

Crafting ‘Literary Sense of Place’: The Generative Work of Literary Place-Making

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Places and stories are innately entwined. The roots of this connection run deep: every story takes place *somewhere*—and every place is constituted, at least in part, by stories. Within academia, the symbiotic relationship of story and place is evident in the ongoing dialogue between literary studies and human geography. In recent years the ‘spatial turn’ in arts and humanities scholarship, and a parallel ‘cultural turn’ in geography, have given rise to several related subfields devoted to exploring this fertile ground. These include literary geography (see Brosseau; Hones, *Thinking Space*; Alexander), literary cartography (Tally, *Literary Cartography*), narrative cartography (Caquard and Cartwright), geocriticism (Westphal; Tally, *Geocritical Explorations*), and ecocriticism (Glotfelty and Fromm).

While this interdisciplinary dialogue has intensified in recent years, over time much of the interest has come from academic geographers. Select examples include research on ‘atlases’ of literary works (Moretti), the distinction between ‘textual geographies’ and ‘the geographies of texts’ (Ogborn), digital mappings of fictionalised spaces (Piatti et al.), literary geographies and narrative space (Hones, *Literary Geographies*), and the entanglement of real and written places (Anderson). In a reciprocal branch of enquiry, literary scholars have increasingly turned their attention to ‘the textuality of space and the spatiality of text’ (Thacker 60). Australian researchers have considered place from Aboriginal (Moreton-Robinson; Chatwin; Mueke), genre-based (Kraitsowits), postcolonial (Huggan), literary-cinematic (Turner), literary-geographic (Leer), cultural-cartographic (*Cultural Atlas of Australia*), ecocritical (Cranston and Zeller; Robin), and geocritical perspectives (Stadler et al.).

But one significant aspect of the literature–place nexus remains relatively underexplored: the specifics of how experienced creative writers actually ‘make’ literary places. I start from the assumption that literary practitioners do not simply represent place: they also construct it (Ball 242). As a form of place-making, creative writing surely warrants scholarly investigation: after all, without this ‘back-stage’ creative labour, there would be no literary places to explore, enjoy, or analyse. So what tools, techniques, and approaches do skilled literary practitioners use to evoke place on the page? How do they make textual places resonant and meaningful? And what kinds of generative ‘off-page’ activities feed into their writing of place?

Gaps in the Map: The *How* of Literary *Wheres*

To date, practice-based accounts of literary place-making remain thin on the ground. Most of the academic research exploring the juncture of literature and place has focused on *textual content* rather than *creative production*—on analysis of imaginative texts, rather than process-oriented accounts of their construction. Recent exceptions aside (see Sharp; Ogborn; Brace and Johns-Putra; Hones, *Text*; Saunders, *Interpretations*), academic geographers have traditionally engaged with literature by analysing story settings, discussing how place is treated in fictional works, or using literary examples to enrich theoretical discussions. Literary scholars, too, have traditionally prioritised content over process—analysing and interpreting texts, rather than asking how they are made. Australian scholars have written insightful and influential books

about specific places, or place-types (see Tumarkin; Carter, *Lie of the Land*; Carter, *Botany Bay*; Gibson), but these works tend to explore the constitution or character of a place(s), not the creative methodologies the writer used to evoke it textually. There are place-focused writing guides (Lappin, *Soul of Place*), but they primarily offer ‘how-to’-style advice on creative practice, rather than scholarly analysis of it. Academics in creative writing studies—a relatively young field—have published reflexive accounts of writing place, under the rubric of practice-led research (Smith and Dean), including work on place-based enquiry and ‘creative ecologies’ (Satchell and Shannon), creative travel-writing methodologies (Lappin 2014), and place-focused community writing workshops (Brien and Hawryluk). But there remains significant scope to expand knowledge in this area.

In this paper I use the term ‘literature’ in a broad sense to describe published works of fiction or creative non-fiction, and ‘creative writer,’ ‘author,’ or ‘literary practitioner’ to refer to people who produce such works.¹ In speaking about ‘place,’ I acknowledge the definitions put forward by geography scholars, who have described it variously as space that is ‘enclosed and humanized’ (Tuan 188), imbued with emotional responses (Withers 641), or invested with meaning (Vanclay 3); as ‘the physical environment given purpose and meaning by people’ (İmamoğlu 155), as ‘meaningful location’ (Agnew 27), as ‘zone[s] of experience and meaning’ (Wilson 84), and as ‘the system of experience that incorporates the personal, social and culturally significant aspects of situated activities’ (Canter 11).

