Placing the Academy

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When I was nine, my family moved from Seattle where we had lived less than a year. It rained almost daily those nine months, causing mildew to grow on the bathroom tiles and in shoes that were not worn every day. The morning we left, the car was packed tightly, the last-minute pile of possessions having grown immeasurably overnight. While my parents worried about where my brothers and I were going to sit for the long drive, my babysitter stood with me in the driveway saying good-bye. I cannot see her face and no longer know her name, but she gave me a terrarium to remember her by, a miniature ecosystem housed in a Sanka jar. Requiring neither water, nor air, nor fertilizer, it was complete, like an egg. Even though I was moving, I thought, a tiny part of the earth would be coming with me.

Though I cared for my piece of the planet as if my livelihood depended on what it produced, the plants died. Two weeks in a hot car were too much for their tiny green limbs.

Writing about the experience now, I find myself wondering if I am not confused in my memories. After all, we were moving to Hawaii, so why would we be driving? A plane seems much more likely. Perhaps it was my babysitter in Virginia who gave me the terrarium and I was seven. Perhaps it was in Seattle, but maybe it was a birthday present. Perhaps I only dreamed the terrarium. Casting, casting, casting back, I work to remember the car we owned, how many siblings I had, the way my mother wore her hair, any detail...
that will help me to attach this memory to a particular place, in hopes my past travels better than the plants. In the end, there is only the image of a short-lived terrarium sweating in a jar with an orange lid.

For me, the loss of those tiny plants has become metaphorical for the tenuous connection I have to the land. I remain envious of those I know who have lived their entire lives in one place, who can hail neighbors by name, and who recall the feel of the air when the gold-finches return. I know so little about the places I have lived; so many of my memories are unplaced, as if the box of family photos were upturned and pictures scattered underneath the table and the bed.

I cannot even tell you for sure where I was standing when I lost the earth.

When Scott Russell Sanders suggests in *Writing from the Center* that “we need a richer vocabulary of place,” he does not explicitly name the need for ways to talk about how the work being done in the academy is shaped by where we, as academics, live (18). Instead he is asking for a “literature of . . . inhabitation,” a broad call for writing that examines who we are by detailing where we are (50). Having recently moved to new landscapes and new jobs, Rona and I realize that literature would be incomplete if it did not explore how place shapes our professional identities. We know intimately that who we are as teachers, writers, and scholars is intricately connected to where we live and have lived.

Part of our awareness of the shaping force of place comes from moving west, to landscapes that with their extremities of weather and geology demand conversation. We have begun to understand how our teaching and our writing have changed in response. Even though Rona knows that Mount Rainier is always there, on those clear bright mornings when it dominates the Tacoma skyline, she is reminded that this volcanic landscape is unfamiliar, and she relies on that sense of displacement to understand the distances her students must travel as they learn the discourse of the university. In similar ways, I drive along the floor of Cache Valley to work every morning, descending into the bed of Lake Bonneville, an ancient sea that beat its retreat fifty thousand years ago. Its absence and the literal loss of land it carved out inform the way I think about the possibilities found in writing to revise the traumatic into a narrative that heals. Encountering new places brought into sharp relief how the two of us teach, how we write, and how we continue
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to learn the channeled ways of academic life. In paying attention to the new places we find ourselves—both as new professors in academic departments and new residents of western states—we find it important to develop not just any vocabulary of place, but one capacious enough to place the academy.

This collection begins such a conversation. It fills a gap in the fields of place writing and academic memoir. While place writers have learned to talk about the connections between landscape and self, they are rarely concerned with occupation and more rarely with the academy. Academic memoirists like Alice Kaplan, Jane Tompkins, Eva Hoffman, and Marianna Torgovnick, in turn, reflect on their professional lives but rarely on the landscapes that surround them as they move between classes, ideas, or meetings. Who we are is dependent on where we are, and the influence of landscape does not end with our habits or customs as residents and citizens but extends to how we read, write, think, learn, and teach.

Because, as Wayne Franklin writes, “it is in our stories that we locate place most powerfully,” this is a collection of personal essays (xi). In their efforts to make legible the land that lies within, here teachers and scholars tell stories of growing up and growing older, of moving and remaining, of working and playing, and of being placed. We learn what the campus plumber can teach us about the classroom, how one might continue to work on fragile ecosystems knowing that you are responsible for killing the last of an endangered species, what the Mississippi has to say to the teaching of writing, as well as the difficulty of imagining places like Vietnam for your students. Their diverse answers to how geography shapes their academic identities mirror the diversity of the authors’ backgrounds. Some essayists have been in the academy for decades, while others are just starting out. Contributors with national reputations adjoin those who are relatively unknown. Here are writers from the East, the West, the South, the Midwest, writers from English to biology, and those occupying the center as well as the borderlands. In common, they believe in writing as a way of making meaning. Through their words, a new vocabulary of place is meted out, one that makes visible the connections between being placed and creating knowledge, being placed and teaching others, being placed and writing.

