

Embodied literacies and a poetics of place

LYN KERKHAM
University of South Australia

ABSTRACT: In this paper I explore the interconnected nature of literacy and the body, and the relation between bodies, landscapes and literacies. I draw on interview data from my doctoral study, the central problematic of which is to provide a rich account of the ways in which teachers' embodied histories, multiple identities and out-of-school lives relate to their environmental communications curriculum. I engage with the narratives of Toni, a primary-school teacher, and show how she constructs multiple selves in relation to the places where she lives and teaches. My interest here is in how these multiple selves shape, and are shaped by, the actualities of her everyday life and her environmental communications curriculum. I use the feminist poststructuralist notion of body/landscape relations (Davies, 2000; Somerville, 1999) to argue that literacies are intimately tied to bodies and bodies are always somewhere: bodies and landscapes are shaped through acts of reading and writing them. I follow this line of thinking in a discussion of Toni's environmental communications curriculum and the ways of perceiving and acting in the world that curriculum makes possible for her students as they reinscribe relations of selves and the environment.

KEYWORDS: Body-landscape relations, embodied literacies, environmental communications, place, teacher identity.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I draw from my doctoral study, "Literacy teachers at work in an environmental communications project", in which I examine how teachers' place, histories, biographies and everyday lives interact with teacher identity and professional practice. One reference point for my study is the small number of studies that bring together scholarship in literacy and environmental education, with a specific focus on regional and rural communities (Comber, Nixon & Reid, 2007; Cormack & Green, 2007; Cormack, Green & Reid, 2007; Green, Cormack & Nixon, 2007; Nixon, 2007; Reid, 2007; Somerville, 2007). As Green and colleagues (2007, p. 78) outline in their introduction to a recent special issue of the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, the papers presented in that volume reflect an explicit, systematic engagement between scholarly and professional work in literacy with the emerging mega-problem of nature and the environment undertaken in the *River Literacies*¹ project. These studies conceptualise the environment as an object of literacy and are interested in pedagogies and curriculum that aim to develop an eco-ethical consciousness in students. Their focus on how the environment is understood,

¹ River Literacies is the plain language title for "Literacy and the environment: A situated study of multi-mediated literacy, sustainability, local knowledges and educational change", an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project (No. LP0455537) between the University of South Australia, Charles Sturt University and The Primary Teaching Association as the Industry Partner. Chief Investigators were Barbara Comber, Phil Cormack, Bill Green, Helen Nixon and Jo-Anne Reid. The project was undertaken between 2004 and 2007.

and how it is constructed discursively in and by texts, brings new perspectives to what it means to read particular places in relation to the self and, indeed, what is entailed in “reading the world and the word” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). To set the scene, I begin with a discussion of the conceptual work that “bring[s] literacy-educational scholarship to bear on the environmental challenge that looms large in all our lives” (Green et al., 2007, p. 80).

Literacy and the environment

Regarding the environment as “an object of literacy” brings two contexts together: the geographical and physical locations of particular Murray-Darling Basin communities, and the literacy-rich integrated curriculum in which young people (and teachers) might learn about environmental sustainability (Green et al., 2007, p. 78). One strand of the *River Literacies* project documented the ways in which teachers engaged their students in research and communication, through a range of media, that focused on their local places in the Murray-Darling Basin and the environmental issues that confronted them. This communication aspect of the project parallels the conceptual work of Andrew Stables and colleagues (Stables, 1996, 2004; Stables & Bishop, 2001; Stables et al., 1999). Their theorisation incorporates the functional-cultural-critical dimensions of (environmental) literacy that stretches the boundaries of traditional literacy, taking reading and writing practices well beyond decoding and encoding printed texts.

Stables and Bishop (2001) speak directly to the question of what constitutes a text and, in the context of environmental literacy, what it means to “read” the environment. These questions have sparked debates in the literacy field but have been peripheral to environmental education. Their view of environmental literacy as an “essentially semiotic relationship with the biophysical world ... a view too broad to be properly considered a mere subset of ‘environmental education’” (Stables & Bishop, 2001, p. 91) has its origins in Saussure’s work on signs and the meaning of cultural practices (Hall, 2003; Stables, 2001, 2004). It provides the basis for a strong conception of environmental literacy where “the environment *itself* is invested with textuality” (Stables & Bishop, 2001, p. 92, emphasis original). In other words, an effective environmental education takes as its starting point the notion of environment *as* text. Such an approach enables rich and complex learning about the environment beyond what science, as the dominant discipline in which environmental education is usually located, can offer. Put another way, we “read” the rivers, gardens, ridges, forests, rocks, farmlands – the landscapes that constitute the environment – and simultaneously construct their meaning in words, sounds and images. This conceptualisation resonates strongly with the feminist poststructuralist notion that landscapes are shaped through acts of reading and writing them. Following Davies (2000) and Somerville (1999), in this paper I explore how bodies and landscapes are shaped by our inscriptions of them.

