Performing Geographies: Between Photographs and Footprints

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Susan Sontag wrote in On Photography (1973) p8-9 that:

> Recently, photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing—which means that, like every mass art form, photography is not practiced by most people as an art. It is mainly a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.

The use of photography to punctuate walking as an act of recording a political will has a long and multifaceted history. I am less concerned with building layers of complexity on top of an existing and well-documented history than I am with going for a walk… and investigating or thinking through what going for a walk might mean in the anthropocene (to me), and in regional New South Wales.

… I have been walking now for about 3 hours and 42 minutes to arrive at my final destination: the Ingalba Nature Reserve, 17.8 kilometres by my GPS counting west-south-west on foot from the New South Wales regional town of Temora. The nature reserves sits at the bottom of a long vanished inland sea, and with it remnants of a drastically changing land, not just in recent economic or political shifts of land usage, but a real sense of a deep and geologic time. I will return to this place later as an important space for thought about my practice in walking in the anthropocene, but it is better to recount my journey as being important in performing the whole geography, or to raise questions of photographs and footprints. I am of course here referring to the common ecotouristic quotation to take only photographs & leave only footprints, an aspirational ideal, but something that will prove impossible for me… I begin by thinking on our relationship to land and its politics; I am immediately reminded of John Brinkerhoff Jackson’s thoughts in Landscapes: Selected Writings of J. B Jackson (1970) p82-83 when he says:

> I define a landscape not as scenery; which is the customary use of the word, but as an organization of man made spaces. Those are the things that have an immediate sympathetic appeal, at least to me.

> I’m not interested in the natural scenery here, I’m interested in what other men have done, or tried to do on the face of the earth; and this design changes from season to season, and from year to year and from generation to generation and is eventually obliterated and replaced by another design. This is the history of the landscape.
All of the places I will pass as part of my walk have been changed or designated by humans for specific political reasons; there is no strict nature here. As part of my process of generating new thoughts about place I have walked from the working regional township of Temora [Fig1] a place that feels deeply rooted in a classic Australian vernacularism. This is not a critique of the place as being out-dated, quite the opposite. I start with a routine; caffeine… rather than the same depressing flat white (but familiar enough to be acceptable) from a roadside café-chip-shop; I find a surprisingly fantastic long-macchiato (at a little place called green-seeds) before starting my journey along the townships streets. I feel an immediate connectivity and a sense of familiarity about this place, like I could be in any small regional township of the area. The air is a dense haze of grey with a thick scent of the burning off of stubble, mixed with a strange damp smell of Country Target™ air-conditioning. In the documentary film Figure in Landscape: A conversation with J. B Jackson (2012), Jackson says of his appreciation for vernacular landscapes:

> The small towns, the architecture, the lay out of the country side is very uniform… … and that is what I like, that is what I look for, repetition, composition, monotony, uniformity, classicism.

It is precisely this that is familiar, and comforting to me here. Like many other small towns it contains the same row of central retail outlets making concentrated use of the ground floor frontage one would expect to maximise patronage
from the passing tourist traversing the Goldenfields Way, a highway that spans a 113-kilometre length north-south between the Newell and Mid-Western Highways; a highway whose name gives no subtle clue to its original intent and purpose, rather a blunt object. This movement between ground floor real estate and shopper activity hides the reality of regional second floor neglect. Once the province of doctors, lawyers and all manner of moneyed gentry, the second storeys have lost their appeal in a race for horizontality. The doctors, lawyers and accountants have long since outgrown these premises or moved on and they no longer service the needs of the town or its citizens, I think for a moment as I walk, about the lives of those professions, and where they might be now. I think while I walk about the fetishization of the horizontal in agrarian architecture, and what that might mean for the future shape of our towns and cities… My mind returns again to Jackson and Figure in Landscape:

I think most people who travel and who are tourists are interested in uniqueness, they are interested in what is picturesque, and what is different but has a regional quality, which is something, which is different. I happen to be one of those, and I think we are very numerous who like sameness. Who like familiarity; as a matter of fact that is one of the characteristics of the American landscape, which is an indication we are a culture. That is why I never cease to be interested and I may say, respectful, of certain commonplace aspects of the American landscape that recur from California to main, Minnesota to Texas.

Does the same highway culture that spread a style by horse, rail and automobile play out across the Australian frontier equally?

I do like sameness.

At the centre of town the north-south of the Goldenfields Way crosses with the east-west Yass to Griffith linking road the Burley Griffin Way named for the American born landscape architect and planner. As is typical of any frontier bush town the main intersection of major travel routes features the regional post-office and the original courthouse buildings on adjacent corners. These two austere buildings are key civic reminders for the development of any frontline space, a post office to connect the frontier to the rest of the world, and the courthouse to remind us of civic duty or responsibility, and both to remind us of the word of law. Tucked just around the corner bathed in inarticulate neon lighting to maximise its highway/way view is the perpetual symbol of roadside economic power, the McDonalds Golden Arches™. The scent of poorly conditioned air of previous shop fronts gives way to the smell of cooking oil and the morning bacon/egg breakfasts, roadhouse java all mixed up with the petrol/diesel smell of idling tradies Utes.