Conscripted at birth and raised in the military, I have never lived in any one place longer than five years. Some places I have known
only for the length of the school year, not even long enough to experience all the seasons. To this day I wonder what the sun feels like in Seattle in July. Now, as an adult with no connections to the military and still no long-term commitment to any particular landscape, I have begun to wonder if transience is a pathology, if change is the only stability I know.

Military children pride themselves in their ability to recover from loss. They wear their relocations like badges, or scars maybe. I remember, once, talking with a fifteen-year-old girl named Brianna about her experiences as a military dependent. We sat in her living room underneath a sign on the wall that proclaimed, “Home is Wherever the Air Force Sends You.” The central location of the plaque made me wonder if it served less as a decoration and more as a reminder to the family of the portability of home. As I did as a child, Brianna saw moving as the single defining characteristic of being a military dependent, what made military brats different from others in their classes, the reason they ate lunch alone. At fifteen, she had already lived in nine places and on two continents. Toward the end of our conversation, her mother and sister safely upstairs and out of hearing range, she confessed to me that she “longed for a home.” Home, like a secret, lying on the couch between us.

In his book *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, Kent Ryden suggests that “a sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines” (38). Given that, I am the last person in the world who should be co-editing a collection examining the relationship between locale and work. When I look inside for the land that moors me, I find nothing, only a series of not homes. No landscape converses with me; no rivers run through my body. I know how to move, less how to remain. Which is, maybe, why I am attracted to writing that attempts to make visible the invisible landscape, the unseen layers of usage and memory that turn space into place and house into home. I want to know how land becomes story; I want to acquire a vocabulary of place. At times my desire borders on the desperate. After all, Scott Russell Sanders suggests in *Staying Put* that “if you are not yourself placed, then you wander the world like a sightseer, a collector of sensations, with no gauge for measuring what you see” (114). Without a home, knowing no one place more intimately than another, pressed to name the particulars of any landscape, I have become a tourist in my own life.
And yet, how can I fail to be placed? Even if that place has shifted and changed, even if my experience of place has long been casual and cursory. I cannot live and write and speak from nowhere. I am somewhere. Which makes me wonder about how place writing has been defined as a genre. If who we are is shaped in part by where we live, then are we not all placed, regardless of the length of time we have lived somewhere, our intimacy with the land, our ability to articulate that relationship? To say one person is “placed” more than another seems akin to saying one person is more of a woman than another, or more Asian than another, or more working class than another. If place works like ethnicity and gender in shaping us, then how can any of us be left to “wander”? We are all rooted, even when we have no home.

Part of the answer to my questions, no doubt, is in the awareness we bring to the places we inhabit. While we all may be placed, few of us are able to articulate our placedness. And place writers have developed a language for talking about the connections between self and land. From their ability to identify and reflect upon the “place-creating elements” in the world, we learn better how to name the landscapes that lie within each of us. But fair, too, I think is the concern that place writing often, and I would argue unfairly, honors a certain kind of connection to the land—one based largely on length of time and ecological savvy—that leaves many of us “with no gauge for measuring what [we] see.” So while I come to place writing with a desire to understand how landscape becomes story, I also come ready to broaden what it means to be placed and what it looks like to write the land.

Place writing is an act of healing, meant to mend the divisions that threaten to undo us. While these divisions include human/nature, artificial/natural, sacred/ordinary, public/private, mind/body, and civilization/wilderness, place writers tend to see the most damaging division as the one the separates nature from experience. Only when we view ourselves as existing apart from the earth, its creatures, and its future are poverty, environmental destruction, degradation, war, and genocide possible. To heal this breach, place writers work to make visible the ties that bind each of us to this quietly spinning planet with an urgency that suggests continued ignorance will mean our extinction. Story, they hope, will save us.

What caused the division between self and land is both com-
pllicated and arguable. Kent Ryden points to the eighteenth century and new methods of surveying that perceived land as an “abstract entity” meant only for division. Prior to the eighteenth century, cartographers made maps reflecting their experience of the world. The maps they drew, autobiographies of sorts, told viewers how to feel about a place, its spirit. In other words, these maps revealed more about the mind than the earth. In the eighteenth century, Ryden argues, when land became something to measure rather than experience, maps also changed. The world became “a matrix of objective geographical facts distilled from the messiness of real life” (37). Centuries later, tutored by maps that would have us believe that something as shifting and subjective as the natural world can be reduced to a two-dimensional object that fits in the glove box, we remain disconnected from the world around us.

Kathleen Dean Moore, herself a philosopher, points further back in history to the beginnings of western philosophy. In *The Pine Island Paradox*, she returns us to the temples of ancient Greece and the words of Democritus and Leucippus, who taught that “all of reality can be reduced to hard little particles, mechanical substances that humans can measure, understand, manipulate, and ultimately control” (5). Moore tells us that Descartes appeared hundreds of years later to detail the separation of mind and body, followed closely by Bacon, Kant, Hobbes, and Locke, all of whom did their part to ensure that humans are separate from, and superior to, the natural world around them.

