Earthwork as metaphor for belonging: Implications for heritage practice

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Abstract

Herbert Flugelman created a sculpture comprising six large aluminium tetrahedrons, which in 1975 he buried in Commonwealth Park, Canberra. Flugelman’s reasons for burying the sculpture were never fully explained. We can only imagine why the sculpture was entombed and what the act of burial represented. In this paper I draw on Flugelman’s provocative installation and the act of burial to reflect on the idea of belonging. Belonging and place-attachment are concepts that heritage practitioners seek to unearth, to make conscious and comprehensible. There is a tendency in heritage practice to view attachment (or ‘association’ in Burra Charter terms) as bonding between people and place, and thus to separate emotions and feelings from material things. Academic work in the humanities has long sought to break down binaries of material and immaterial, mind and matter. I suggest that viewing assemblages of humans, places and things as entangled or folded into one another – akin to distributed agency – requires heritage practitioners to reconsider the idea of belonging. I argue for belonging as a form of accommodation, rather than human-centred sentiment or place-centred connectivity, and consider implications for heritage practice.

Introduction: placing attachment

My interest in place-attachment and belonging lies in the way the idea is conceptualised in the field of heritage studies and applied in heritage conservation practice. How is place-attachment constructed? What are the challenges? Place-attachment for psychologists, geographers, sociologists and heritage practitioners is typically conceptualised as a process of bonding that occurs between an individual (or group) and place (Altman & Low 1992; Giuliani 2003; Scannall & Gifford 2010). A conspicuous omission in this framing is the role of material things (natural materials or culturally produced objects). In psychology, for example, place-attachment is usually investigated separately from ‘possession attachment’ despite the recognition of strong commonalities between possession, place and interpersonal attachment styles (Belk 1992; Kleine & Baker 2004; McBain 2010). The exclusion of material things in concepts of place-attachment stands in marked contrast to scholarship in the humanities and social sciences on people/things relations (e.g., Barad 2007; Hicks 2010; Hodder 2012; Ingold 2011; Latour 2005; Miller 2005).

Based on my current doctoral research (Brown 2014), I propose a definition of place-attachment as a distributed property that emerges through the encounters and entanglements of individuals (or groups), things and place. This meaning is underpinned by a view that each person, place and thing can be conceptualised as uncontained rather than as stable and separate entity. Thus, rather than conceptualising a person as a singularly bounded
psychological subject, each human can be theorised as extending beyond their physical body (e.g., skin and nervous system) via, for example, affective processes (Venn 2010; Siegel 2012, 2-10; see also literature on the extended mind, e.g. Malafouris & Renfrew 2010; Menary 2010). Rather than viewing place as fixed, bounded or rooted (i.e. a physical location with spatial coordinates and the locale of something such as a structure or event), a place can be viewed as unbounded because it comprises a range of associations and heterogeneous meanings ‘distributed’ through networks of human actors (see Cresswell 2009; Malpas 1999). Finally, rather than conceptualising material things as inanimate, they can be viewed as having active power (variously framed as agency, affect and capacities) distributed in ways that co-produce, or mutually constitute, humans and human action (Barad 2007; Jones & Boivin 2010).

The concern of this paper is the way in which heritage studies conceptualises, and heritage practice identifies, place-attachment and belonging. My approach to contrasting place-attachment as people-place bonding versus entanglement between assemblages of people-place-things is to draw on processes of personal encounter and experiential understanding. To do this I present two narratives: one a metaphor and one a case study. I use these stories to tease out issues and challenges for heritage practice in the recognition and construction of place-attachment and then touch on a number of ways in which heritage practitioners might attend to them.