In 2010 human geographer Angharad Saunders issued her colleagues an implicit challenge: ‘There is a need to move beyond the artefacts of writing to assess more fully the immediacy of writing as an embodied practice . . . to have access to the thought processes, the acts of contemplation and persuasion that are entwined with writing’ (*Literary Geography* 442, 446). Geographers have begun experimenting with ‘creative-critical’ writing approaches, melding imaginative prose with scholarly reflection (see Ward; Jacobsen and Larsen), and special editions of *Geographical Review* (Marston and de Leeuw) and *Cultural Geographies* (Lorimer and Parr) have explored how geography scholars might harness creative modes of writing. While these hybrid registers have occasionally had their critics (see Jamie; Wylie 237), advocates claim them as a valuable research method and critical tool, a way of expanding debate, and a means to express the multidimensionality of place (Ward 764).²

Despite this lively scholarly dialogue, a gap remains: what we might call the *how* of literary *wheres* remains something of a mystery. This paper seeks to lift the curtain on this back-stage labour by exploring how one experienced and critically acclaimed Australian author, Tony Birch, ‘makes’ literary place. Drawing on interview data, analysis of select creative works, and key concepts from theorists of place, narrative, and creativity, I develop a process-based framework (the POET model) to illuminate how creative writers produce literary sense of place.¹ Birch is a novelist, short story writer, poet, and academic historian. The creative works discussed here are his short story collections *Shadowboxing* (2006) and *Father’s Day* (2009), set in the inner-Melbourne suburbs where the writer grew up (Carlton, Fitzroy, Richmond, and Collingwood); and his debut novel *Blood* (2011), set in regional Victoria. The POET model identifies and delineates four key modes of ‘place-oriented experiential techniques’ (POETs)—generative techniques that engage an array of lived sensations, emotions, memories, thoughts, ideas and actions, and which writers can deploy to evoke literary sense of place.³

An idea that carries both popular and academic currency, ‘sense of place’ has been defined in the scholarly literature as ‘the subjective side of place—the meanings that attach to it either individually or collectively’ (Cresswell 5); as ‘an emotional attachment to place’ (Agnew 28),

whereby ‘attachment’ can allude to the full spectrum of emotions (positive, negative, mixed, or ambivalent); and as emotional bonds with places, and with values, meanings and symbols of place, as they are actively and continuously reconstructed within individual minds, and informed by cultural, spatial and historical context (my paraphrasing; Williams and Stewart). While the term ‘literary sense of place’ appears in the research literature, it lacks a clear and unanimous definition.⁴ If ‘sense of place’ is an emotional attachment to place, and its associated values, meanings and symbols, I propose that ‘literary sense of place’ denotes how ‘sense of place’ manifests on the page. Literary sense of place can then be said to have three components: a generative act (the work of making a literary text), a product (the text itself), and an interpretative act (the reader’s engagement with it). This study emphasises the first element, considers the second, and implicates the third. It is worth noting that literary place surpasses the limited bounds of setting: indeed, it is ‘something more, and other’ than setting (Tindall 1), encompassing place-based imagery, associations, metaphors, and ‘evocations of place in the speeches and consciousness of characters’ (Lutwack 28).

Casting Back: Seed Incidents and Spatial Memories

Harnessing emotionally charged memories can be a potent way to inject colour, verve, and verisimilitude into a fictional world. Tony Birch’s short stories are often described as ‘semi-autobiographical,’ and he says his first two story collections ‘are based on a memory bank . . . I deliberately wrote down a set of ideas that were memories’ (Interview n.p.). The child narrator of ‘The Bulldozer’ watches as his whole neighbourhood is bulldozed to the ground, each demolition leaving a ‘cavity’ in place of a home. The story opens as the threat of destruction draws audibly near: ‘Each day the crash of the machines grew louder as they moved in on us . . . our date with the demolition team was looming’ (Birch, ‘Bulldozer’ 75). The narrative implies a parallel between wrecked houses and broken homes, with the narrator’s troubled, oft-absent father reduced to tears when his own childhood home is destroyed. The story ends on a note of erasure: ‘And then, [our house] went too. Finally, there was nothing left but the vast emptiness. It was as if we had never existed’ (‘Bulldozer’ 87). The obliteration here is twofold: loss of home equates to loss of self.

Geographer Owain Jones argues that creative writers often fuel their work by remembering reflexively—calling up and ‘re-feeling’ emotions (210). ‘The Bulldozer’ is rooted in the author’s own childhood memories of domicide, or ‘the deliberate destruction of the home against the will of the home dweller’ (Porteous and Smith 19–20). Asked to nominate a ‘seed incident’ for this tale—a term creativity researcher Charlotte Doyle uses to describe a puzzling or disturbing past experience that catalyses a story (30)—Birch recalls watching as his own family home was razed by bulldozers. Incredibly, he endured this experience three times:

Our house in Carlton was bulldozed for the Housing Commission [flats] . . . Our [Fitzroy] house was bulldozed along with many others [during the 1960s ‘slum clearances’] . . . The government bulldozed our house in Collingwood for the F19 [freeway] . . . For most of my childhood, houses were being bulldozed every week. (Interview n.p.)