Others find different reasons for the division. They point at city walls that created a literal (and later figurative) separation from the woods and hills, industrialization that took us from the fields and into the factories, the invention of streetlamps that removed us from the diurnal rhythm, or late twentieth-century capitalism that takes the measure of the world in terms of monetary rather than humanistic value. Clearly, the separation of land and experience did not happen overnight, nor did it happen easily. But it did happen. As we move from parking structures to office buildings and then home to the garage, it is quite possible to go through an entire day without ever literally putting foot to earth. Nature and its movements have become something you capture on film while on vacation, not a force that we recognize as shaping who we are.

Place writers recognize that separation allows for destruction. We are more willing to do harm to something we can objectify and
impersonalize. And they are at pains in their work, therefore, to place themselves, to embed their experience in the land around them. To fail to do so means that we will suffer as the land suffers.

Place writing becomes, then, an ethical act. To belong to a place and to write about that connection mean that one more place might escape damage either because you become invested in saving that place or because you convince others to save it. Through the essays in this collection, for example, we learn about the Suwannee River, the box elder bugs in Utah, the fragility of the Mojave Desert, places where these writers live, work, and teach. Their work parallels the efforts of writers like Rick Bass, Terry Tempest Williams, and Bruce Chatwin, who bring national attention to potential losses. Writing about a place can equate to saving it.

On a local level, place writers contend that once they become rooted in a place, even if that place is their own backyard, or the stream near their house, or a path that runs through campus, they attend to its survival. In telling stories of place, people remain connected to the land, they love it, and they will not leave it or abuse it. And if each of us were to save only the land nearest to us, think of the global effect.

Even when the land is not literally saved—for example, when Scott Russell Sanders remembers his childhood home in Indiana before it was flooded—it is saved in story and passed down. Rockwell Gray honors the connection between autobiographical memory and place when he describes autobiography’s function as “an antidote to anonymity, disconnection and uprootedness” (57). When literal places pass away—falling prey to new construction, environmental ruin, or natural decline—they are still preserved in story. To write of these places keeps them alive, keeps our hearts and minds connected to them. As we learn from Bruce Chatwin’s work, *Songlines*, the land of the Australian aboriginal people is literally sustained through telling stories and singing songs—every rock, every tree, every river being sung into continual existence. Place writers are conservationists then, even when the places they write about are preserved only in memory. In fact, Gray suggests, the remembered place can become more meaningful than the land that has been lost.

It is the turning of land into a story that creates places in our lives. “Places do not exist,” Ryden says, “until they are verbalized” (241). Without narrative, a place is merely space, a geographical entity without any emotional resonance. In many ways, stories of place
work like sculpture, defining a way for us to see and experience what was formerly invisible and formless. Story transforms space into place first in memory. We carry with us the memories of all the places we have experienced in the past—comparing each new place to our “primal landscapes.” These memories of place help us understand who we are, help make us whole. So in telling the story of who we are, we tell the story of where we have stood. While place is important, it is narrative that makes place possible, bringing “place” and “writing” into a symbiotic relationship. We understand ourselves, in part, through the landscapes that surround us, but the landscapes that surround us do not become significant until we turn them into narrative.

Ryden takes the connection between landscape and narrative even further by suggesting that narrative is an unstated component of any landscape. Your autobiography is written on the land—in the way you see it and feel it and in the way that each new place becomes enmeshed with all the other places you have experienced. We literally “write place into being,” and in that sense I wonder, then, if we can ever truly be without a home.

Not surprisingly, place writers turn to the natural world for metaphors that explain the relationship between identity and place. Linda Hogan, in her collection of essays, *Dwellings*, writes about caves, bats, wolves, and feathers to describe how “the land merges with us.” In her essay “All My Relations,” her body and the land become one, where the “stones come to dwell inside the person” and there is “no real aloneness” (41). In a similar vein, Terry Tempest Williams imagines the desert as her lover in *Desert Quartet*, and Sanders ponders what we can learn from rivers in *Staying Put*. For me, one of the strongest metaphors is that of the island, one which Kathleen Dean Moore explores in *The Pine Island Paradox*. Standing at the edge of the shore, she tells us, it is impossible to know where land ends and water begins. The line shifts with the tide. It is the same, she suggests, as the line that separates the human from the natural, the present from the future, the sacred from the mundane—which is to say there is no line. For too long we have relied upon metaphors of the natural world that make the land strange and that place us in positions of superiority. But islands are different. “Not even an island is an island,” Moore reminds us. It is all part of the same “continuous skin of the planet, the small part we can see of the hidden substance that connects everything on earth” (4).
I like Moore's use of the island as a figurative vehicle for moving beyond the land/experience division. Maybe because I know the elusiveness of the coastline, her metaphor resonates with me. Having been stationed on Oahu three different times growing up, I claim that island as the closest thing I have to home. I have stood on the shore of the Pacific as waves wrapped around my ankles and buried my feet deeper and deeper in the cool sand. As a child, I often wondered what would happen if I were to stand, unmoved, on the shore for hours, days even. Would the sand eventually bury me, pulling me deep into the belly of the earth? Would I become part of the land?

