chosen not to adopt the current practice of using capital and lower case 'Deaf/deaf' to distinguish the cultural affinity of deaf people. Instead I am using the term 'deaf' to denote those who are significantly deaf from birth and for whom sign language is a natural first language. I will use the term 'hearing loss' to designate those who lose their hearing after finding an identity in the hearing world.
2   Augusto Zucchi, quote from the verbatim account of the Milan congress: *Compte Rendu du Congrès International pour l'Amélioration du Sort des Sourds-Muets*, trans. Mike Gulliver, Imprimerie Héritiers Botta, Rome, 1880.
3   The *London Times* newspaper followed the proceedings of the Milan congress with interest and proclaimed shortly after its conclusion that 'Deafness is abolished', cited in Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, UK, 2003, p. 29.
4   Edward Gallaudet, quote from the verbatim account of the Milan congress.
5   Rudi Conrad, *The Deaf Schoolchild: Language and Cognitive Function*, Harper & Row, London, 1979; M Griggs, 'Deafness and mental health: perceptions of health within the deaf community', PhD thesis, University of Bristol, UK, 1998; Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*.
6   M Labbe Guérin, quote taken from the verbatim account of the Milan congress.
7   George Veditz, quoted in Carol Padden, 'The people of the eye', 1910, undated web-published paper, www.taperahmanson.com/download/5BRpeopleeye.pdf.
8   Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*, p. 34.
9   A Barry, quoted in Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*, p. 316.
10 This assertion is based on research drawn from Ancient Greece, North America, France, the United Kingdom and the Ottoman Empire, and synthesised separately by Ladd, 2003, and by M Gulliver in 'Deafscapes: The landscape and heritage of the Deaf world', paper presented at Forum UNESCO conference, Newcastle University, UK, 11–16 April 2005.
11 Veditz, in C Padden & T Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988, pp. 35–6.
12 Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1992.
13 Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*.