This dramatic cluster of seed incidents resonates across Birch’s entire *oeuvre*. Themes of transience and displacement, broken homes, topicide (Porteous), and the spatial vulnerability of poverty recur in his fiction. In Birch’s fictionalised landscapes, home is often a vulnerable place that fails to fulfil its promise of shelter: a homeless man’s shack is consumed by floodwaters (‘Chocolate Empire’ 93); a violent and grief-riven family home is ‘a rickety

wooden boat, set adrift in a murky grey swamp' ('Red House' 1); a young refugee boy maps the emotional landmarks of his lost homeland ('Cartography' 52–58).

Elsewhere, Birch draws on fonder early memories of place. For him the Yarra River is 'a place of really spiritual importance and vitality' (Steger 29), to which he feels a lifelong 'deep attachment' (Birch, *Weather Stations*) and there is an element of tribute in his frequent evocations of this urban waterway. Birch's depiction of the river as a site of refuge, friendship, and youthful rebellion echoes its role in his own early life. His fictionalised Yarra is imbued with vivid sensory detail:

The river has this sort of rich smell . . . a mix of soil and water. In ['The Sea of Tranquillity'], as a metaphor of carrying the river home with us, [the smell] is both a pleasant feeling of the river being emotionally with you, and of course it was also the giveaway because your mother could smell it, particularly in your hair. (Interview n.p.)

Remembering is not merely an act of recall, but one of creative reconstruction. Birch's imaginative deployment of early memories resonates with place theorists' claims about how and why places matter to us. Human geographer Steve Pile argues that narratives of the self are 'spatially constituted' (111–12), while Owain Jones argues that creative writing offers a medium to recollect and represent 'past emotional-spatial experiences,' those bygone terrains and encounters 'which are mapped inside us and which colour our present in ways we cannot easily feel or say' (206). Environmental psychologists use the term 'place attachment' to refer to our evolving and cumulative emotional ties to place, including the 'thoughts, feelings, memories and interpretations evoked by a landscape' (Schroeder 232), while 'place-identity' denotes those elements of personal identity that are defined in relation to place: 'a potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about [places]' (Proshansky et al. 60). Taken together, place attachment and place-identity could be said to form a personalised emotional index that helps frame and contextualise our ongoing spatial experiences. For Birch, tapping into this rich mnemonic cache is a valuable technique in crafting literary sense of place.

In an influential article on 'flashbulb memories' (1977), psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik describe how emotionally charged memories imprint upon us with a particular intensity, and how this intensity results in a higher degree of narrative elaboration when those memories are recalled. Given this implicit link with storytelling, it makes sense that creative writers would draw upon more intense spatial memories to help them evoke literary place in emotionally resonant ways. More readily and richly recalled, and thus more available to the writer, these powerful memories carry a kind of inbuilt narrative charge.

Fruitful Presence: Site Visits, Sensory Treasures, and Happenstance

If memory grants us access to past places, site visits enable us to explore existing ones. Creative writing studies academic Donna Lee Brien argues that writers gather facts and impressions in a 'bowerbird-like' way, mobilising their senses 'to mine the reality around them for information to inform their writing' (55). By expanding the bowerbird's terrain, offering a direct immersion in place, site visits can yield unexpected narrative treasures: story ideas, sensory impressions, spatial scenarios, emotional cues.

Site visits are integral to Birch's creative process, often revealing sensory and spatial details that enrich, or even catalyse, a story. A related practice, site photography, is another important generative technique for him, providing sensory detail in the form of unexpected or serendipitous imagery that can help shape the narrative:

I'd never write about a place without going to it, and photographing it. Although I can imagine a place, I prefer to go there and interact with it, take notes, and see what's going on . . . What you get from [site visits] is the cream on the cake. You often pick up something that might seem inconsequential, on the periphery, but it gives some authenticity to what you're writing about fictionally . . . Taking photos, your eye gets directed to particular aspects of the place. So you find the story in that way. (Interview n.p.)

Birch works from the belief that places are pre-imbued with stories, and that writers must be attentive to these situated nuances—the sights, sounds, smells, atmosphere, and subtle narrative cues that places possess: 'I always have a sense that these stories are waiting for you. And if you miss them, as a writer, you miss great opportunities' (Interview n.p.). Yet site visits needn't be specifically goal-directed, or even planned, in order to prove fruitful. For a writer attuned to her surroundings, the everyday experience of moving about the world—walking, driving, running, pausing to observe—can reveal unforeseen material that lends itself to creative use. And sometimes a story element takes shape long after the direct encounter with place: driving through Victoria's wheat belt, Birch accumulated numerous photos of the area's roadside grain silos; years later, he set a high-stakes scene in his road novel *Blood* atop one of these iconic structures.