Place writers stand in this surf line, insisting that we are intimately connected with the landscapes around us. Sanders describes the relationship in marital terms while Linda Hogan prefers the spiritual; Williams defines her relationship with the desert as sexual; Pattiann Rogers in *Song of the Marsh Wren* feels her connection to the southern landscape as a bodily one; and for Kathleen Dean Moore the relationship between self and land is familial. Regardless of how these writers describe the connection, wholeness and healing are what they write toward. "There is no division," Sanders says in *Staying Put*, "between where we live and what we are" (51).

What happens, though, if I do not experience land in any of these terms? What if I have not lived anywhere long enough or with enough awareness to know how that land enters my body? Does it mean that landscapes have not shaped me? Does it mean that I have no way of gauging my experience? In general, place writers privilege time over every other factor in determining the authenticity of one's connection to land. Staying put, Sanders tells us, is how we learn to love a place. But I find myself wondering if migration is not also a way of knowing. Because remaining in one place for a great length of time is a privilege that not all of us have. There must be ways that I have been shaped by the lands that I have passed through. In the stillness of the early morning hours, when I am awake and staring at the ceiling, it is the surf I feel moving the length of my body, quieting me, shushing me to sleep. And it is the ocean in all its terrifying force that enters my nightmares, pounding my body, pulling me under. I smell Virginia in the fall when I rake leaves, hear Nebraska corn rustle through the spruce trees outside my window, know variety in flatness, color in the desert, wealth in tones of brown. That I have spent my life passing through rather
than remaining makes me question if placedness comes less from staying put and more from paying attention, less from the ability to name the land in all its particulars and more from honoring the particulars that you can name.

When I returned to Hawaii several years ago, having been away from the islands for a longer period than I had ever lived there at one time, I was hoping to find home. What that was and how I would know it were not clear to me. Having been interested in place writing for several years at that point, I assumed home would register in my body. After all, everything I had read suggested, to paraphrase Mary Clearman Blew, that place, like landscape, was bone deep.

What I found when I arrived was that I needed a map to get around the island, that I could not name the mountains or the birds, and that I was little better off than the tourists. Here was the tiny bit of land that I had long clung to as home, and I found I could not even discern its shape from the airplane. It was a rude awakening.

Is it that as a child I did not learn the names of things? Did my parents tell me that we would eat lunch under the kukui trees at Waimea Bay and I just not listen? Did they explain to me that the plumeria tree whose flowers we picked to make leis was originally used to ring graveyards and traditionally the flowers were thought to bring bad luck? Did they name the peaks and the beaches for me? Maybe I have learned the importance of naming—of honoring—the natural world only in later life. Maybe I have come to realize only recently how the particulars of things are the birthplace of both story and memory.

While I think this is partially true, my deeper sense is that although I have forgotten much, I was also never told. Not because my parents were preoccupied or selfish, but because as a military family we bore a complicated relationship to the land and in particular to naming. In the broadest sense, naming means knowing and knowing brings with it the possibility of grief. And a military family must reduce the number of losses incurred with every move, the number of grieved things. Since you cannot grieve what you do not know that you have lost, it is safest not to name that which you don’t have to. To operate at a level of generality becomes a defense mechanism. Trees, after all, are everywhere, whereas the kukui is confined to the tropics.

For two years after my youngest brother, Bryan, was born, my
father called him George. In a startling example of how the refusal to name can appear to protect a person from the deep pain of loss, my father chose to call my brother George because, for the first few months of his life, Bryan struggled to remain alive. Seriously burned over his entire body when a grossly negligent nurse immersed him in scalding water right after his birth, Bryan spent the first part of his life in continual and what can only be imagined as excruciating pain. He lost most of the flesh on the lower half of his body. There was an enormous chance that he would die. Even when it appeared that Bryan would be okay, my dad continued to call him George. As if “George’s” loss could be tolerated in ways that the loss of “Bryan” could not. It was only when Bryan, at the age of two, told my dad that his name was not George that my father began calling his son by name.

Landscapes, however, do not talk back. They do not insist that you honor them by calling them by name. They do not even require that you know them or pay attention to them at the level of the particular. As the United States’ own colonial past attests, you can appear to control the land by renaming it, by making it fit your own system. If the autonomy and individuality of an object, a place, or a person are maintained, in part, through naming, then renaming or misnaming denies a thing its own history, its “beingness” apart from you. You supercede, in this case, the land. It exists only when you call it into existence, and it fails to exist—as you have named it—once you leave.