LITERACY TEACHERS AT WORK IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATIONS PROJECT

The primary school teachers participating in my study were regional coordinators with *Special Forever*, a collaborative project between the Primary English Teaching

Association (PETA, now e:lit) and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC). *Special Forever* has made a long-term commitment to the development of environmental communications curricula to enhancing primary school children's literacy and their knowledge about the Murray-Darling Basin, an extensive catchment covering much of inland South-Eastern Australia.

Teachers participating in *Special Forever* explore emotional, social and cultural aspects of local places with their students, and have them write poetry and expressive writing, as well as a range of factual texts, and increasingly digital and multimedia texts. Children's writing about "special places" remains an important feature of *Special Forever* projects, but teachers also work towards developing children's more critical knowledges of the environment and engaging children in social action in and with local communities. (Cormack & Comber, 2007; Cormack & Green, 2007; Nixon, 2007; Reid, 2007) Some teachers design curriculum units that focus on endangered species and ecosystems, local and Basin-wide. Many have developed strong relationships with local community groups such as Water Watch, Salt Watch, Land Care and Bird Watchers, and have initiated projects that actively involve parents and school communities in a range of ways (Comber et al., 2007). These projects reflect the origins of *Special Forever* as a subject English-oriented "writing project" in primary schools with an emphasis on the literary as well as its evolution to "environmental communications" with an emphasis on eco-citizenship.

Five *Special Forever* regional coordinators agreed to participate in my study and were interviewed four times over a 15-month period in 2006-2007. Toni, who is the focus for this paper, has participated in *Special Forever* since it began in 1993. She has been teaching for more than 20 years in the rural town where she spent some of her childhood. Her connection with the farming landscape where she lives and the town where she has been teaching is integral to her identities of primary school literacy teacher, rural woman, "local" and wife of a dairy farmer. Some of the narratives she tells concern the changes she observes: rural decline and globalisation are changing the social and economic lives of the people whose livelihoods are connected with the town; the farming landscape, scorched by drought, is a visible reminder of an environment under stress. Woven into her narratives are connections between literacies – ways of perceiving and acting in and on the world – bodies and landscapes, connections that powerfully shape her environmental communications curriculum.

This paper is exploratory, rather than a fully-fledged explanation of the ways in which a teacher's multiple identities and relations with place are intricately intertwined in what she does as a teacher. These dimensions of teaching are rarely accounted for in education research. In the first part of the article, I retell some of Toni's narratives to consider interconnections between self, place and action. I have used *poiesis*, the process of "working on and with texts" (Kamler, 2001; Richardson, 1994, 1997; Threadgold, 1997) to construct transcript poems from the data obtained through the four interviews. I begin with a prologue that exemplifies this approach as a way of exploring embodied literacies. The prologue is followed by a note on methodology that explains why and how I constructed transcript poems from Toni's interview data. I then present excerpts from two of the transcript poems, "Hard times in a small rural town", and "How ought we to live".

In the second part I describe aspects of Toni's literacy-rich environmental communications curriculum and the textual work in which her Grade 5/6 students engage, with the intention of showing that she makes available to her students new ways of perceiving and acting in and on the world that are tied to eco-ethical subjectivities. In conclusion I consider what *poiesis* has enabled me to say about Toni's embodied relation to place and how that plays out in the curriculum she develops.

PROLOGUE

As preparation for the third interview, I invited the teachers to jot three or four journal reflections over a couple of weeks as they went about their usual activities – walking around their place, gardening, cooking – to encourage them to capture the everydayness of their being-in-a-place, and to give me a sense of what it was like for them to be there. Their reflections could include descriptions of where they were, the season, their mood, time of day, how they felt about being there. In response to this request, Toni wrote three short reflective pieces, and in the interview spoke briefly about the experience of writing one of them.²

I've been trying to grow the Flanders poppies for ages and ages...the day my dad *died*, I came home from the hospital and there was one flower in the garden, and that was the end of September, far too early for it to have flowered so there's/ *yeah*// there's an attachment *there*; everything around the place is dying; it was quite sort of a powerful/ sort of feeling of/ you know/ why are these flourishing and/ nothing else/ you know like/ and how good it would be if everything would flourish a little bit [slight laugh] because it's pretty/ you know/ *grim* around here.