When this kind of phenomenological openness comes into play, happenstance can offer rich pickings. As an emergent piece of work captures the writer's imagination, she becomes receptive to auspicious images, ideas, and associative links; operating in 'bower-bird' mode (Brien 55), she engages her senses to mine reality for material. Psychologist Daniel Kahneman describes two processes that shed light on this phenomenon: in 'associative activation,' an initial stimulus triggers our brains to construct a rapidly cascading web of affiliated ideas (53); in 'priming,' recent experiences predispose us to make particular associative links. Priming and associative activation help explain some of the subconscious and symbolic connections that writers make as a vital part of their creative process. As the story begins to take shape in the writer's mind, real-world places and encounters become a rich source of material, and transpositions flourish between the real and fictional realms. While Birch was working on his story 'Father's Day,' by chance he drove past a man standing by the side of Sydney Road, in Brunswick: 'It was pouring with rain and I saw this guy standing across the road and thought, this is obviously [my character]. He's been waiting here for me' (Interview n.p.). Primed to notice this stranger lingering on a familiar street, Birch borrowed the rain-soaked setting, retained the car, added a dog, and had the story's opening scene, where the narrator unexpectedly encounters his estranged father on Sydney Road.

Skilled writers are often said to be keen observers, but there is more than observation at play here. This state of mind is akin to a kind of sensory immersion or heightened attentiveness, a disposition that author and cultural historian Ross Gibson has referred to as 'turn[ing] yourself into an antenna' (2012)—deliberately cultivating a multisensory engagement with one's surroundings in order to pick up the subtle resonances of place. This immersive state, and the associative possibilities it opens up, calls to mind writing scholar Lynn Z. Bloom's assertion that a professional writer 'is never off duty' (24–25). For creative writers, deliberately 'tuning

in' to the sensory nuances of place—its sights, scents, textures and atmosphere, its concrete and more ephemeral elements—may become a creatively fruitful habit, and a way of orienting oneself to the world.

Storied Ground: Shared and Cultural Understandings of Place

Just as personal experience is bound up with socio-political and historical contexts, our individual responses to place are shaped by a shared (albeit oft-contested) stock of cultural knowledge. These 'collaborative' understandings of place can take both intertextual and interpersonal form, manifesting for example in creative texts, scholarly research, media reports, maps, conversations, rumours, myths, folklore, collective memory (see Stepinsky), and symbolic, metaphoric, or generic formulations relating to particular 'types' of places (see Lutwack 31, 'archetypal place symbolism'; and İmamoğlu on 'place schemas').⁵ For creative writers, this accumulated cultural knowledge offers a bountiful supply of source material and imaginative prompts.

Scholarly forms of place-based knowledge helped catalyse and shape Birch's debut novel *Blood*, a road story set in regional Victoria's Western Districts. As an academic historian, Birch explored this area in the early 1990s for a series of journal articles on 'colonial ruins': ghost towns, failed tourist parks, and other abandoned sites signifying thwarted colonial ambition. Birch's central argument was that 'colonial hold on landscape in these parts of Victoria has been very brief and fleeting, and has always ended in some kind of economic ruin' (Interview n.p.). Aboriginal people often refer to Victoria's Western Districts as 'sad country,' he writes, due to its history of massacres and forced removals (Birch, 'Victoria's Western Districts' 72). The region's violent past is not mentioned overtly in *Blood*, but its shadow tinges the atmosphere of the book.

Years after this research ended, the area still resonated for Birch imaginatively. *Blood* revisits the themes of displacement, spatial vulnerability, and domestic fragility that mark his earlier fiction, but roams over a wider landscape. The novel's young protagonists, siblings Jesse and Rachel, brave a perilous and transitory life on the backroads of regional Victoria. Rachel's yearning for a steady home contrasts with their rootless reality: as Jesse puts it, 'We're from nowhere' (*Blood* 65). The landscape itself seems to signify danger and death, notes Birch: 'The children see dead sheep in a paddock, rusted machinery, bullet shells . . . it's like they've come after the place has died' (Interview n.p.). The landscape's implicit menace was integral to the story Birch sought to tell: 'I really wanted to write about a place that was almost post-violence . . . I wanted the children to have to survive something where you know that the harshness of the landscape has beaten a lot of people already' (Interview n.p.). Several key settings in *Blood* derive from Birch's scholarly research on degraded postcolonial landscapes. The children shelter in a derelict theme park, where miniature replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the pyramids, and Uluru crumble amongst weeds and graffiti. Jesse remarks: 'Looks like people gave up on it and left. It's an abandoned world, like in science fiction' (179). During his academic fieldwork Birch discovered a similar forlorn theme park near Stawell—'a little world in ruin' (Interview n.p.). As an allegorical nod to the notion of lost childhood, with its provenance filtered through the imaginative prism of the 'colonial ruin,' this half-invented place carries an extra charge of melancholy.