As my path works south along Goldenfields Way, the multiple storey shop fronts and burger-joints quickly give way to cheaper and larger blocks of land, adorned with excessively large Colorbond™ sheds; each with equally excessive on-site shop-front parking places… I find myself walking down a space designed principally for the automobile, there are no footpaths here, this is a place you get to not on foot, but by the mixing of petrol, mechanics, electronics and rubber. This is the all-pervasive strip, an American style commodity space whose design, form and function followed the spreading and popularity of the automobile. Whether one is to drive-in or drive-through, what matters most is the capacity to undertake the tasks quickly. Again, there is a pleasure to be found in the familiarity of their design and their similar arrangements across the regions. Passing through such spaces, as a tourist, but a person of the regions, feels a little nostalgic, a kind of déjà vu, a sense of homeliness tinged with hard work and perseverance.

A heavy smell of rubber, oil and sweat punctuates the air.

After the large warehouses of the furniture shops, diesel garages and extensive storerooms: the horizontality of the town plan can be felt in full force. The suburban dwellings sweep out in mimicked Victorian style, a kind of federation afterthought. A new form of cheap housing has taken hold of the surroundings in much of regional Australia’s country towns, that of the transportable or demountable home. Speaking of a still familiar kind of vernacular character these speculative spaces allow the kind of flexibility of living nowhere and somewhere simultaneously. Never tied down to a
specific site or space these dwellings provide shelter and temporary residence to their owners (who might be gone tomorrow, like the lawyers, bankers and doctors of yesteryear in their second storey lofts). These houses appear like sad relics, with their sagging and depressed agapanthus, pseudo-manicured roses and occasional copse of jagged-edged hedge-trees.

People do live here.

I have thought multiple times before on what water restrictions mean for our mental health, what dirt instead of grass might mean for our wellbeing. I am reminded of something my partner said to me only two weeks ago about our one-year-old son, and our new home we share together in Regional Australia. She said: ‘All I want is for a patch of grass for Thomas to play on, he really likes being outside’… and every time I think of my young child experiencing the outside world behind the tempered glass doors of our living room, breathing conditioned air, playing with plastic toys, it makes me little melancholic… we do need a piece of green grass… but maybe we need to share that green grass with everyone (like a park) rather than own our own. Sometimes when I come home from work, I bring in gum leaves and sticks… I would prefer he play with those than another petroleum by-product tractor toy… now he is a bit older, we spend almost all of our time learning and sharing outside.

… I think of my son for quite some time as I walk… then I think of Susan Sontag p8-9:

> Through photographs, each family constructs as portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. It hardly matters what activities are photographed so long as photographs get taken and are cherished.

None so far have green grass.

…I have walked a reasonable distance along Goldenfields Way, turned down a small dirt road called McDougalls Road and on to the Back Mimosa Road before I realise just how far I have come. I am back in the reality of walking. It clearly rained last night. I make a note in my journal, it says:

> The smell of rain on dry soil; if there isn’t a word for this already there needs to be one; if there isn’t a cologne that smells like it, there needs to be one.

The word is Petrichor, a quick google shows me that it exists (the wonders of modern technology, demystifying ideas before they even get a chance to coalesce); I thought I was on to something… …it was apparently co-coined in 1964 by Isabel Joy Bear, an Australian. Of course it existed, and of course it included an Australian, it is such a familiar and delightful smell. Better thoughts followed yet, the smell of rain on soil is different everywhere, so this smell must be, it is, uniquely of this place. Mugga iron bark, black cypress on some gravelly and rocky sections of roadside; grey box and white cypress on slightly better soils; occasional dwarf she-oak (casuarina). I think to myself there might still be something in this… …I have an exhibition coming up at Eastern Riverina Arts office in Wagga Wagga, maybe I can recreate a sense of place, the smell of certain bushlands, a job for later in distilling essential oils. What if my photographs not only were of something visually, but were of something via scent… I’ll do this later. The truth is, I would return to my cold white office, place some eucalyptus leaves in front of the air conditioning outlet, and allow the smell to fill my room as I write these notes up… I write better in the ‘open air’.

My mind is back to Sontag again, on Photography p9-10:

> As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure. Thus, photography develops in tandem with one
of the most characteristic of modern activities: tourism. For the first time in history, large numbers of people regularly travel out of their habitual environments for short periods of time. It seems positively unnatural to travel for pleasure without taking a camera along. Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had. Photographs document sequences of consumption carried on outside the view of family, friends, neighbours. But dependence on the camera, as the device that makes real what one is experiencing, doesn’t fade when people travel more. Taking photographs fills the same need for the cosmopolitans accumulating photograph-trophies of their boat trip up the Albert Nile or their fourteen days in China as it does for lower-middle-class vacationers taking snapshots of Eiffel Tower or Niagara Falls.