**Something about Bert**

**Saturday 8 March 2014.** Cockatoos screech loudly, periodically challenging the sounds of Canberra’s Saturday morning traffic as it, the traffic, flies along Parkes Way, a roadway flanking Commonwealth Park’s northern edge. Within the park, some thirty metres northwest of Nerang Pool, is a low concrete plinth, set amongst verdant greenness and downslope of a copse of pines. Attached to the weathered plinth is an aluminium sign, on which is a barely discernible image incorporating a bulldozer, a deep trench and a sculpture. The sign explains that *Earthwork 1975* is buried in an unidentified spot, an unmarked grave, in the park. Passers-by, even the cockatoos, show little interest in the thing. However I am drawn to the plinth’s tale. (Steve Brown, field notes)

I begin with a story. **Something about Bert.** The story begins in Sydney, travels to Melbourne and Adelaide and involves a burial, a funeral of sorts, in Canberra. The narrative is about a sculpture named *Tetrahedra*, subsequently transformed into *Earthwork*, created by Herbert (Bert) Flugelman, who died at the age of 90 in early 2013. Flugelman is best known for his huge, shiny, geometric public sculptures in stainless steel that dot Australia’s cities: *Spheres* in Adelaide, the *Dobell Memorial* in Sydney, and *Cones* in the National Gallery of Australia’s sculpture garden in Canberra. *Tetrahedra* was a huge sculpture constructed in 1970 at The University of Sydney. It comprised six large connected tetrahedra (a four-sided triangular pyramid), fabricated from aluminium. The surfaces of the sculpture were highly polished in order to engage the viewer so that his/her reflection became temporarily part of, and thus a participant in, the work. *Tetrahedra* was first exhibited in the Hawthorn City Art Gallery, Melbourne, then in the National Gallery of
Victoria’s sculpture garden, then at a private home in Hunters Hill, Sydney, and finally in the forecourt plaza of the Adelaide Festival Centre.

By 1975, Flugelman recognised the shortcomings of aluminium: it inevitably lost its shiny surface and thus its reflective and viewer-participatory properties. Flugelman was approached by Tom McCullough, then-director of an art and technology festival in Canberra, to undertake an ‘earthwork’ for the event. Flugelman decided to bury Tetrahedra as part of an art installation. The sculpture was subsequently entombed in a bulldozer-cut trench 20 metres long, six metres wide and eight metres deep in Commonwealth Park – near Nerang Pool and beside Lake Burley Griffin (Figure 1). A documentary account of the burial was installed at the site for one week following the event, after which time it was removed. The now-entombed Tetrahedra came to be marked by plaques, including the aforementioned aluminium sign on a concrete plinth.

Tetrahedra was thus transformed and Earthwork, according to biographer and gallery owner Peter Pinson (2008), became a material landscape setting and a locale (Cresswell 2009) of community memory. Flugelman ‘imagined that over time, as the aluminium decayed, there would be cavities – negative spaces – left in the soil. These cavities would stand testimony to the lost objects’ (Pinson 2008: 24). Twenty-three years after Earthwork was created, Flugelman returned to Canberra to reawaken Canberra’s cultural and material memory of Earthwork. As part of the Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial in 1998, he exhibited the work Six Tetrahedrons Revisited, comprising six, four metre-high inflated polythene pyramids that bobbed on the watery surface of Nerang Pool.

The story of Bert Flugelman and Tetrahedra is a story of metamorphosis. I am drawn to the biography of Earthwork as a metaphor for the idea of place-attachment: What is visible on the surface? What lies hidden? What is community memory? Can it be reawakened? What is tangible and intangible in the Tetrahedral/Earthwork mixture?

Something about Dorothy

In the summer we made daisy chains out of wild clover and necklaces and bangles from the red berries off briar bushes … Sometimes we wrote ‘Merry Christmas’ in big letters on a piece of cardboard and put holes all the way around the writing about ¼ inch apart; then with Ever Lasting Daisies you put one down one hole and up the next hole and so on. The finished masterpiece hung above the door. (Dorothy Constance, personal communication, 2 November 2012)