I think as a child I was not given the names of things—or more often given the wrong names of things—because it allowed us, as a family, to remain in charge of the degree of intimacy we had with the land and ultimately with a home. We would make up names for everything—for the beaches, for stores, for campsites, for people, even for our own pets—and in making up we would not have to really “know.” We would not have to fit into a history or a geography that we would only be leaving. We would not have to acknowledge that this landscape was any different from any other.

What my experience with land tells me is that being placed has little to do with the length of time you remain and much more to do with the willingness to open yourself up to the possibility of loss. Land becomes an intimate when you are willing to grieve it, and you do not need to have spent a long time in one place to feel loss. In fact, you could be passing through.
The tennis court tree in Maloelap.
The way the sky and sea meet seamlessly on the Puget Sound ferry.
The rattle of palm fronds against the house.
Gnats in your eyes and your nose.
Fireflies skittering over prairie grass.
And always the ocean.

Perhaps place writing is less about the specific relationship between the writer and the land and more about a particular stance a writer takes toward the land. Like memory itself, place resides in the details. It is not so much that you remember but how you remember. In the same essay in which Rockwell Gray suggests that memory of places can become more significant than the actual places, he also cautions against what he calls the practice of “guerilla autobiography,” where place becomes reduced to snippets of information that read like a résumé (58). These narratives lack “a deep sense of place” and trade in clichés, becoming a part of the growing number of anonymous and interchangeable landscapes that exist in modern society (58). For autobiographical memory to serve as an antidote to dislocation and disconnection, it must be drawn with patience, he tells us, and with particulars.

In thinking about the place writing that has moved me, the particulars are what I recall. Scott Russell Sanders standing in his backyard in the early morning hours, his arms wrapped around a tree. Terry Tempest Williams rearranging the limbs of a dead swan as she will later care for her mother’s body. Annie Dillard paying attention to clouds. These are moments that these writers have chosen to translate their experience of landscape for their readers. Small, specific, and personal moments with the land.

In the end, it seems to me, the acts of writing and of being placed are the same. To be placed and to write place both require the distillation of experience into certain, specific details. When we write, we reduce the complexity of the world around us into ordered lines of prose. It is little different when we place ourselves. Through the selection and honoring of certain details, we turn spaces into places. Much is left out of the sentence, and much is left out of the landscapes we carry with us, but what remains tells the story of who we are. Harold Simonson is right when he suggests that “real placement requires effort,” that it is not a birthright (174). But the
effort required is not one of staying put or even one of extended study. It is the effort that begins with the knowledge that what you see is fleeting, partial, and never whole and that, at the same time, it is all that you have.

I began this introduction with the words of Barbara Kingsolver, who tells us that we find our place in the world by writing one. For a former military brat without a home, I find her words very comforting. Placedness can be most certainly found in staying put, but it can also be found in migration. It can develop from close study, but it can also develop by simply opening yourself up to the possibility that what you see might be lost. We write place into being. It is the act of writing that brings us home, the crafting of story that gives us the guide to measure the rest of the world.

As I wrote at the beginning of this essay, the goal Rona and I have for this collection is to establish a vocabulary of place that includes our relationship between our work—specifically our academic work—and where we live. The title of our book, *Placing the Academy*, is in some ways more shifting than it might syntactically sound. As our contributors indicate, the academy and our work in the academy are anything but fixed or determined. Rather, our understanding of the academy as a place must be as broad and as fluid as the work that we do. We do not stop being teachers or writers or researchers the moment we leave campus, as if our scholarly selves were coats that could be checked at the door. Instead, we bring our sense of ourselves as academics into our beds at night when we read, into the mountains when we hike, to the table when we eat. Plato’s foundational idea that an academy must be less about a physical location and more about a way of exchange, a kind of conversation, a path for seeking knowledge plays out within and among the essays in this collection.

That said, our contributors understand that the academy is always local and, in fact, can only be local, even as we consider common work that academies do or common foundations that academies rest upon. Each person experiences place differently, and no one understanding of place can fit an entire department, campus, field, discipline, or profession. The place of the academy shifts between people and even within a person. While some of the writers do indeed write about their literal campuses or offices, most conceptualize academic work and the academic landscapes in alternative terms. In exploring the connections between landscape and academic identity, we
have divided the collection into four sections that honor the shifting nature of place and the reach of the academy. The movement between the four sections is meant to mirror the argument made in the introduction, namely, that place must be fluid and shifting even as it requires attention to particulars and that potentially the most exhilarating work being done on place is that which is not literally rooted but which ranges, straddles, and roams.