Her words guided my reading of what was significant from her point of view, and helped me to think about how to emphasise her feeling for place, the imagery and literary quality in her writing. I minimally pared her description of the effects of the drought she observed, and reshaped the block of text she sent:

The paddocks are dry.
 We've forgotten what rain is like.
 I have got rid of most of the garden.
 For many years I have been trying to grow
 Flanders poppies.
 My dad used to give me seeds every year.
 A patch of dying lawn is covered by a mass of poppies this year
 a sea of red flowers
 that have a special meaning to me.
 My dad, a returned soldier,
 used to grow them when he was alive.
 The morning he passed away late in September
 one poppy bloomed in my garden a couple of months early.
 I water the poppies thinking of my dad

² I use a rudimentary notation system based on Halliday's (1985, p. 102) prosodic symbols to indicate the contours of Toni's speech. The notations on transcript excerpts indicate pauses (/), repetitions [2], falling tone (*italics*) and rising tone (underline).

and I wonder why the poppies flourish
 when everything else is
 so
 parched.

Reshaping Toni's writing in this way draws attention to her sensual reading of the landscape: the land is dry, a patch of lawn is dying, a striking image of "a sea of red flowers". She is taken by the incongruity of the red poppies thriving when the land is desiccated after seemingly endless seasons with little rain. She makes a connection between the death of her father, a returned soldier, and the Flanders poppies that symbolise incomprehensible deaths in the fields of war. Yet, red is also associated with blood, vitality, life-giving: death and life alongside each other. In the drought there is the wonder at unexpected signs of life.

In this short piece, body and landscape, identity and place are intimately connected in the text Toni writes and the words she speaks. She locates herself in and of the landscape: the landscape inscribes its colour, its struggle for life, on her senses. This specific place and Toni's identity as a local woman who lives on a dairy farm are in a reciprocal relation of becoming – neither place nor identity are read or understood as objective, fixed and unchanging. Writing of such a reciprocity as integral to an ontology that incorporates "who we imagine ourselves to be and our embodied relationship with others", Somerville (2007) argues that a self in the process of becoming also includes,

a reciprocal relationship with objects and landscapes, weather, rocks and trees, sand, mud and water, animals and plants, an ontology founded in the bodies of things. In this ontology, bodies of things are dynamic, existing in relation to each other, and it is in the dynamic of this relationship that subjectivities are formed and transformed. (p. 234)

Toni's description of this landscape is intimate. At the same time her inscription of the landscape, her "writing from the body" (Davies, 2000), connects deeply with her more extended accounts of what it is like to live on a dairy farm and teach in a small rural town that is confronting serious social, economic and environmental problems. Before exploring further this body-landscape relation and relations with human and non-human others that are discernible in Toni's more extended narratives, I offer a short description of how I constructed the transcript poems.

POIESIS, CREATING TRANSCRIPT POEMS

Narrative is a powerful resource in Toni's interviews. She uses narrative to configure her world, to explain and interpret her ways of being, her actions and experiences. The immediacy of actual experience and the imagery in her description of the impact of the drought and the difficulties she had in knowing with certainty what she ought to teach, and how she ought to live, was striking. To present this, and her ongoing struggles over identity and pedagogical practice, in a discussion of "findings" that summed up her life work would have transformed her, an embodied subject located in a particular actual place, into an object of study. The power of her words would be lost in an interpretation voiced in third person objective. In seeking an alternative way to represent her words, I have been influenced by feminist scholars who use *poesis*,

the process of working “on and with texts” (Kamler, 2001; Richardson, 1994, 1997; Santoro, Kamler & Reid, 2001; Threadgold, 1997). *Poeisis*, Threadgold (1997) writes, is the dynamic process of rereading, rewriting, or making texts, a combination of textual analysis and text production. Poetic text is constructed out of analysis that attends to questions like:

What is a text? How is it internally structured? How do texts mean? What is the relationship between verbal and non-verbal, ordinary and aesthetic texts, and so on? What do these things have to do with the social world, with culture, with history and with subjectivity and the body? (Threadgold, 1997, p. 2).