Here is another story, Something about Dorothy. Dorothy Constance retains a deep affection for Old Currango, a pastoral outstation within Kosciuszko National Park. It was her childhood home. Her family lived there when her Dad, Harcourt Reid, worked for the Dingo Destruction Board. Dorothy spent her childhood years, from age three until ten, at Old Currango. She retains some of the few surviving box camera photos that her mother, Vera Reid, took at the place (Figure 2). The child’s tea set Aunty Molly Taylor gave her one Christmas (Figure 3) sits in a display cabinet in the lounge room at Dorothy’s home in Cooma. The circa 1920s, ‘Made in Japan’, tea set is made from porcelain. It is hand painted with images of a curious looking cat and pretty flowers positioned behind a wood picket fence. Dorothy never got to play with the tea set as a child. She had three younger brothers and none of them wanted to share play-tea. Vera kept the set for Dorothy and only gave it back to her when Dorothy married. Occasionally Dorothy’s grandchildren are allowed to play with the tea set, though one of the cups had to be repaired after a granddaughter dropped it.

It was forty years after the Reid’s left Old Currango before Dorothy re-visited the place. She and her brother Jack went there in 1983. Dorothy recalled that the place was a mess. She was surprised by the scale of place—the distance from the old front gate to the verandah and the size of the house. ‘So little; so little’, she said. The place had felt so roomy to kids mucking about. The world was bigger in Dorothy’s recollections of childhood.

In 1983 the cast-iron stove that used to be in the kitchen at Old Currango was missing. Vera Reid had baked bread in the wood-fired stove twice a week for eight years. Someone had taken or
stolen the stove. Dorothy said: ‘People are mean’. When Dorothy told me of this meanness she expressed disappointment. For her the stove evoked pleasurable memories of childhood and life on the Gurrangorambla Flat. The missing stove provoked anguish. Implicit memories, that is memories outside of conscious awareness, formed in Dorothy’s childhood were involuntarily revived and ‘childhood emotional states re-lived’ (Morgan 2010: 13): memories of the smell of fresh-baked bread and the taste of hot bread and home-made butter. Things matter. Even absent things matter.

**Something about place-attachment**

**HERCON Criterion (G).** [A place has] Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural and spiritual reasons.

I turn now to place-attachment, to say something about place-attachment. How is place-attachment conceptualised in the field of heritage practice? In this discussion my focus is on Australian historic heritage (i.e. cultural heritage of the period after 1788).

To ascribe cultural significance to historic heritage, Australian heritage systems typically adopt a thresholds-based values approach, where the values attributed to place are assessed against a series of criteria to qualify for local, State or national heritage status. For a place to meet one or more criteria it must either be an outstanding or rare example, or a representative example (that is, derives its value from the extent to which it can act as an exemplar of a class of place, Harrison 2010: 26). In this approach, place-attachment is recognised as a social value and is generally conceptualised as intangible heritage (HERCON Criterion (G) for social significance quoted above; Queensland Heritage Council 2006; Australian Heritage Council 2009). Typically, as for example in the HERCON criterion, social value is framed as ‘association’, a term defined in Burra Charter terminology as meaning ‘the connections that exist between people and a place’ (Australia ICOMOS 2013, Article 1:15).

To my mind, two challenges arise from HERCON Criterion (G) and the Burra Charter definition of association. First, they implicitly construct people (that is, communities or cultural groups) and place (that is, a physical location with spatial coordinates and the locale of something) as separate entities. In other words, for the purpose of constructing the idea of belonging, place is represented as spatiality and people as sociality (Dovey 2010: 3-6). Thus place-attachment is framed as an interaction or a ‘process’ of bonding (or association) between two distinct entities: that is, bonding is an interactional process that enables place-attachment (Milligan 1998).
Second, the thrust of wording in the statements on social value and association lays emphasis on the place as having special connectivity with a group (rather than the reverse or even equivalence), thus locating the weight of affection as residing in the place and emanating toward the community or cultural group. This reading may seem pedantic, perhaps unintended, at one level but it is also revealing because historically in heritage there has been a tendency to view objects and fabric as having intrinsic or inherent value(s) residing in the material (Byrne et al. 2001: 55-58) rather than the opposite: that is, viewing values as socially constructed meanings residing in individual humans and collectively in groups of people. From the latter perspective, it would seem more reasonable to locate the weight of feelings of attachment in a cultural group and toward a place, though recognising that a place in and of its material self is not passive in its affective connections with humans.