The six writers in the first section, “Here,” ask us to pay attention to the place we find ourselves the most, the place many of us call our homes. All of these essays are strongly rooted in the present—in the here and now. For some of these writers, this means calling attention to the literal place in which we write, read, and work—the campus—a place mostly ignored and devalued in comparison to intellectual endeavors, or, worse yet, threatened with toxins, concrete, and overuse. They wonder, explicitly and implicitly, just where the university is—in the classrooms, on the quad, in our minds, in the buildings? Others who move off campus ask us to consider ways of seeing and hearing our most immediate surroundings that can also enable us to see and hear—to reimagine—our work as teachers and scholars. “Here” for these writers is always ecological, always interconnected, always interanimating.

Through long conversations with her daughter Erin E. Moore, an architect, Kathleen Dean Moore, a philosopher and nature writer, begins this section by exploring her own uneasy place in an academy where she long existed “in two worlds: the world of Ideas, which thrilled [her] and paid [her] bills, and the world of rain and wind, which [she] loved.” In a critique of the university’s strategic plans to globalize, Moore refuses separation between land and work. She explores how much is lost when the personal and place-based is “banished . . . from the philosophically meaningful world.”

Michael Sowder’s sojourns in eleven different geographies and four different professions have helped teach him the gift of paying attention. Sowder is guided by the “question of seeing—for landscape can inform our identity only to the extent that, day by day, moment by moment, throughout our ordinary lives, we truly see it.” Seeing, however, is simple “but not easy,” as we can be easily distracted by the busyness of everyday life or feel the discomfort of worry and memory. Relying on his practice in Zen meditation as a metaphor for thinking about how we learn to be at home, Sowder writes that he is “learning that finding a right livelihood and a place to be may finally end in what we have to give.”
In contrast to Sowder’s peripatetic past, Diana Garcia’s rootedness in California’s San Joaquin Valley shapes her commitment to writing and teaching. Her childhood landscape taught her “a focused gaze and close attention to detail,” and the public school system rewarded her intelligence and good studentship by busing her to an almost-all-white class of gifted children on the other side of town. There she speaks English, “the language of parity”; there she goes by Karen, “a name centered somewhere north of Scandinavia; not Diana, redolent of sage cracking through dirt in August.”

Now teaching in the creative writing and social action program at California State University, Monterey Bay, Garcia is dedicated to teaching students like herself and students who remind her of kids with whom she grew up, kids who disappeared in the fog.

Charles Bergman insists that we understand our environment—particularly our campus—as a powerful teacher. Drawing on his training as an English Renaissance scholar and his experiences with his Pacific northwestern university’s sustainability committee, Bergman argues that academics tend to look past the literal place of the academy in favor of the pastoral ideal, “as a place set apart from the real world, a refuge and a retreat into contemplation.” Yet “we can learn not only at a college campus,” Bergman writes, “but from a college campus.” He helps us read “the silent syllabus” of the university, the material reality of boilers, showers, and sewers that sustains the intellectual life we typically (and incorrectly) identify as the “landscape of the mind.” Bergman argues that placing the campus any place other than here proves damaging, even deadly: English ivy, the symbol of the academy, is an invasive species that chokes to death native Douglas fir and western hemlock, and water, the symbol of the region in its waterways and rain, is at its limits in terms of use.

Katherine Fischer also finds a teacher in water. Overflowing its banks, changing forms with the seasons, the Mississippi River of Fischer’s adulthood in the floodplain encourages “[f]antasy and metaphor, adventure and [her] own yearning heart.” The Mississippi also makes her rethink her pedagogy. As a new teacher, Fischer believed that teaching and learning were as precise, as controllable, as she once imagined the river to be: “Schooled in education departments of the early 1970s,” she writes, “I believed that if I poured flowing streams of lessons and sage advice into student heads, their knowledge would flow downstream like a contained river—kept neatly to its shores.” Yet paying attention to the
rhythms, the fecundity of the Mississippi allows her to revise her metaphor and value the wildness and unpredictability of the classroom, as well as the pleasure of movement and surfaces.

Seán W. Henne concludes this section by writing of his return home. A Michigan teacher from a long line of Michigan teachers, Henne inherits his family’s love of stories, teaching, and place, and he understands storytelling, teaching, and farming as interdependent acts. At the community college on Lake Michigan at which he works, Henne’s workload is as heavy as the one his students bear living in a district with high unemployment rates and rural isolation. As Henne develops a curriculum to help students lift themselves out of the poverty of the place, he listens to frogsongs. Amphibians, he tells us, are indicator species: “Hearing them in such abundance is, in part, a signal that the natural world I inhabit is functioning richly.” And hearing frogsongs reminds him that his “curricula need to be aware of the realities brought into [his] room by the other inhabitants that share [his] space.”

In the second section, “There,” we look at academics who argue that their professional identities are most shaped by another place, one not necessarily where they work or live but one equally powerful in its shaping influence. For these writers, who they are now is largely dependent on where they have stood before.