Transcript poems “settl[e] words together in new configurations letting us see, hear and feel the world in new dimensions” (Richardson, 1994, p. 522). They are constructed to capture experiences in such a way that the reader is not merely told about, but can *sense* and *feel* the moments, events and episodes that the speaker has made significant in her account. The intention of a transcript poem, then, is to provoke an emotional, as well as an intellectual response in the reader.

To construct the transcript poems, I selected chunks of prose related to each of Toni’s narratives from across the four interviews (48 pages of transcript). Reading narrative stretches from different interviews alongside each other enabled me to identify the continuities and connections she made over time, and the questions that persisted in her reading and writing of place. This reading guided the editing work of paring down and minimally reassembling what she had said. I constructed extended narratives, cutting and pasting together stretches of related narrative, and keeping the sequence of interviews intact. Following Kamler (2001, p. 159), I listened again to the recorded interviews and marked rising and falling tone, repetition of words and phrases, rhythm, pauses and hesitations on these narrative chunks. My reshaping of Toni’s words into stanzas was more often informed by these layers of meaning than the rules of grammar.

Across the four interviews, there are three extended narratives: “Hard times in a small rural town”, “How ought we to live?”, and “Being an environmental communications teacher”. These narratives thread together the past of childhood places, the present of tough times in the town and on the farm where she now lives, and imagined futures for the dairying district and for the students she currently teaches. I turn now to “Hard times in a small rural town”, and the questions Toni grapples with as she articulates what her attachment to place means for her as a local woman and an environmental communications teacher.

A POETICS OF PLACE

In this short excerpt from one transcript, Toni describes the changes she observes in the landscape:

Because of the severe droughts we’ve had/ and the changes in our community/ like we’ve gone from a very rich farming area to/ you know/ quite a poor/ farming area/ you know like/ the [2]/ landscape has changed forever/ like a lot of people have had to sell their water to survive/ so that water will never come back/ so instead of being a lovely green district/ we’re now sort of a patchwork district so// yeah/ there’s a lot of

changes in the community in that sense/ but I think they've always/ been fairly environmentally conscious though// the farmers around here were always interested in the salinity aspects and things like that/ it's always been quite a caring/ sort of environment but/ yeah/ things have changed enormously over the last 5 or 6 years I guess.³

Although the words “like”, “yeah” and “you know” disturb the fluency of written language, they signify meaning-making in process and are critical to informing a reading of the transcript. In rewriting the short excerpt above I omit these words and shape it as one stanza, a group of lines about a single topic or event. I have not changed the words but I have shaped them in order to capture the rhythm and inflection of Toni’s speech.

We’ve gone from a very rich farming area
to quite a poor
farming area.

The landscape has changed forever.
 Instead of being a lovely green district
 we’re now sort of a patchwork district
 people have had to sell their water to survive
 so that water will never come back.

There’s a lot of changes in the community.
Things have changed enormously.

This representation of Toni’s words reflects prosodic analysis as well as content analysis. Although not spoken first, the topic or theme for this stanza is “The landscape has changed forever”. This is suggested by Toni’s “you know”, “like” and repetition of “the” immediately before it. This clause is therefore scribed in such a way to make it visually prominent. The first sentence in the excerpt is displayed as three lines to indicate the short pauses in Toni’s speech, but also to exploit the contrast of “rich” and “poor”. Deliberately separating “very rich farming area” in the first line from “to quite a poor” in the second directs the reader to notice that contrast. The rest of the stanza elaborates on that contrast, expressing it in terms of changes in the landscape and the community.

I have indented the two lines that refer to the “lovely green district” and the “sort of a patchwork district” because the image is powerful. In this instance I have placed these lines immediately below the clause they expand on (rather than place the words in the order in which they were spoken) so that the reader attends to the “patchwork” image of the changed landscape. The following two lines (people have had to sell their water to survive / so that water will never come back) are indented further because, while they suggest one of the causes for the change in the landscape, they are not as significant as the image or the main theme of the stanza as I have constructed it.

The two final sentences in this stanza also concern changes and challenges, but these are changes in the community – the social dimension – so they are scribed in line with the sentence about the landscape – the environmental dimension.

³ I use a rudimentary notation system based on Halliday’s (1985, p. 102) prosodic symbols to indicate the contours of Toni’s speech. The notations on transcript excerpts indicate pauses (/), repetitions [2], falling tone (*italics*) and rising tone (underline).