Architecture scholar Lynne Manzo argues that our emotional ties to place are underpinned by socio-political factors, including class (82), and Birch's work bears out this assertion. Despite his Aboriginal heritage, and his frequent inclusion of Indigenous characters, Birch says he is

‘much more interested in class dynamics than I am in ethnic dynamics’ (Steger 29).⁶ Class, not ethnicity, defined the multicultural community the author grew up in; it was the poor whose homes fell prey to the bulldozers. Discussing the emotional and social impact of the Victorian government’s 1960s ‘slum clearances,’ which he researched for his PhD, Birch says: ‘[The residents] lost so much of their self, their sense of community, identity, physical, social landscape through the process of slum reclamation. So as my mum would often say, she got running water, but she lost her whole family to get it’ (Vincent).⁷ Again, this state-perpetrated form of domicide has profound social and emotional consequences.

Birch’s approach to fiction recalls Joan Scott’s urging historians to ‘contextualise’ experiential perspectives. Rather than valorising experience as a direct, unproblematic way of knowing, Scott argues, historians should admit to the discursive and situated nature of experience, analyse its political role in constructing identity and subjectivity, and critically assess how it frames knowledge; they should acknowledge both their own ‘situatedness,’ and how personal experience is entangled with cultural and historical norms (Scott 783). Handled overtly, such contextualisation would not serve fiction well. But Birch, himself a historian, has subtly contextualised his literary places along the lines Scott advocates. While his stories wear these forms of knowledge lightly, they help inform his characters’ spatial experiences, add deeper layers of meaning, and help shape literary sense of place.

Not all shared or cultural understandings of place, of course, adhere to the historian’s goal of factual accuracy. These manifold forms of place knowledge are invested with emotion, and may owe little debt to rationality; they are dynamic, change over time, and often vary between different groups, societies, cultures, and individuals. Literary scholar Leonard Lutwack argues that places become invested with symbolic meaning through an accumulation of human emotion and experience, but that their symbolic function and value is subject to ‘ambiguity and change,’ and may vary from person to person (Lutwack 35). For phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, home equates to haven: ‘the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace’ (Bachelard 6); but as Lynne Manzo notes, for those whose experiences have been less idyllic, home may come to signify a place of violence (Ahrentzen 113), entrapment (Marcus 1995), drudgery (Relph), or ambivalence (Chawla 66).

‘Through Their Eyes’: Character, Empathy, and Embodiment

Blood is a tale of survival under duress, and Birch sees the interwoven elements of place and character as essential to its telling. ‘The thing that drove the book, as well as place, is the unbelievable resilience of children, particularly children in danger’ (Interview n.p.). Navigating a hostile landscape is crucial to the children’s survival. To increase dramatic tension and encourage readers to ‘barrack’ for them, Birch devised strongly spatial scenes where they must flee sinister adults, cross rough terrain and hide in dangerous places—behind a dumpster, in a roadside ditch, atop a towering grain silo. To write these scenes, Birch put himself in his child characters’ shoes: ‘I could imagine squeezing in behind the dumpster, how narrow the space would be . . . I saw that very clearly through their eyes’ (Interview n.p.). This imaginative act was strongly corporeal, he says: ‘I had to put them in situations where it’s difficult for them to overcome their physical surroundings, but not impossible’ (Interview n.p.). Doyle’s study participants described using a similar technique. Several spoke of ‘inhabiting’ their characters’ bodies, taking on their viewpoints, even becoming them (33); seeing the ‘fictionworld’ (the world of the story) through their eyes—in effect, vicariously *taking their place*.

This technique of imaginatively inhabiting characters—what I call ‘vicarious emplacement’—highlights an important link between the body, emotions, and literary sense of place.⁸ Australian novelist and academic Nigel Krauth proposes that ‘stories are lodged in our whole bodies,’ and that experience is encoded not just psychologically, but also embodied physiologically, through ‘muscle memory’ or ‘motor memory’ (Krauth). This idea resonates with philosopher Edward Casey’s claim that body and place are ‘*congruent counterparts* . . . Just as there is no place without body . . . *there is no body without place*’ (103, 104). It follows that the body is integral to how literary sense of place is produced, and how characters are situated within literary works. Vicarious emplacement helps the writer achieve this through the physical and emotional inhabitation of characters.

Just as Doyle’s writers described being ‘deeply affected’ by their characters, even ‘rooting for them’ (33), Birch consciously devised spatial scenarios to imperil his child characters, hoping readers would ‘barrack’ for them. This suggests another important ingredient in literary sense of place: empathy. For narrative theorist Suzanne Keen, ‘narrative empathy’ occurs when a reader vicariously experiences what they believe to be the emotional state of a fictional other (‘A Theory’ 216). Keen proposes that both reading and writing fiction activates empathic responses at the neurological level, and that creative writers may be ‘ready empathisers’ (*Empathy and the Novel* xiii) who are particularly skilled in, or innately predisposed to, this ability.⁹ Several studies support these propositions. Taylor et al. found that creative writers scored higher than average on both ‘empathic concern’ (emotional empathy) and ‘perspective-taking’ (cognitive empathy) (369–70). Speer et al. found that being immersed in reading a story triggers activity in the brain regions that process comparable real-life experiences: when the protagonist handled a pencil, activity spiked in brain areas governing hand movements (993–94). Kaufman and Libby found that readers immersed in fiction temporarily forgot their own self-concept and identity, instead experiencing the characters’ feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and internal responses as their own—‘adopting the character’s mindset and perspective’ (2)—in a process the researchers dub ‘experience-taking.’ We can surely extrapolate these latter reader-based findings to skilled creative writers, whose craft demands this type of empathic engagement.