Kathryn T. Flannery begins this conversation with an essay that attends to the cultural geography of her childhood spent in Levittown, the largest planned community in the United States. Through a series of reflections that meander through floor plans and racial covenants, Flannery comes to understand how strongly this “There” of her childhood informs her chosen field of study, the literacy practices of those “from below.” Having once been under the gaze of those who wanted to document, she has dedicated her career to studying what happens when the subject speaks back. Unwilling to allow Levittown to remain neither uniformly tidy nor uniformly bleak, Flannery relies on personal experience to argue that place is never singular. In her desire to explore the dissonance created when “personal and public stories are in tension,” Flannery refuses any easy alliances between place and the academy or landscape and knowledge.

Mitsuye Yamada turns the focus from research to the classroom and her work with students. She devotes her time to reconsidering a place that was once barren to her, once a place of pain. Imprisoned as a child with 120,000 other Japanese nationals and
Japanese Americans in a concentration camp in the Idaho desert during World War II, Yamada associated the desert with barbed wire and watchtowers, with sameness, sterility, and nonproductivity. Yet coteaching a class with a biologist for writing and biology students alike “transforms” the desert for Yamada and fuels her work as a teacher, poet, and activist. Ultimately, Yamada identifies with the desert and its ability to “emerge out of obscurity,” thereby taking solace and strength in a place that once threatened to destroy her.

For Jayne Brim Box, the stakes are equally high with her work on the Suwannee River. A conservation biologist, Brim Box has spent her career focused on the life cycle of freshwater mussels, in particular the Suwannee moccasinshell, a species that is now extinct. What complicates Brim Box’s work is the fact that she found what may well be the last specimen of the Suwannee moccasinshell and then killed it. Caught in a “twisted biological Greek tragedy,” Brim Box works to save what she may have helped kill, putting her own body at risk by swimming in the same polluted waters. It is only when the other biologists around her begin getting sick that Brim Box considers how she partakes in the trauma experienced by the mussels and the river they inhabit. The antithesis to Yamada, Brim Box must learn to balance a once calming riverscape with the toxic zone it has become.

Both a fiction writer and a postcolonial scholar, Charles Waugh has also spent time negotiating different cultural geographies. His work in Vietnam grounds both his novels and his scholarship, and in “Imagining Vietnam” he explores how Vietnam became, for him, “a place in its own right” rather than a set of received stereotypes. Through his writing he tries to “demonstrate how this place in which we live is irrevocably bound to that one, tied together by our choice to go there and do what we did, forever linked by common experience and responsibilities.” For Waugh, the far away becomes understood when one attends to the near and thus provides a fitting conclusion to a section that argues collectively that who we are as writers and teachers may be most shaped by places we have already passed through.

The third section, “Everywhere,” includes writers for whom literal places become either interchangeable or cumulative in their efforts to focus on a kind of meta-landscape that speaks most powerfully to them. In this section, one specific place is not enough to describe their relationship to their environment and their work. They make the argument that being no place and every place at the
same time raises the stakes in the conversation about landscape and academic identity.

Deborah A. Miranda, an indigenous teacher, writer, and scholar, begins this section by reminding us that no matter where we teach, we are teaching “on stolen ground.” She explores the tensions that exist among her body, place, and the academy as she educates her students and her colleagues about what it means to teach in occupied territory. She uses her felt connection to the land to suggest that “[t]here is a knowing that cannot be held in words alone,” complicating just what it means for a profession that trades in words and texts to be placed. In describing her efforts to repatriate the academy, she forcefully shows just how intertwined land, self, and work are. Only when we pay attention to where we stand literally every day, Miranda concludes, can that land teach us our “place in this world.”

Independent scholar Robert Michael Pyle reflects on the “disconnection many people feel with regard to their nonhuman neighbors” and the inability of most academics to see the “distinct, physical, inhabited place” of the campus. In chronicling his observations and discoveries on “dozens of campuses” in his career, he makes an impassioned argument to pay attention to the land that surrounds us, to become “naturalist[s], day by day, regardless of [our] academic discipline.” Only by dissolving the divisions between the human and the natural, the arts and the sciences, the mind and the land can we bear the burden of responsibility we have to the places in which we work, places that are threatened by our continued ignorance. He invites academics to open their eyes to the “vast reservoir of inspiration, grounding, instruction, authority, tranquility, consolation, physical and intellectual stimulation, spiritual succor, fun, and sometimes ecstasy, but above all, interest in the real world.”

Lee Torda widens the scope of this section even further by considering the at-times competing impulses of looking for a job and securing tenure. “[I]f you choose to live an academic life,” she writes, “you are subject to a fickle job market and, thus, to a certain amount of moving around.” Those fortunate to secure a job somewhere must then work very hard to gain that “coveted measure of academic security: tenure.” Tenure is understood as a means of securing academic freedom; it is also, for better or for worse, a way of securing a literal and intellectual home. Yet getting tenure at a place does not guarantee a desire to stay there. What’s more, often
the work (heavy teaching and service) that helps secure tenure at one institution is precisely the work that would make it difficult to find a job elsewhere. Casting a wide geographical net, Torda traces her journey from an immigrant neighborhood outside Cleveland to her university outside Boston, where she now holds tenure, and contemplates the emotional complexity involved in answering the oft-asked question, “Where are you from?”