What might be read from this appraisal is that when heritage conservation discourse is place-driven and interactionist, it conceptually locates humans outside of and separate to material things and landscapes. This is a particularly attractive view from a heritage management perspective because it supports a separation of people from place, whether cultural heritage place or near-natural place. People constructed as external, rather than mutually constituting, in the construction of place can thus be positioned as external in the practice of place management. It is the operational consequence of this conceptual position, one that I have observed to have negative consequences for people’s wellbeing (Brown 2011), that concerns me.

My two comments on the ways place-attachment is typically conceptualised in heritage conservation can also be applied to current models in, for example, environmental psychology. For example, psychologists Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford (2010: 2) propose a tri-partite model of place-attachment, a person-process-place framework that incorporates place as both physical space and social construct and recognises that attachment occurs at individual and group levels and may extend across social and spatial scales. However, the process dimension of place-attachment in the Scannell and Gifford framework is represented as entirely psychological: that is, characterised by emotion, cognitive and behaviour components. The psychological process has equivalence with the heritage notion of association in that both separate place and people in the conceptual construction of place-attachment. Psychology privileges people. Heritage emphasises place.

**Something else about place-attachment**

I turn now to something else about place-attachment. To address the challenges I have outlined, I draw on work being undertaken across the humanities and social sciences: in particular the paradigm of co-evolution, co-production and co-enactment that focuses on entanglements of people-place-things assemblages rather than interactions between pre-existing, separate entities of people and place (Barad 2007; see also Blackman 2012; Hodder 2012; Thomas 1991). This former meaning frames place-attachment as an emergent and relational force that arises out of an assemblage of uncontained humans, nested places and active things. The meaning resists conceptualising belonging as bonding or association that arises from the interactions of pre-existing entities (as in the ‘heritage model’ and ‘environmental psychology model’). The notion of place-attachment as a distributed property, akin to a form of distributed agency, draws on a Deleuzian ontology of becoming-in-the-world in preference to the Heideggerian notion of being-in-the-world (Dovey 2010: 6): that is, place-attachment as vibrant, active and continuously co-constituted versus passive, fixed and contained. This is of course a simplified distinction, one that masks how assemblages or systems oscillate between periods of equilibrium (being) and disequilibrium (becoming). Nevertheless, the distinction is a useful one for the purpose of this discussion.

Returning to the installation Earthwork, is it possible to separate Tetrahedra from the huge earth-filled trench? Is the buried sculpture separable from the burial? As the aluminium corrodes and disintegrates, as earth slowly trickles into the pyramid shaped voids, where is the separation between what was and what is becoming? Becoming, in the Gilles Deleuze sense, is a notion that resists: (1) the construction of fixed and stable entities; (2) the idea that place exists solely

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as physical space; and (3) ideas of spatiality and sociality as silos or separable categories in notions of place-attachment.

And what of Dorothy’s absent stove? I think of the absent stove as part of the realm of the sensual, experience and emotion. Two notions concerning the material and sensuous dimensions of memory and belonging underpin this view. First, the anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1998) discusses the entangled histories of objects and life stories and shows how memory is not necessarily exclusively tied to words and spoken narratives. Danish ethnologist Lisa Rosén Rasmussen (2012: 115) also makes this point about material objects entering the memory process, arguing that objects take the interviewer and interviewee ‘beyond an exclusively linguistic understanding of memory’ because materiality is part of a non-verbalised storyline. Thus, bound up with material things like the stove and toy tea set are significant aspects of Dorothy’s history, her connections with Old Currango, childhood and beyond. These tangible things, ‘memory objects’, are active and agentic in transferring to the present experiences of the past.

A further point concerning the connections between objects and the senses relates to sensual aspects of memory. The absent stove enables Dorothy to recollect certain smells (Vera’s fresh baked bread) and tastes (home-made butter and cherry jam). Pleasurable stove-memories are simultaneously associated with feelings of pain and sadness. Thus there is a tactile, sensory and embodied character to memory as it relates to things (Paterson 2007; Pink 2009).

Archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012: 15) finds it useful to think of things as both material stuff, ‘solid entities made or used by humans’, as well as thoughts and feelings, smells and sounds: that is, things as flows of matter, energy and information. This definition of things, things as ‘gatherings’ (Olsen 2013: 209), recognises that relationships between humans and things are deeply entangled. I am inclined to adopt Hodder’s definition of things because it fits well with the material and sensuous dimensions of memory that I have touched on here. It makes locating place-attachment exclusively in the human estate or in place or in materials impossible.

**Somewhat of a conclusion**

An implication for heritage practice and heritage management of these interlacings of memory, life-histories and things is that the distinctions between tangible and intangible are, at the very least, blurred (Smith & Akagawa 2009). To separate the architectural or archaeological value of Old Currango from the story of its missing stove and Dorothy’s experience and feelings is to misrepresent, even disrespect, place-attachment. It is a task of heritage practice, in my view, to reveal the humanity of place by making visible feelings of love, grief, pleasure, security and identity. Place is not a passive backdrop on whose stage human emotions are performed: people, memory objects and things as well as places are simultaneously material and immaterial, tangible and intangible. Fabric is family as much as family is fabric.

I am very fond of Flugelman’s *Earthwork*. Perhaps because I am an archaeologist I am attracted to entombment and burial. Perhaps as an ex-physical theatre artist I am attracted to performance, to the way in which artist Bert Flugelman performed the last movement of *Tetrahedra* by installing it within an imagined ancient landscape and within the modernity that Canberra represents. I like not knowing the precise location of the burial site and I like that Flugelman did not document his intended meaning of the work, the way entombment made a shiny sculpture continue to exist in unseen worlds. It is hard to know where *Earthwork* begins and ends and to what extent individuals or collectives feel a sense of attachment to the thing. It is enigmatic.

Thus, conceptualising place-attachment as a distributed property across assemblages of people-place-things, like the mixture that is *Earthwork*, necessitates the heritage practitioner to take a holistic view of and re-imagine the world. It is in the idea of entanglement (as well as recognition and respect) that I see opportunities for an inclusive heritage management practice, where neither place nor people is privileged, but that they, along with material things, are given some degree of equivalence.
Epilogue: outing a toolbox

Since it seems a little mean to critique a matter of concern and simply leave it at that, I include a short epilogue which outlines some of the approaches I am currently exploring that seek to address challenges raised in the paper. My methodological explorations aim to tease out the resonances of re-conceptualising place-attachment as entanglement. How might place-attachment as distributed property be operationalised in the real world of heritage practice?

First, arising out of the matter of different conceptual positions is the use of alternative vocabularies (Table 1). Typically, as I have discussed, the language of heritage practice expresses place-attachment as bonding or association. It is clear that I find this language problematic: words used in current heritage practice to describe belonging do not mesh with my conceptual and experiential understanding of the phenomena. A static view of attachment is antithetical to a notion of attachment as entanglement in which assemblages of individuals are uncontained, place is unbounded and nested, and things are alive. In the table below, I present what I see as the vocabulary typical of heritage practice concerning place-attachment versus an alternative vocabulary, which I am currently exploring and formulating.

Second, I touch on methods that I have found useful in the process of documenting and describing place-attachment. Much of the work I have undertaken to date draws on ethnographic approaches including oral testimony, participant observation and auto-ethnography. Since these approaches are well documented in the literature (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson 2007; Pink 2009), I focus here on three additional methods: material histories, empathy and narrative.

One way I have sought to counter an absence of objects in conceptions of place-attachment, such as the stove (a doubly-absent object) at Old Currango Homestead, has been to focus on the role of material things in people’s feelings of belonging. I have found it useful to investigate the biographies and entanglements of material things to create ‘object lessons’, to borrow a phrase from the work of Jane Lydon and Tracy Ireland (2005). It is an approach that emphasises material histories; a term used by anthropologist Ann Brower Stahl (2010: 151), which she distinguishes from ‘histories of materials’. Material histories, Stahl argues, ‘bring into view the bundling of people, things, and ideas past and present’ and thereby elicit configurations across humans, non-humans and the material traces of history. Applying a material histories approach to my experiential understandings of place-attachment has provided a constructive pathway for demonstrating the vibrant and spirited role of material things in the person-place-thing assembly.