We can think of ‘vicarious emplacement’ as a kind of experiential exploration conducted by proxy: the imaginative inhabitation of another person’s emotional standpoint, sensory perspective, or subjective experience. This process is innately spatial and situated: the writer *senses* place, *inhabits* place, *occupies* the fictionworld (Doyle 31) as the character does. All going well, the body and emotions become shared sites of comprehension, and the reader makes a similar leap.

Mapping Invention: Towards a Dynamic Model of Literary Place-Making

Creative writers ‘produce’ literary place as part of their stock in trade. While their personal experiences of place may be neither remarkable nor universal, they do face a unique challenge: to imaginatively evoke textual place in a way that resonates meaningfully for a diversity of readers. This task calls for the deployment of specialised skills.

During this research I developed a practice-based framework to help demystify and theorise the process of literary place-making. The POET model is based on five modes of ‘place-oriented experiential techniques’ (POETs): generative techniques that engage an array of lived sensations, emotions, memories, thoughts, ideas and actions, and which writers can use to evoke literary sense of place. The five modes do not operate in isolation; rather, they overlap, inform,

and animate each other in a dynamic and multidimensional interplay (see Figure 1). For example, as we saw in Tony Birch's work, formative experiences of familial displacement may plant the seed for future scholarly research on geopolitical dispossession. Spatial memories of childhood—the smells, sights, and sounds of a particular childhood haunt or scenario—might aid the writer's empathic process of 'vicarious emplacement'; happenstance plus associative activation/priming (Kahneman) may trigger sensory memories of place, or spark a fortuitous confluence of setting and character; a site visit could trigger symbolic associations relating to caves, forests, or high towers; encountering a map, painting, poem, myth, or rumour could entice the writer to explore a potential story setting in person.

Taxonomic models can be useful in mapping the parameters of complex phenomena, but they also run the risk of reducing complexity, or obscuring murkier elements that will not slot neatly into categories. Creativity is a slippery creature, and tends to resist analysis; much about the process of creative writing remains opaque, even to its practitioners. This is particularly true for sense of place, argues literary critic Gillian Tindall, who calls it 'a summary label [for] one of the most elusive elements in the fictional amalgam' (vii).

The POET model is not a definitive framework for literary place-making, nor does it encompass all the techniques a writer may deploy to evoke place. Recognising this, along with the initial four POET modes—which are more clearly defined in operational terms—I propose a fifth mode as a catch-all category for those more elusive elements. 'Nebulous' techniques may include the author's creative use of more esoteric and slippery phenomena such as dream content, 'pure imagination,' subconscious formulations, intuition, the sublime, the uncanny, spectrality, and hauntings. Of the five POET modes, the Nebulous category comes closest to the Romantic notion of *genius loci* (spirit of place), a term derived from the ancient Roman belief in protective spirits who guarded specific sites. Nebulous techniques could also encompass the creative use of phobias with a spatial dimension; phenomena such as infrasound, which register just below the threshold of awareness; and subtle physiological or emotional responses to other felt phenomena such as weather, temperature, humidity, or atmospheric pressure. We can discern hints of this murky creative territory in Birch's belief that stories 'lie in wait' for writers in particular places, and in his occasional use of tarot cards to introduce an element of chance and spark ideas during the writing process (Interview n.p.).

In including this overtly non-specific category, I acknowledge the important but enigmatic role that the subconscious mind plays in creativity, and admit that a model that seeks to demystify the creative process can only go so far. Nebulous techniques may be catalogued and investigated, but are likely to elude full explication: in this, they constitute a nod to author Donald Barthelme's plea that we resist the 'rage for final explanations,' and 'allow a [creative] work that mystery which is essential to it.' After all, he warns, 'tear a mystery to tatters and you have tatters, not mystery' (19). The Nebulous category might provide a refuge of sorts for the more mysterious and fragile elements of literary place-making—those aspects that resist being fully understood.

The five POET modes are:

1. **Retrospective techniques** (casting back/remembering place: drawing on autobiographical memories of place): harnessing place-based personal memories, both early and more recent, can be a fruitful literary technique. As Tony Birch's work suggests, highly emotive memories can be particularly powerful catalysts.
2. **Immersive techniques** (being present/encountering place: using direct encounters with place): site visits offer writers an immediate sensory and emotional engagement with

place. Planned site visits and photography are central to Birch's practice, but happenstance and serendipitous place encounters can also yield creative dividends.