The fourth section, “In Between,” is shaped by contributors who feel caught between two competing landscapes that claim equal attention on their professional lives. They refuse to name a single defining landscape as most important and never feel completely at home, especially in their work.

Scott Slovic begins this section far from home in another country, surrounded by water rather than mountains. His work, he suggests, draws its energy from “the tension between going away and coming home.” Only in traveling, in being in a new place that requires him to pay attention, does he find a “renewed openness” to, or awareness of, home. At the same time, he recognizes that home creates “a kind of ballast or core of meaning that helps [him] to appreciate and understand the implications of [his] travels.” We move from surf, to airplane, to the American Southwest, as Slovic considers how much more we can know of ourselves and our work when we leave the familiar behind.

Norma Elia Cantú takes us to the borderlands. For Cantú, it is the borderland between Texas and Mexico that shapes her “fronteriza consciousness,” a borderland that often comes in conflict “with what the academic world expect[s].” While she writes that “[g]eography is destiny,” she acknowledges the work she has had to do to translate her experience for her colleagues and her institutions. The borderland appears again and again in her research, teaching, and service, ultimately giving her the strength needed to speak back to a culture that would have her remain on the edge.

Mary Clearman Blew faced similar obstacles as a young PhD in the 1960s with little support and little understanding of how the academy works. Through a third-person narrative, Blew tries to find the distance needed from her young self to describe the literal impact landscape has on our work and our lives. Caught between the Montana of her childhood and the Montana she occupies as a professional, she describes how her focus on Ben Jonson in graduate school, work that “grew from her fear of suffocation, of being
buried alive under [the] blinding sun” of her Montana childhood, fails her when she returns to northern Montana to teach. Instead she follows the barren landscape of the Highline and begins to write stories that “bare the bones of her people and the bones of the people they displaced,” occupying both the present and the past in order to understand the future.

Like Blew, Janice M. Gould also works to reclaim the past, straddling eras, languages, and heritages in order to understand her current place. A Konkow Maidu poet, Janice Gould writes that she became a scholar to answer questions that her mother couldn’t answer about her heritage; she become a poet to “start talking about [her] life—[her] experience as a lesbian, a mixed-blood, a woman with an inner landscape of mountains and stars, sunrises and setting moons, pastures in fog and rain, bright noontides.” As a professor of creative writing, Gould uses photographs, poetry, fiction, and United Statesian propaganda—as well as the presence of Chemawa Indian Boarding School a few miles away from the university—to teach her students about the kinship between Native people and land and how to “question what the ‘other side’ of the story of this nation . . . could be.”

Jeffrey M. Buchanan rounds out this section by defining his obligations to particular populations of students, namely working-class students in urban areas, places “scarred and storied,” places marked by “uncertainty, failure, [and] loss.” Buchanan speaks to the importance of “making places work,” of actively shaping spaces to become places. Drawing on his father’s labor as a tree trimmer in Detroit and his place as his father’s assistant, Buchanan describes teaching as work that requires a similar kind of felt sense, and he endeavors to teach his students to read the landscapes of their lives, to read the selves they present in those places, and to change, adapt, and rearrange. Buchanan reminds us of the work that goes into making a place in the academy, work that is replicated by his students who feel equally at sea, and how we might never feel at home in our professional lives but rather remain dislocated.

Rona Kaufman concludes the collection with a coda meditating on the relationships among bodies, texts, and land, bringing the themes explored in the four sections together and arguing for an expansive definition of what it means to place the academy. Relying on her experience as a runner whose body type does not resemble that of the “typical” runner, Kaufman considers how easily bodies—like texts and landscapes—are misread because
of readers’ tendencies to “reduce all surfaces to signs.” She argues that all texts, like all landscapes, are embodied and that “[e]ventually, we have to deal with [that] body.” More importantly, the body can be a “site of learning,” a place, not unlike landscape, where knowledge is made. Too often scholars “use place as a metaphor, as a point of social location—place stands in for ethnicity, or class, or religion—rather than speak to the particularities of landscapes themselves as a shaping force.” When that happens, “[p]lace collapses into placeholder, a stand-in for something else, to be chronically displaced and replaced and displaced more.” Kaufman concludes by reminding us that “places and texts are bodies first.” In doing so, she extends the reach of landscape to include the one we inhabit every day, the landscape we inscribe on our bodies.

Notes

Parts of this introduction originally appeared in “Through the Particular,” Ecotone (Winter 2005).

1. Kent Ryden uses the term “place-creating elements” (225).
2. In Staying Put, Scott Sanders uses the phrase “primal landscape” to define the “place by which [one] measure[s] every other place” (4).
3. Kent Ryden argues that essayists, in particular, have the function or even responsibility to “write place into being” (241).

Bibliography


