

## *Being There: Poetic Landscapes*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In early 2012, I was invited by Pilbara Writers group in Karratha to make a poetry map for the Pilbara region when they saw the *Poetry 4 U* website (<http://poetry4U.org>) where poems are pinned to geographic locations. I visited the Pilbara June 17 – 23, 2012 to commence the poetry mapping project with members of the Pilbara Writers group. By walking with video when writers took me to their favourite places I was able to document visceral intersubjective experiences of these places, of being there together, so that I could empathically share the writers' sense of landscape. This paper discusses what happens when a hodological approach is taken to explore connections and flows between poetic expressions, places and landscapes.

**Keywords:** place, landscape, interactive media, digital media, poetry, ethnography, cultural geography, placemaking, placemaking

### **An Invitation**

... stories we can walk into bodily,  
stories we trace with our feet as well as our eyes.  
(Solnit, 2002: 71)

The *Poetry 4 U: Pinning Poetry to Place* project explores the implications of Web 2.0, smart phones and location-based technologies such as like GPS, Google maps for creative writing and arts practices. Like many creative projects, *Poetry 4 U* started with an intuition – an impulse to add a poetic layer to a landscape using location based media technologies.

In early 2012, I was invited by Pilbara Writers group in Karratha to make a poetry map for the Pilbara region when they saw the *Poetry 4 U* website (<http://poetry4U.org>) where poems are pinned to geographic locations. I visited the Pilbara June 17 – 23, 2012 to commence the poetry mapping project with members of the Pilbara Writers

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group. Settings are integral to creative writing practices, for as Krauth observes in his discussion of the importance of place to writing:

We make places make meanings for us – we imbue them that way – yet some places we acknowledge to be already imbued with significance, and to many others, of course, we assign no significance at all. (Krauth, 2003: np)

The Pilbara region comprises 505,000 km<sup>2</sup> (ABS, 2008). Wikipedia describes the Pilbara thus: “a large thinly populated region in the north west of Western Australia known for its Aboriginal peoples, its stunning landscapes, the red earth and its vast mineral deposits”. The Pilbara contains three distinct geographic formations – the immense coastal plain, mountain ranges inland and an arid desert stretching right to the Northern Territory border. Its topography is characterised by gabbro and granophyte boulder piles ranging in colour from deep orange to purple, and spinifex grasslands. There is a diversity of habitats including snappy gums and hakea, which support various fauna and flora (Burbridge et al., 2006).

My research agenda on this fieldtrip was twofold: I wanted to document the process of selecting sites for the poetry map as well as to “activate a space and time within which I might engage with and explore issues of landscape” (Wylie, 2005: 234) in terms of relationships for placemarking using networked technology and cultural production. This paper discusses what happens when a hodological approach (see Argounova-Low, 2012) is taken to explore connections and flows between poetic expressions, places and landscapes for as Lee and Ingold argue, “the locomotive (or getting around) aspect of walking allows for an understanding of places being created by routes” (Lee and Ingold, 2006: 68). Hodology refers to the study of paths. It is a word that has its origins in Greek, ‘hodos’, meaning way, road, and journey. Argounova-Low suggests, “the hodological approach underlines the very flow of both roads and narratives” (2012: 195). I am a native speaker of Russian so the term deeply resonated with me because the word ‘hodos’ migrated to Russian where it retains a similar meaning but also refers to the act of walking (‘khodit’).

As a researcher I felt needed to ‘be there’ to gain and to “invoke the complexities implied by an anthropological use of the phrase – ‘a sense of place’ ” (Pink, 2007: 240). Furthermore, through ‘being there’ I was able to gain perceptions of place using all of our senses (Feld and Basso, 1996). Pink (2007) suggests walking with video is a way of experiencing place through the sensorium as well as emplacing the senses in order to get an understanding what a place may mean. Lee and Ingold argue, “the locomotive (or getting around) aspect of walking allows for an understanding of places being created by routes” (Lee and Ingold, 2006: 68). By walking with video when writers took me to their favourite places I was able to document visceral intersubjective experiences of these places, of being there together, so that I could empathically share the writers’ sense of landscape, which inspires their writing. Through walking I engaged with a hodological methodology to explore poetic and narrative connections to landscape.

## **Placing Landscape**

The concepts 'landscape' and 'place' are conceptualised by and migrate across several disciplines including anthropology, archeology, architecture, fine arts, geography, and literary studies with each discipline adding their particular nuances. Meike Bal would describe them as travelling concepts because of their transdisciplinarity. According to her, the value of travelling concepts lies in their slipperiness so that "while groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may mean, we gain insight into what it can do" (Bal, 2009: 17). (Interestingly both landscape and place words can be used as either nouns or verbs.) Rather than disambiguating these concepts, in this paper I shall embrace the richness, intersubjectivity and contradictions inherent in the words 'landscape' and 'place' and treat them as travelling concepts.