3. **Collaborative techniques** (taking stock/socialising place: using shared or cultural understandings of place): tapping into an accumulated stock of place-based cultural knowledge, be it intertextual (e.g. artefacts, written texts, maps) or interpersonal (e.g. conversations, rumours), can be an invaluable creative tool. In particular, Birch has made imaginative use of scholarly forms of place-based knowledge.
4. **Vicarious techniques** (feeling for characters/empathising place: imaginatively inhabiting a fictional being): 'vicarious emplacement' enables writers to mobilise perspective-taking and narrative empathy to help emplace characters within the story; it is also implicated in how stories resonate for readers, as the body and emotions become shared sites of understanding. Birch has used vicarious emplacement to build his fictionworld (Doyle 31) from the perspective of child characters.
5. **Nebulous techniques** (esoteric or mysterious approaches): this category could include such slippery phenomena as dream content, 'pure imagination,' subconscious formulations, intuition, the sublime, the uncanny, hauntings, and *genius loci* (spirit of place).

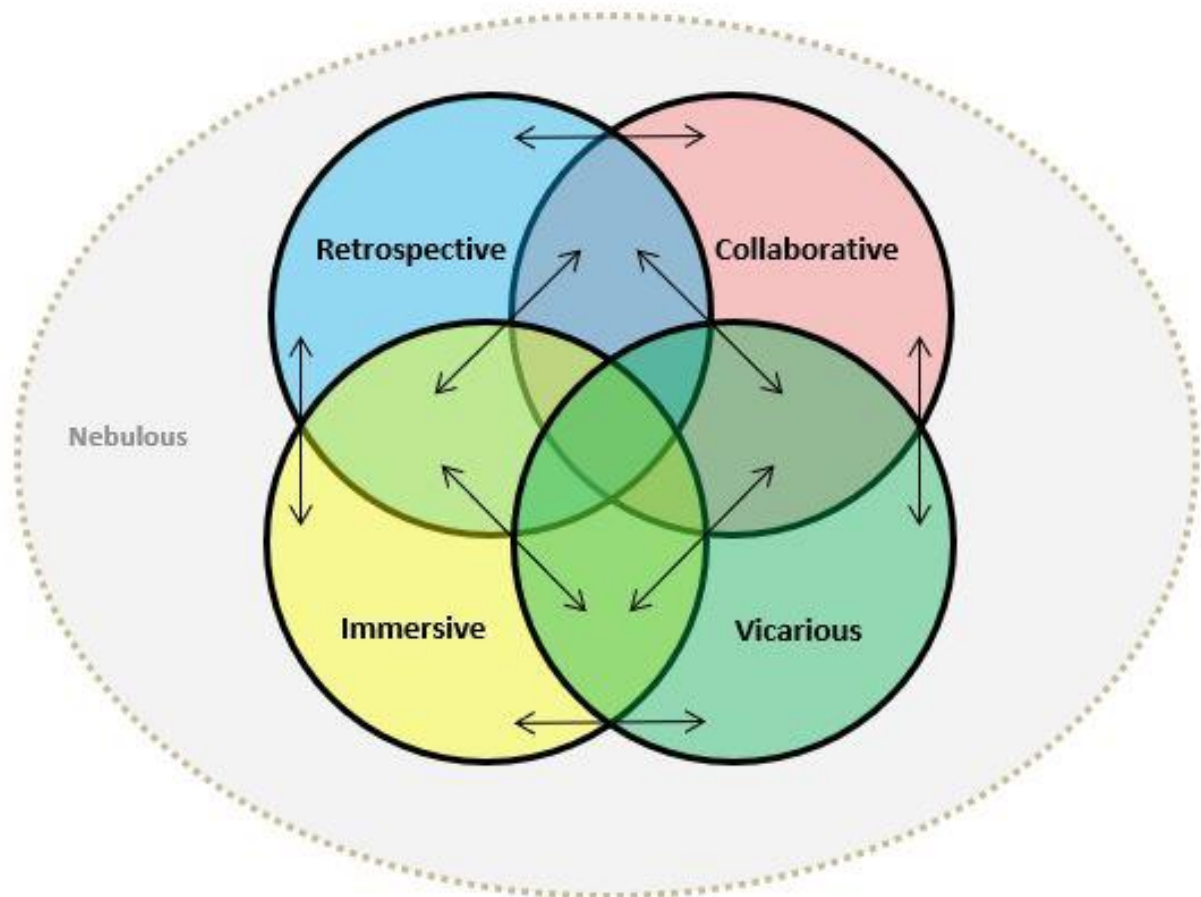


Figure 1: The POET Model: a process-based model of literary place-making

Through the Prism of Experience: Making Place Meaningful

Creative writing is a literary form of place-making: its practitioners, to a greater or lesser degree, are engaged in crafting a literary sense of place. If we define 'place' as space endowed with meaning, and 'sense of place' as emotional connections to place, then literary place-