As in the reflective piece about the Flanders poppies, Toni locates her self in the physicality of a landscape that is dynamic and changing. She uses oppositional concepts (rich/poor, lovely green/patchwork) that evoke a textured visual image of the district where she lives: a “patchwork” of contrasting green and brown, of watered crops and bleached, drought-dried paddocks. The place she describes is a product of (agri)culture – a landscape marked by human activity and farming practices, so “patchwork” also signifies cobbling bits of social and agricultural life together, persisting and persevering with the few resources available, and even selling water, ironically “to survive”. It is, as she comments, “pretty grim around here”. This stanza, however, is more than an observation of the landscape; it is a felt relation with the town she describes. It hints at the struggle for survival in the farming community at a time when broader environmental and economic pressures are reshaping both the landscape and her relations with it. It indicates how place is deeply embedded in her identity.

I now present selected stanzas from “Hard times in a small rural town”, in which Toni speaks about the effects of drought and rural decline on the life of the town, and show some of the complexity of knowing oneself as an embodied being in relation to place.

HARD TIMES IN A SMALL RURAL TOWN

Across the four interviews Toni spoke about what it was like to live on a farm in a dairying district that is confronting major issues of social and environmental sustainability. She speaks not only about changes in the landscape, but changes in the social and economic life of a small rural community. I have edited, pared and minimally reassembled her narrative as a 76-line transcript poem. The first stanza begins with a list of absences.

It’s changed over the years
 There’s very few farms left
 On the Golden Mile
 (where the most milk was produced per head of cow)
 The milk factory was a huge part of the town
 but only a very small part is still open.
 It’s still a very friendly town
 but a lot of things have gone
 the Shire offices
 two banks
 the engineers’ office
 the bull farm
 all the major things
 have closed
 and gone
 from the town

Toni names businesses and services that no longer exist, partly as a result of the effects of drought, partly a result of regional government restructuring, and partly because people are moving elsewhere as employment options diminish. As its vitality seeps away, the town and the dynamics of social and economic life change

irrevocably. Social practices change as a consequence, and Toni includes herself as someone who no longer shops locally, part of the dissipation of a once lively town: her embodied and everyday practices have changed in response to changes in the place where she lives. She regrets the inevitability of extending her “activity spaces” (Massey, 1994) to other towns where the resources are more plentiful, but at the same time she is hopeful that “people will come and live in the town” for its close-to-the-river environment, cheaper cost of living and quiet lifestyle, and that the “town won’t die because the factory has closed”.

... It’s gone through a lot of hardship
 The closures,
 And then the drought.
 Our hope is that people will come and live in the town
 Travel to work
 And that it won’t die just because the factory has gone.

In this narrative, just as in the reflective piece about the poppies, there is a sense of dying and regeneration: the town is in decline but there is nevertheless the possibility of revitalising and renewing it. For the local community, these changes constitute challenges to its image as a producer of dairy products, and as part of the broader Murray-Darling Basin, the “food bowl of Australia”. For Toni, these changes constitute challenges to her embodied self-in-landscape and her practices of everyday life. This leads me to consider how Toni addresses the question of how we ought to live, another strong storyline across her interviews.

Here I offer one excerpt from the narrative “How ought we to live?” This is an important narrative not just for what it shows of the questions Toni asks herself concerning what she ought to do, and could be doing, to contribute to a more sustainable and sustaining relationship with her place, and with the environment; it is the narrative where her identities as local, farmer, “greenie” and teacher intersect, and where she questions her embodied practices in relation to those identities and rereads her place and the environment.

Toni’s knowledge of the local environment and its ecosystems, and her understanding of environmental challenges in the Murray-Darling Basin, have been complicated by what she has learned through her teaching as well as her professional learning as a *Special Forever* coordinator. As a consequence, she is unable to take an unequivocal position on environmental questions that confront the local community. She is aware of the tension between the needs of people, agriculture and the environment, through oppositional discourses of resource management (efficiency, cost benefits), agriculture (productive use of the environment), and environment (protection and care of nature and its ecosystems). This tension is manifested in the questions she asks herself about what she ought to do as a teacher, and what she ought to do on the farm. She thinks about her day-to-day life from the point of view of someone who practices (or not) what she teaches. For example,

We’ve done a lot with salt prevention
 all those sorts of things,
 good farmers have to
 but I think there’s more that we can do

I've started to really think about
 what I've done
 what I can do.
 "I'm teaching this but how much am I actually doing as a farmer?"
 (My husband's a farmer, I can't say I'm too much of a farmer myself)
 I often stop and think
 "I wonder if we should be doing more on our own farm?"
 We need to plant more trees on our farm
 My husband has got a whole pile of small trees at the moment
 sitting outside our back door
 I took some of them into the classroom and we kept
 watering them
 I think it's really good if you model for the kids,
 don't just tell them what to do
 but actually do it yourself.
 I keep saying that we've got to go and plant those.
 We've got more good ideas,
 we need to put more into action.