Lyotard, in his essay 'Scapeland', invokes a notion of landscape that is embodied as well as experiential: landscape is a "vanishing of a standpoint" through "an excess of presence" (Lyotard, 1989: 216). Lyotard's landscape is a moment of embodied presence, a state of mind where one is completely immersed in one's surroundings so that the sense of place ordered by knowledge recedes. So clearly 'being there' as defined by anthropologists (Geertz, 1988) is an important aspect of landscape. Landscape is also constructed through social practices and dwelling whereby "environment manifests itself as landscape only when people create and experience space as a complex of places" (Knapp and Ashmore, 1999: 21). We construct landscapes, inscribing ourselves into landscapes so that

Landscape as practice or art practice is forwarded into process, as dynamic rather than either 'outside' experience or only focused through the physical character of encounters. (Crouch, 2010: 14)

Being and walking in landscapes has an interior as well as an exterior dynamic so that a "landscape is situated in the expression and poetics of spacing: apprehended as constituted in a flirtatious mode: contingent, sensual, anxious, awkward" (Crouch, 2010: 7), in short it is an experience that is mutable, complex and intangible, and it can inspire poesis (Heidegger, 1996). Landscapes, then are not static, rather they are fluid constellations of meanings and knowings that shift as we move through them with our feet and eyes as well as our thoughts, worldviews and feelings. How we attribute meaning to landscapes depends on many factors including our cultural capital – our habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

Some physical environments present landscapes that may be confronting and difficult to make sense of pictorially for a nonindigenous Australian gaze because they are situated outside of the day-to-day habitus. The Pilbara contains many such landscapes where the horizons are seemingly endless and where there is an absence of verticals to serve as visual markers for orientation. In 2010, five artists, Les Walkling, Tony Hewitt, Christian Fletcher, Michael Fletcher and Peter Eastway undertook a project to portray the Pilbara through photography and video. Mags Webster (2011) travelled with them. In order to make sense of her own responses to the landscapes she encountered, she speaks about her need as a writer to record her relationship with the land, to layer it with mythos by referring to Fox's observations about the Nevada basin:

I can't begin to inhabit the territory we circumscribed until I re-create it in the indefinite territory of my imagination through the act of writing it, relying upon memory and constructing a narrative (Fox, 2005: 11).

There is an impulse to cling to the familiar, to the already known in order to imagine, that which is before one's eyes and beneath one's feet. It is always tempting to create narratives about places we see for the first time in order to contain these newly encountered landscapes within our existing and often tacit epistemologies. Landscapes thus are intertextual in that one landscape may evoke others for the beholder. The photograph of the geological formation along with its name presented in the plate below may be read as an example of the intertextuality of landscapes.

The road between Millstream-Chichester National Park and Roebourne snakes along one of the world's most ancient plateaus. The geology is breathtaking whereby subtle shifts in the light reveal spectacular new vistas of mesas. The locals know the formation the photograph above as Pyramid Hill (Figure 1). When I was told this I could not help but think that the text of an alien ancient history with its echoes of pharaonic Egyptian glory had been superimposed over this landscape and how such a naming of a specific geological formation on the Pilbara plain could be interpreted as a remnant of the erroneous and damaging colonial notion of Australia as Terra Nullius. The landscape of the Pilbara is inundated with the flows of this colonial construction of the Australian landscape. The number of contested land rights claims in the region is evidence of this. The narratives and imaginaries conjured in naming places (Fox, 2005) may detract from the experience of a landscape with its multiplicities and connections yet paradoxically, these narratives also can add to the sense of being there in a specific space.

**Figure 1: Pyramid Hill (photograph by Marsha Berry)**



## **Intangibles in Place**

Massey (2005) theorises space as interrelated flows, energies and things renders. She explores the multiplicity of space through the connectedness and dynamics of things so that it is impossible to 'go back' anywhere because of change to both the places and the people experiencing them so that "it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed" (Massey, 2005: 9). This notion has kinship with Ingold's protest against the "anthropological cliché" (2010: S122) that the landscape is extrinsic "leaving individuals stranded in an unspecified 'environment' which is invoked merely for the purposes of allowing the body to have something material to interact with" (Ingold, 2010: S123). The landscape instead is a "region of the body's very existence, without which no knowing or remembering would be possible" (Ingold, 2010: S122). So, what does being in landscapes mean and what role can poetic maps play in drawing attention to the landscape?