Is this my grand tour? Temora to Ingalba Nature Reserve?

…I’m getting tired. It is time for morning tea. My pack is loaded with more camera equipment to ensure I am able to capture the experience of being anywhere than food, water or first aid devices to ensure my safe arrival. I ponder how necessary this is. How important is it to say ‘I was there’. I take a seat amongst an Acacia Baileyana… Cootamundra Wattle.

I try not to think of John Williamson, nope, there he is.

As I look through my pack for some food, I notice that a strange white sign features prominently on the other side of the road ‘Significant Roadside Environment Area’, I take a sip of water and think, when is a roadside insignificant? In New South Wales roadside areas comprise approximately 5% of the states total landmass, more than combined National Parks and State forests. Perhaps they could be more important. The sign serves its duty; I am reminded that walking on the side of the road is a political act. What I am doing here maybe, is no mere walk… what I am doing is exploring, through photography and walking the contemporary politics of space and mobility. The New South Wales road and roadside as microcosm for industrial intervention at the nexus of political, economic, environmental and cultural agendas in thinking, walking or driving through the anthropocene. I am using the road as literal line separating nature from technology. The road, central to the Australian economy is being re-explored by me as a physical and non-physical space for the interconnection of philosophies, I feel an uneasy or tense marriage between commercial and financial interests as environmental vestiges of genetic variation are forced in to uneasy balances, and in many cases, managed out of an equilibrium (if there ever was one). This stability and instability is explored as philosophical misalignment of potential values, to see the road not only through anthropocentric eyes, but also as the last fragmented corridors for genetic diversity, amongst flora and fauna and as home to some last ranges of remnant native vegetation (including a large proportion of threatened/endangered species) as hosting its own capacity to value outside its value to humankind.

My sandwich is white bread with cheese.

My seat is Diorite.

The cheese is limp and flaccid and sweating.

I wish I’d thought about this more when I was packing.

I raise the viewfinder of my camera cautiously to my left eye. Using my right index finger and thumb cycle through a selection of apertures and shutter speeds resting on an approximate exposure for my scene. In a split second I can seamlessly integrate with these mechanical functions and analyse the world spread out before me. My landscapes placed in a blender and whizzed up to a healthy shade of middle grey, typically about 18% reflectance in visible light. I execute my political will. I have decided that what was previously, through neglect, an unimportant site, now shall be displayed prominently through photography as a space given a new significance. These are my ‘significant roadside environment areas’, they are now also ‘Significant roadside cultural documents’… or are they just evidence of passing. Are they just un-processed ideas? Either way, it feels good. My walk is not just an ephemeral performance of politics,
environment, culture or economics; I have the documents to prove it.

Sontag would have an answer for this, she always does, On Photography p9-10:

A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience in an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs. The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel. Most tourists feel compelled to put the camera between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter. Unsure of other responses, they take a picture. This gives shape to experience: stop, take a photograph, and move on. The method especially appeals to people handicapped by a ruthless work ethic – Germans, Japanese, and Americans. Using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures.

An overly inquisitive crow lands on the fencing wire behind me, sending a little laser like shock sound along its taught metal lines. It sounds like a Storm Trooper™ blaster from star wars. The crow’s arrival signals I am in someone else’s territory.

It is time to keep moving.

… Maybe, I can make more sense of the world hidden behind a camera, than in just experiencing it. Maybe, I have those documents to prove it. I start to walk again. My mind turns to thoughts about this being just one large performance. What is the role of performance in the touristic/non-touristic walk, the role of walking in ecological stewardship and photographic perception including the designation of performed actions in walking to/from/without a destination (am I just doing what I would be expected to do in these spaces), what about walking with/without deliberate artistic intent? What if I didn’t record anything I did. I’m walking in time to a song that is in my head… balance, gate, rhythm, repetition, line and pattern are paralleled in performance walking and performance visual arts. The camera around my neck bounces against my sternum in time with the gate of my walk. My right shoe squeaks a little as I lift it from the asphalt… Is this all just about doing work.

I have arrived. I’m at Ingalba Nature Reserve. I don’t think I should photograph it. Doing so would feel too much like work. I think I just need to be there.

References

Jackson, John Brinkerhoff. Figure in Landscape: A conversation with J. B Jackson.
About the Author

Christopher Orchard is a Lecturer in Photography and interdisciplinary researcher in the School of Communication and Creative Industries at Charles Sturt University’s Wagga Wagga campus. Christopher’s research draws from a wide field of discourse on landscape health, natural resource management, trauma studies, terror management theory and broad art theory and culture to generate transdisciplinary dialogue on landscape issues utilising practice-led research methodologies. Christopher calls himself a ‘connectivist’, a research conduit for information between differing perspectives acting as intermediary to bring about landscape reconciliations, sustainabilities, new knowledge and opened discourse. Christopher Orchard is an internationally exhibiting photographer whose work is currently held in private and public collections globally.