Here Toni is caught in a complex of discursive positions, relations and practices: she speaks from the standpoint of "farmer" at one moment, teacher at another, and "greenie" at yet another. The differences inherent in these discursive positions, and the different versions of place ("the farm", "the bioregion of the Murray-Darling Basin" and "the environment") that they produce, complicate identity work and place relations. She is a teacher whose learning shapes her actions (enacted and potential) on the farm, and who wants to model "good practice" for the students she teaches; simultaneously she is a member of a farming community that uses scarce water resources to produce primary products; she also identifies with "good farmers" who take responsibility for preventing salinity on their properties. She waters small trees grown from seedlings to plant out on the farm, an act of replenishment. The inscription of body and place here is an ethical response to the landscape scarred by drought and damaged by farming.

I have outlined so far some of the complexity of embodied literacies and body-landscape relations that are inscribed in Toni's narratives of "Hard times" and "How ought we to live?" Beginning with "the actualities of people's lives as they experience them" (D. Smith, 1999, p. 96), *poiesis* has enabled me to construct a text that has an immediacy and power that speaks more directly to the reader than an "objective" account. It has enabled me to show that an embodied, engaged, organic relation to place is present in the teacher, even as she speaks from multiple subject positions as a local, as the wife of a dairy farmer, as a teacher and as a "greenie". I now turn to the question of how this plays out in her curriculum.

To answer this question, I draw on data collected on a field visit to the school. This visit provided an opportunity to photograph students' artefacts (pamphlets, fact wheels and information cubes), to collect examples of their multimodal photostories, and to interview most of the students in small groups. At the time the students were also giving oral presentations based on the research they had done on an endangered bird, fish or animal, a topic they discussed in the interviews. For my purposes here I have selected representative comments from three interviews because they clearly

indicate the ways in which the students were responding to what they were learning about endangered species and how they were thinking about themselves in relation to their place. Before turning to these interviews, however, I briefly outline the “Advocacy for Species” unit of work that Toni designed for her Grade 5/6 class, and suggest that one of the ways Toni inscribes place-identity relations is through this curriculum.

BODY-PLACE RELATIONS IN THE CURRICULUM

At the time of the interviews, Toni was interested in the idea of “advocacy for species”, a concept related to the way Aboriginal people take responsibility for the welfare of living things by adopting “totemic species” of birds and animals. It entails understanding “the needs and rights of that species and therefore must look at habitats, sources of food or nutrition, and all other things that a species needs to survive and thrive.” (Cameron, Mulligan & Wheatley, 2004, p. 155). Toni regarded this unit of work as a step towards a longer-term goal for the children’s research into local endangered species – to move from fact-gathering and information collecting to more public advocacy and action. This longer term goal reflects the shift in focus in Toni’s environmental curriculum over time, in parallel with the shift in the rhetoric and practice of *Special Forever*: from the celebration of special places in the tradition of literary English (which remains a valued way of knowing place), towards educating children as “future custodians”, a subjectivity that Toni understands is increasingly important in response to changes in the environment, the farming landscape, and in the town. Here is a glimpse of how her own changing and increasingly nuanced relation with place enters into her curriculum.

Making “the environment” a more explicit focus prompted an environmental communications curriculum that was more place-based and more overtly connected with local environmental issues. Toni’s unit of work was also multidisciplinary, inherently experiential, and connected place, self and community in significant ways. Place in this curriculum is “pedagogical” (Gruenewald, 2003b), p. 621). As Gruenewald (2003b) writes, “as centres of experience, places teach us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy”. This involves “[l]earning to listen to what place is telling us” (p. 645). Toni’s environmental communications curriculum is designed on such principles of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003a; Havlick & Hourdequin, 2005; Martusewicz & Edmundson, 2005; G. Smith, 2002). While she retains the importance of the students’ sensitivity to, and awareness of, their special places and local communities, she also moves the students (and herself) towards knowledge and action, to different knowledges of, and relations with, place.