making is about imbuing textual places with meaning and emotion. To this end, creative writers draw upon both personal and shared understandings of place, seeking to render textual place through the prism of experience. The POET model aims to help explicate this process by setting out a framework of place-oriented experiential techniques (POETs)—generative tools which writers use to endow literary place with sensory detail, emotion, and meaning, in a way that will hopefully resonate with readers. Often manifesting as ‘off-page’ activities that fuel or feed into the writing process, these techniques span the gap between personal and shared understandings of place, and between our lived experiences of place and its textual manifestations. Recognising the model as multidirectional and dynamic, literary place-making emerges as a generative, cumulative and associative process, in which writers mobilise a rich array of lived sensations, emotions, memories, understandings, and actions in order to evoke place in resonant ways.

In 2009 geographer James Kneale lamented that the dialogue between literary studies, geography, and other disciplines has been ‘piecemeal ... full of missed opportunities and one-sided conversations’ (1). Happily, that dialogue seems to be both intensifying and broadening. For geography scholars exploring the nexus of place and literature, engaging more fully with the practice-based perspectives of experienced creative writers may help extend and deepen this ongoing conversation. With regard to the POET model put forward in this paper, future studies could explore the ‘Nebulous’ category in more depth, and investigate the place-making practices of writers working across a diverse range of genres and forms. Beyond literature, the POET model could be used by practitioners working in other place-making disciplines—architecture, urban planning, ecosystem services, experience design, and the construction of virtual environments or game worlds—as a framework for creating places that are multidimensional, meaningful, and experientially rich. The framework may potentially be a useful tool for geography scholars and non-text-based arts practitioners conducting their own place-making experiments, and might also provide a starting point for interdisciplinary co-explorations of place. As Angharad Saunders rightly argues, ‘Geography pervades the content, practice and meaning of creative writing’ (436). Yet the reverse is also true: the content, practice, and meaning of creative writing shapes our understanding of geography, and the way we experience place. This common ground may be a promising site for future collaboration.

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NOTES

¹ One could claim that *all* writing is ‘creative.’ But creativity researcher Michele Root-Bernstein argues that creative behaviour ‘involves the generation and the expression or instantiation of ideas, things or processes that are both novel and effective. If novel refers to [the work’s originality], effective refers to its subsequent reception, for a creative [work] takes on a life of its own after communication to others—it fills a cultural need, [or] solves a social or intellectual problem recognised by a larger group’ (601).

² Some ecocritics also publish ‘hybrid’ forms of writing (see Edlich), but these works typically explore how humans interact with place, rather than the creative techniques they use to evoke it on the page.

³ This project forms part of a larger study involving four creative writers: Tony Birch and Ross Gibson (from Australia), Elizabeth Knox (from New Zealand), and Jane Goodall (from the UK). Perhaps unavoidably, it is also informed by the researcher's own experiences as a novelist and short story writer.

⁴ A search for any documents containing the phrase 'literary sense of place' in the databases Proquest Central, Project Muse, JStore, and Google Scholar yielded a total of 66 sources that briefly mention the term, but none that offer a definition. Online searches within *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2009), *The New Handbook of Literary Terms* (2007), and the academic journals *JASAL*, *New Writing*, *Journal of Literary Studies*, and *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* yielded zero results for 'literary sense of place.'

⁵ Lutwack argues that as certain human experiences come to be associated with particular types of places, a kind of 'archetypal place symbolism' develops: mountains may come to symbolise ambition and challenge, forests or swamps signify danger and entrapment, and roads or paths denote adventure and change. These collective understandings of place are both emotionally charged and common to a group, society, or culture; however, as noted, they are also subject to ambiguity, change, and individual interpretation (35).

⁶ Eve Vincent notes that while Birch resists being cast as a 'public Aborigine,' and seldom foregrounds his fictional characters' Indigeneity, in his non-fiction and academic writing he 'speaks comfortably in, and is designated as, an "Aboriginal voice"' (Vincent).

⁷ Speaking at an academic conference, Birch linked this destructive act with the practice of eugenics: the State government of the day designated Fitzroy as an area for 'decanting and quarantining social deviants,' associated slums with physical and moral disease, and viewed their inhabitants as 'costly to society and morally useless' (*The Other Half*).

⁸ Edward Casey's concept of 'emplacement' denotes our continuous bodily re-inhabitation of place, an ongoing process of striving to 'feel at home' in it (291–93).

⁹ Keen takes pains not to valorise empathy, or suggest that creative writers are somehow morally superior to non-writers; she simply argues that empathic abilities are essential to their craft.

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