The desert has been a rich site for poetic narratives and has been used as a trope for exile, self-discovery and alienation. Many writers have constructed it as a character in its own right. The starkness of deserts is associated with abjuring the "normal human desire for ease and abundance" (Tuan, 1974: 51) so that asceticism becomes a path to epiphanic encounters. The trope of the desert as a place that tests the purity of faith has a long history in Western cosmologies based on the biblical tradition, which is a part of our cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). These traditions migrated to Australia and still play a significant role in the ways we imagine the outback, of which the Pilbara is a part. Haynes (1998) observes that in the 1930s and 40s, through the images of the desert painted by Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale, it became "a powerful local metaphor for existential angst and a modernist perception of spiritual poverty in both the individual and the nation" (Haynes, 1998: 5). The themes of exile, self-discovery and epiphany figured prominently in the conversations I had with writers during the field trip, which suggests that the desert remains a powerful meme in the Australian imagination.

Desert landscapes may also be places of hidden dangers for the uninitiated. When I walked towards the Fortescue River I thought about how an unknowing traveller could stumble right over the edge and fall down the gorge (Figure 2). It is almost invisible until you are almost upon it. I stood several metres back from the edge to film, hoping that my video would show at least a part of the river's overwhelming beauty, its ability to reduce humans to awe. The Fortescue River is a place that erases standpoints (Lyotard, 1989), it is a poetic landscape imbued with a surfeit of presence that is also imbricated in the stories fundamental to Australian Indigenous Law and culture for the gorge was made by the Rainbow Serpent. The story told by Wimiya King explains:

Long ago, a sea serpent became angry with two boys. That was at Millstream. The two boys had cooked and eaten a mulga parrot, which was forbidden. The Rainbow Serpent smelled the singed feathers of the burnt bird, and came out from the sea, travelling inland. He came from the north and made a deep trench in the land, cutting it in half, creating what is now the Fortescue River. (Juluwalu Aboriginal Corporation, 2007: vii)

I was walking in a landscape where Indigenous stories are woven through the land. As I walked with my video camera, I recollected reading the account of a Navajo poet driving through his land where “rocks are songs dappled with ancient starlight, suns, wind, and rain” (Bitsui, 2011: 28). Here too the rocks seemed imbued with so much history of human habitation – over 40,000 years. I stood in this spot with my guide who defined herself as a desert girl. She told me about her recent hobby of bird watching. She identified it as a way in which she could feel a sense of kinship with Pilbara landscapes. As we stood together, she pointed out a whistling kite and asked me if that was the type of bird I had seen hovering in the sky that morning, just after dawn near her place. It was. She confided her ambition to capture each bird of the Pilbara in a haiku. Birds were an integral part of the landscape for her as well as a source of poetic inspiration. The sight of the whistling kite propelled us both right into the landscape, into its presence to exclusion of all other standpoints (Lyotard, 1989). For me now, the Fortescue River is overlaid not only with the Yindjibarndi story of the Rainbow Serpent but also with a magical whistling kite hovering, scanning the ground below for a meal before flying towards the horizon and vanishing into the air. In that moment, the landscape of the Fortescue River became vertical and timeless for us (Tuan, 1974).

**Figure 2: Fortescue River (photograph by Marsha Berry)**



We continued our journey to Millstream Pool. Through walking together along the tracks we were able to see place itself as a sensory phenomenon and I could empathically sense what was important to my guide (Feld and Basso, 1996; Pink, 2007). Sensory immersion in the landscape reminded me that it is never possible to describe an experience in its entirety (Husserl 1932/52). We were both acutely aware that this landscape had aspects beyond our cognitive understanding. Paul Taçon (1999) has discussed the levels of sacredness layered over landscapes in Australia whereby as people gain different levels of knowledge through initiation, they receive access to

sacred landscapes and sites. My guide was not indigenous but had a rich knowledge of the cultural significance of the landscape. We were walking through a storied or literary landscape where the traces of those who've walked here before remained. Crang suggests, "literary landscapes are best thought of as a combination of literature and landscape"(Crang, 1999: 57). The paths along which I was walking towards the pool with my video were "conduits along which narratives, memory and knowledge flow" (Argounova-Low, 2012: 191-2). The landscapes the paths traverse have immense spiritual significance for Indigenous peoples in Australia. Many of these stories include the Rainbow Serpent (Juluwarlu, 2007). The Yindjibarndi name for Millstream Pool is Chinderwarriner Pool. The pool is described as an increase or rainmaking site:

This increase site is in Chinderwarriner Pool, near Millstream Homestead. The actual site is a termite mound submerged near the small island in the middle of the pool. ... Because it's underwater, you have to dive into the pool to work this site. To perform the ceremony that brings rain the *yurala* (rainmaker) puts their arms around the mound, takes some water from the pools in their mouth and spits it out again. They ask the site to bring rain, and tell it where and when they want it to fall. ... This site is one of two rainmaking sites, and is connected to the rainmaking trees which are found near Chinderwarriner Pool. (Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation, 2007: 38)

Later in the day I met with people at the Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation in Roebourne. I was there to conduct a poetry workshop for them and to talk about poetry maps. We had conversations about the Yindjibarndi country encompassing the Millstream-Chichester National Park. Their delight in their *ngurra* (country) was obvious as we conversed about impressions of the Millstream Chichester National Park. In the workshop, the Yindjibarndi Elder Tootsie wrote the poem below to express her feelings about being in her country.

### **Dedication Song**

He stands and looks  
as far as the eyes  
can see!

The soft breeze of his country  
welcomes his presence,  
the soft gentle breeze  
and the tree and birds  
make joyful noise  
of his welcoming visit to  
the country.

Proudly he stands,  
sings his song,  
this is my country,  
the place I belong!

(© Tootsie 2012)

The Juluwarlu people enjoyed the poetry workshop and the process of learning a form of poetry that engages with place (haiku). In the evening I conducted a workshop for the Pilbara Writers. There too, we engaged in lengthy dialogues about places in the Pilbara and what they meant to each of the participants. They were excited about the poetry map where their poems would be pinned to a Google map for the whole world to see and appreciate. I had memory cards filled with video footage I had shot while being shown special places and a notebook filled with observations. It was time to leave the Pilbara due to other academic commitments. I bade the ancient plateau farewell. My next steps were to reflect upon and analyse the experience as well as the evidence in the form of video footage and interviews. I also had a poetry map to build for the Pilbara Writers.

### **Poetic Placemaking**

Later, when I had returned to Melbourne, I began to transcribe the video and to think about how I could use the shaky handheld footage to create my own visual poetic expression of this unique landscape. My expressive aim was to convey a sense of the intangible magic of Yindjibarndi country. I chose double exposures as a dominant compositing aesthetic and poetic device to suggest the dynamics of landscape as a series vanishing of standpoints (Figure 3). Ambient music provides a soundscape to invite the viewer to meditate on the images that unfold in the video. The full video may be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/48191634>.

**Figure 3: Still from the video *Place of Increase* (Marsha Berry)**



I have also commenced the process of pinning poems from the Pilbara Writers to a map. The map may be accessed at <http://poetry4u.org/pilbara/> (Figure 4) Users can click on

the pins to see the poetry evoked by landscapes in the Pilbara. Below is an example of a short form poem exploring a specific geographic place.

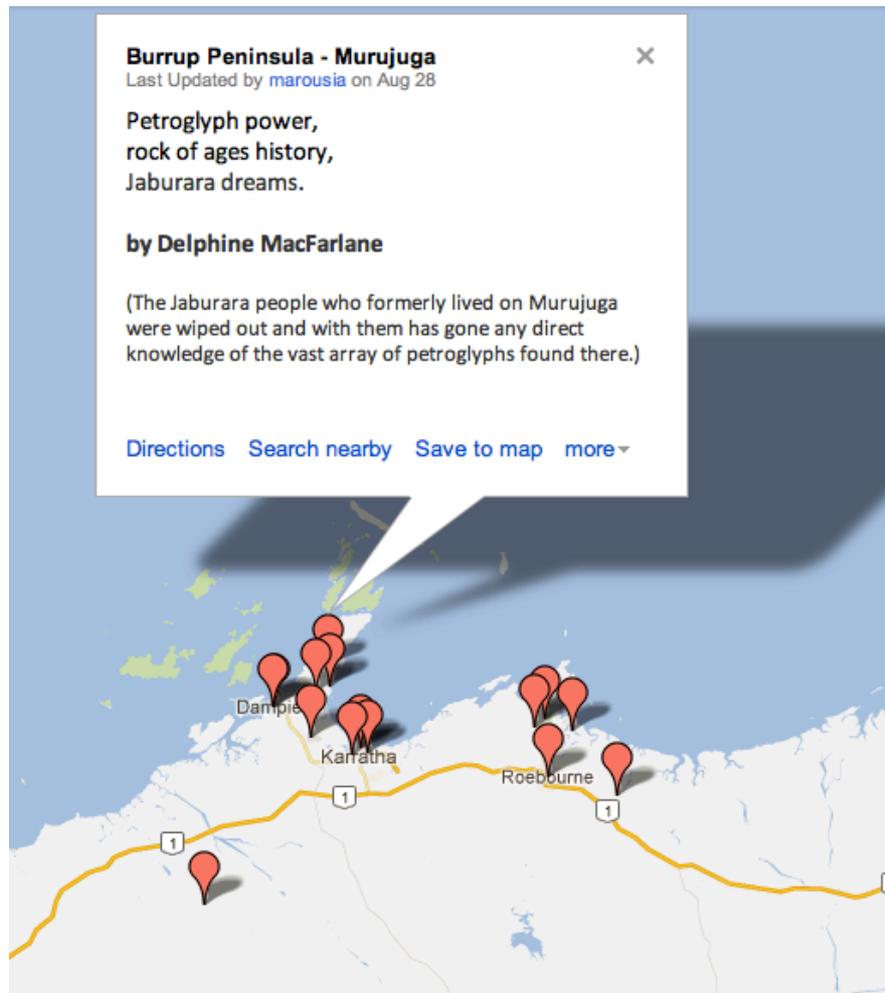
Hodology or the study of paths (Argounova-Low, 2012) has proved to be a fruitful avenue to contemplate the relationships between landscapes, places and poetic expressions. It also provided a way to be there in place and ponder the intangibles of being there. It has resulted in a novel way of publishing poetry that is pinned to representations of physical geography that engages with cultural and spiritual geography. The ambiguities I commenced with remain yet I think that the gathering together poetic expressions of place add to the richness of understandings of landscape. I was in the Pilbara with a visitor's perspective, which gave me a simple and easily stated viewpoint that is "essentially aesthetic" (Tuan, 1974: 64). It also enabled me to contribute a "fresh perspective" (Tuan, 1974: 65).