A second approach that I am exploring is empathy. The reason I draw on empathy is because, as philosopher Derek Matravers (2011) discusses, ‘empathy can give us knowledge’ and is thus
Empathy is therefore relevant to representing people’s experiences of place-attachment because it is a method by which heritage practitioners can derive information, particularly in relation to emotion and feelings. By empathy I mean being emotionally affected by someone else’s emotions and experiences and/or emotionally affected by an object and creatively imagining oneself in another person’s or thing’s situation. This meaning differs from traditional meanings of empathy, which in the English-speaking world are generally restricted to the human domain (e.g. Coplan & Goldie 2011). However it is my contention, a view that is informed by my long-time experience as an archaeologist, that empathy should be extended to the realm of non-humans. This view draws from ideas of ‘material memory’ (Olivier 2011), that artefacts have life-histories (Kopytoff 1986), and because of the liveliness and vibrant materiality of things (Bennett 2010). To my mind Dorothy Constance’ entanglements with the absent stove and Bert Fludlman’s Earthwork have all these qualities and thus enable me to empathetically imagine past situations, both as events and as emotionally charged experiences.

A useful way of approaching empathy for the purpose of heritage studies is as a form of experiential understanding (Coplan 2011: 17-18). By this I mean that experiential understanding provides an observer/participant – such as the heritage practitioner – with some knowledge of another person’s or group’s thoughts and feelings that can be used to describe and explain the emotional character of people-place-things assemblages; and to do this in a way that is different from expert opinion and scientific explanation. Philosopher Amy Coplan describes how experiential understanding works.

While all scientific theories involve representations from a third-person point of view, empathy involves representations from a first-person point of view. Through empathy, we represent the other’s experience by replicating that experience … We attempt to share the other’s perspective … [Empathy] may provide what no third-person form of scientific understanding can: understanding of another person from the ‘inside’ (Coplan 2011: 18).

The idea of ‘understanding from the inside’ brings me to a third and final method I am investigating with regard to heritage practice and place-attachment: the use of narrative structure and forms. In general, narrative refers to a story that can be told, a representation of events (Goldie 2012: 2). For philosopher Peter Goldie,

A narrative is a representation of events which is shaped, organized, and coloured, presenting those events, and the people involved in them, from a certain perspective or perspectives, and thereby giving narrative structure – coherence, meaningfulness, and evaluative and emotional import – to what is narrated (Goldie 2012: 8).

A key feature of narrative in this meaning is that narrative structure gives emotional weight to a story. Emotion, I argue, is typically absent from concepts and applications of place-attachment in heritage practice. In this regard Coplan, quoted above, comes close to the mark when she recognises that ‘scientific theories involve representations from a third-person point of view’. That is, scientific writing is constructed as authoritative and expert, intended to reveal absolute and intrinsic ways in which the world-according-to-science works. Heritage practice, while for the most part not empirical science, works in a similar expert way by claiming to reveal intrinsic attributes and values that are judged to make a place, and its associations, significant.

Thus narrative, I argue, has a role to play because it can inject humanity and emotional weight into ways that belonging is articulated in heritage practice. I am not suggesting that this is a simple task, but in my view it is a necessary one because, if our work does not engage with people’s emotions and feelings, there is the risk that people will not value and consequently care for important heritage places. If it is acknowledged that modern concepts of heritage recognise all parts of the landscape as alive with cultural meaning (Brown 2010: 5), then recognising and documenting people’s attachments to land/seascapes, including through the way significance is represented and presented in values statements, is necessary in garnering support for sustaining heritage futures.
It is not my intention to suggest that heritage practitioners do not think about or use methods such as material histories, empathy or narrative in their practice, but rather my intention is to apply these methods to a concept of place-attachment that is not typical practice in heritage studies. And thus my explorations of ways that place-attachment as entanglement can be put into practice is, as they say in the movies, to be continued.

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