Advocacy for species

The goals of Toni’s “Advocacy for species” unit of work were for the students to investigate a local threatened species and become advocates for their chosen species. They were to communicate what they had learned through written, multimedia (photo

story), artwork, as well as oral texts and River Health Conference presentation⁴. Discourses of science and the literary were counterpoised in this unit. Toni engaged the students in activities to build their knowledge of local endangered species and their knowledge of a range of information and scientific texts. For example, they recorded observations on field visits to the local fauna park, and in the classroom used a range of sources, print and web-based, for research to supplement their observations. They wrote information reports on a local bird or animal they chose to investigate, with details of its characteristics, habitat, food sources, distribution and reproduction. Some of these reports were designed as information pamphlets for visitors to the local fauna park. The students also constructed an information cube in a novel presentation of their written text. In addition, they designed multimedia texts – PowerPoint presentations with voiceover and animation.

The unit focussed not so much on species as an object of scientific study, but on species in relation to the students as literate, eco-ethical subjects. This aspect of Toni's unit foregrounds the subject English and creates a space in which the students could rewrite a scientific text into a literary one that reused and reorganised the factual information of the report in a different textual form – a script to be performed as an oral presentation. It is a curriculum space in which students are overtly positioned as ethical subjects, as actors and speakers for and about their species. This positioning has considerable resonance with the students in *and* beyond the classroom, as their passion to “save their endangered species” is heard in the interview excerpts below. The unit thus provided the students with different ways of learning about and from place, as well as different ways of inscribing body-place relations.

STUDENTS REINSCRIBING SELVES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The students willingly spoke about what they had been learning, the different texts they had produced, and how they felt about not only the endangered species they had been studying but their own responsibilities to those species. Two students spoke about the changes they were starting to make at home as a result of what they were learning about endangered species, and involving their families in more actively taking care of the environment.

Toby: I've been telling mum and dad about this, and they've bought some trees and they've planted a few because we've got this dam and it's really not any use to us, so we're making like a bit of a place where any animals can go.

Amanda: At my house we have a lot of trees around the house, because our house is in the middle and then there's trees all around it, and there's big logs and I told dad about it, and I told mum, and now mum and dad, the ones that are

⁴ The Murray-Darling Basin Young People's International River Health Conference is a biennial three-day conference that is held in a different regional centre each time. Hundreds of upper primary and lower secondary students attend along with local and international speakers, including environmental experts and politicians. The students themselves prepare and offer workshops to other students on issues related to river health.

out near the channel we don't like pick them up or anything, we're just leaving them there, and we've blocked off places because I'm getting a horse, and we've blocked off places where it won't be able to go so it doesn't like step on frogs or anything.

These students have taken seriously the proposition that each person can make a difference by their actions in everyday life, an overt message in Toni's environmental communications curriculum. The new knowledges that the students generated brought with them new practices and renewed relations of care for place.

Although Jason and Olly did not articulate specific practices that would address the habitat destruction and overfishing they had found out about, their concern for the plight of the Murray Cod and Wilgori Perch is evident in this exchange.

- Jason: [My endangered animal is] the Wilgori perch, it's a fish, but the trees grow in the water and people chop them out, so they can fish. And they move all the logs so they can go fishing and swim, and take their boats in the water, and that's why they're getting endangered.
- R: Because you have to think about all those things that change their habitat, then think about how you would make the habitat back to what it was?
- Jason: Yep!
- Olly: And we've been learning heaps more, like we've been doing that wheel and the cube.
- R: Tell me some of the things you learnt from doing that.
- Olly: Well, some of the things that I've learnt just from drawing on it, or just some facts about the Murray Cod?
- R: Some facts ...
- Olly: Oh, well, I learnt that I reckon they would have got endangered in the...is it the Goulburn, when you go over from Moama to Echuca, is that the Goulburn or the Murray?
- Jason: Murray!
- Olly: Oh yeah, well there was 147 tons of Murray Cod from just one port, and that was Moama, 147 tons.
- R: Wow! How long ago was that?
- Olly: In 1883 ...
- Olly: With the Murray Cod, well people have got wing nets, and they put them across the river, down the stream, and they go downstream and you go straight into it, and then you pull it up and you have a look, there's Murray Cod.
- Jason: And that's why they're getting endangered.
- Olly: Yeah!