Time was an issue for me during my sojourn because my hosts wanted to show me as much of their Pilbara as they could during the limited time I was there. They wanted to know what I was making of what they could show me. I went along with their flow. If I were to do the project again, I would do it differently. I would slow down time so that I could stand longer with my camera to frame shots and simply sit with a camera perched on a tripod capturing a landscape over an extended time while we meditated and wrote poetry about a specific place. Yet this is the nature of fieldwork undertaken in short bursts between teaching semester, and it is always impossible to express all of the phenomena observed, for as Husserl so eloquently stated:

Even an experience (Erlebnis) is not, and never is, perceived in its completeness, it cannot be grasped adequately in its full entirety. It is essentially something that flows, and starting from the present moment we swim after it, our gaze reflectively turning towards it, whilst the stretches we leave in our wake are lost to our perception. (Husserl, 1932/52:140).

Now as I sit writing this, looking back over my experience, I reflect on the efficacy of my research agenda, which was to document the process of choosing sites for the digital map and to create a space for myself to explore landscape – materially and philosophically. I also reread the call that motivated me to write this essay. Porteous issued a challenge in 1985, for geography to remain silent because prose cannot convey a true appreciation of geography; therefore, geography should use poetry and other forms of nontraditional writing to express itself. I chose to explore landscape, to express my appreciation of geography through a visual video poem of my own and by bringing together the poetry of others in a website dedicated to poetry about place. I am in the process of building the Pilbara Writers poetry map using Google map pins and I am treating the poetry as evidence of people's perceptions of place and the landscape in which they dwell (Heidegger, 1996). This is an ongoing and open-ended project that will deepen knowledge about how people express their experiences of being in a place; about the dynamics of space; and, how they construct landscape.

**Figure 4: Screenshot of Pilbara poetry map (project content by Marsha Berry; map © 2011 Google)**



So, how can creative practice combined with ethnography contribute new knowledge to the field of cultural geography and vice versa? What new knowledge emerges from this approach? The evidence from the poems contributed to the website suggests that our understandings of place are temporal as well as spatial. I have found that by invoking the imagination through the use of poetic devices, spaces are created to increase the public's engagement where perceptions and relationships to geographic environments may be altered. The evidence I have gathered so far in this research suggests that poetic expressions of place and landscape, particularly those that invoke landscape as a complex and dynamic system that is physical, cultural and spiritual, enable new ways of understanding the places we inhabit. The new knowledge that emerges from this approach is that creative practices and associated cultural production including poetry, photography and video art uncover intangible connections to landscape that often remain outside of scientific evidence based research paradigms. Porteous (1985) was quite right in his intuition that geography should embrace nontraditional forms of writing in order to reflexively understand itself better. Furthermore, by engaging with geographic ways of knowing, creative practice expands its fields to generate new expressions and artifacts that interrogate ways of being in the world.

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