Both Olly and Jason were aware of the causes of depleted fish stocks and the need to take action, albeit unspecified. Several students commented in similarly general ways. However, what is the important here is that the students have taken onto themselves the responsibility to act on what they have learned. Sometimes that action was conceptualised in terms of the physical work of revitalising the environment as indicated in Melissa's and Toby's comments above. Sometimes it was conceptualised in terms of effectively communicating what students are learning beyond the school. To this end, one of the design and writing tasks the students completed was an information pamphlet that would eventually be distributed to visitors at the local fauna park.

Ella's response to my question about what they had learnt that was important to them personally as they researched their endangered species went straight to the heart of the matter.

- R: You've mentioned that you know a bit more about your environment and what sorts of effects certain things have on it. Have they been the really, the highlights of what you've learnt so far do you think, or are there other things that have been really important to you, personally? What would you say are some of the really important things that you've learnt?
- Ella: That we need to save these animals because, like, when you think about it, there is 12 in our area ... There's 12 main animals in Tongala, and that's only Tongala, it's tiny, so imagine how many there are in Australia, it's quite sad.
- James: Apparently I found out that Australia is one of the worst countries for endangered animals.
- R: Yep! And so that makes you feel sad?
- James: Yeah!
- Cate: Yeah!
- R: An inspired to do something?
- James: Yeah – it's not like a game.

These students are well imbued with the understanding that what they are learning matters, that how people relate to places and the environment matters. James' sobering comment at the end of this excerpt emphasises the gravity of the issue of endangered species as he understands it. For these students the environment is not "out there" to be studied. Nor are places and the environment "special" just in a poetic, romantic or literary sense. They are "special" because, as Toni's narratives show, we are intimately connected with the places we inhabit and the ecosystems that sustain all life. These young students have had an opportunity to engage with a curriculum that foregrounds reading (the semiotics of) place, and that constitutes literacies as ways of perceiving and acting in the world.

Over time, agency and advocacy have become increasingly important in Toni's everyday life and in her teaching as she aims to equip students for a world that is confronting serious social and environmental problems, a world that is more and more defined by global politics and economies that have serious consequences in small communities. Toni's curriculum incorporates inscription (Davies, 2000) – acts of reading and writing the environment and relations to place. It makes available to her students the possibility of acting as "future custodians" of a particular, actual location in the Murray-Darling Basin. She focuses on learning and literacies that shape how they might live and act differently to manage more equitably the scarce resources of the Basin to protect the lifewaters of the River itself, cognisant of relations between their place and other places across the Basin, and their responsibilities to act for the environment.

CONCLUSION: A TEACHER IN A PLACE

In this article, I have explored some of the ways in which "belonging with/in landscape" (Davies, 2000, p. 11) is achieved in Toni's narratives of place. There are tensions around her multiple identities and her multiple relations with place; she

addresses awkward questions about how she ought to live in a place with which she is connected deeply, a place that is in flux. Moreover, her relations with place are played out at multiple levels – the farm, the local town, the Basin and broader national and global geographies – each of which shape her environmental communications curriculum.

I began with *poiesis*, not because Toni is necessarily “poetic”, but because it allowed me to construct a sense of a teacher in an actual place, and to give due regard to the complexity of embodied relations with place that typically are relegated to background information. Indeed, as Davies (2000, p. 23) writes, “bodies and landscapes might be said to live in such complex patterns of interdependence that landscape should be understood as much more than a mere context in which embodied beings live out their lives”. In my work, the delicate task of rewriting Toni’s narratives as transcript poems is an attempt to “preserve the presence of the active, experiencing subject” (D. Smith, 1987, p. 105) and to take this presence into my interpretation of her curriculum. This sense of “a teacher teaching in a *place* ... that matters to the people who inhabit it” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004, p. 388), is a challenge to education research and policy that tends to overlook the everyday experience of living in a particular place. Yet the intertwining of place and identities, bodies and landscapes, as I have come to understand it through Toni’s narratives, significantly shapes aspects of classroom curriculum. Toni’s curriculum offers the students resources for reading and writing place in new ways, and make possible more nuanced relations of care for place in their day-to-day lives. This work, which has brought together a teacher’s life as *poiesis*, along with the kind of curriculum she creates, demonstrates the connections between bodies and places, literacies and the literary, that shape us all.

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