



TRANSIENCE AND TEACHING: PLACE AND THE NEW PSYCHOANALYTIC SOCIOLOGIES OF TEACHING

Cathryn McConaghy
University of New England

ABSTRACT

Ask any teacher about their life as a teacher and they will begin with their experience of place. 'First I taught there and then I moved there', the matter of time often hazy or more peripheral to the story of place. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, becomings are matters of geography more than history, our lives punctuated by entries and exits and the challenges of territorialisation and displacement. Becoming is a dynamic of space and place. Swept up by or leaping in to the flow, we move across the folds of the map rather than occupying its fixed points. Teacher-becoming, in a Deleuzian sense, is a series of lines of flight, journeys through both exterior and interior spaces. The rural sociologist Urry (2000) suggests that the rate of flow, the volume of movements – of people, things and ideas – is more a feature of the current century than previous. Tied up with the commodification of things, space produces and consumes objects, including teachers. Hence through Deleuze's social geography and Urry's mobility sociology it is possible to reframe the notion of teacher movements in new ways, not as a problem for education, but an increasing phenomenon linked with teacherliness in the contemporary era.

RETHINKING PLACE AND MOBILITIES IN TEACHING

Much of the recent literature about rural teaching has focused on the problem of teacher mobilities – the fact that many schools are difficult to staff, teacher turnover is high and schooling is in a constant state of flux as a result (Roberts 2005). Some research has focussed on identifying the characteristics of long staying rural teachers with a view to developing systemic supports and teacher education reforms in response (Boylan 1993) while a host of research has sought to identify the incentives that encourage longer stays. That is, teacher transience is viewed as a problem with high financial and other costs for public education providers. While the contributions of such research to policy reforms and enhanced industrial conditions for teachers are significant, there is a sense in which certain taken-for-granted knowledges remain untroubled within these approaches. For example, in what ways are the time and place of teaching being theorised, how is teacher desire identified, how is loss and change in teaching understood, in what ways is composure rather than excitability viewed as desired stasis, and what is identified as provoking teacher transitions (McConaghy and Robertson 2006)?

If we are to believe the new rural sociologists such as Urry (2000) and others, flows of people across space and place are increasingly a characteristic of the new millennium; that is, increasing mobilities are natural social phenomena associated with new globalising conditions. Geophilosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that place and mobility are essential aspects of being in the world. Becomings are not so much historical as geographical; our subjectivities are matters of lines of flight or entries and exits within and across space. Further place theorists such as Lefebvre (1974) and de Certeau (1986) argue that all social practices, (and here we could include teaching practices such as pedagogy and leadership), are spatialised, that is, social

practices are produced in certain ways in certain places. Hence the Bush Tracks project has been interested in identifying the teacher learning processes and other practices that are produced in rural places. These may not be different to urban practices in the way we usually construct a rural-urban divide, but nonetheless it is useful to consider materialist place theory as the basis for considering: why these practices here?

Hence new mobility sociologies suggest that transience is a natural social phenomenon, rather than an abhorrent one, and place theorists argue that being and acting in the world, our selves and our practices, are place matters. Elsewhere we have suggested the significance of place for understanding schooling and teaching practices (McConaghy & Burnett 2002). But here we are interested in what the new mobility sociologies can offer by way of rethinking the issues of teacher movements in and across space and place. How can we think geographically or spatially about social phenomenon including teaching; and in what ways are the formations of teaching subjectivities linked to these lines of flight across spaces and places? What provokes a line of flight? What is the relationship between place, mobilities and teaching? This paper engages in an exploratory conversation about these questions in relation to transience, a key idea associated with contemporary rural teaching.

TRANSCIENCE AND TEACHING

Recently, studies of rural teacher demographics, teacher turnover and staffing such as R[T]EP, the Rural Teacher Education Project being conducted jointly by Charles Sturt University, the University of New England and NSW Department of Education and Training, have sought to inform rural teacher renewal and school succession planning (McConaghy & Burnett 2002). However, the Bush Tracks Research Collective, of which the author is a member, is concerned with the more intimate nature, at any rate the everyday lived reality, of rural teaching transitions. Our research is focussed on teachers' experiences of learning in rural contexts and the meanings they make of their experiences. Our conceptual approach, outlined in this paper with the support of rural teaching narratives and interview data, is to consider the nature of transience in teaching, with transience developed here in two senses – in the form of becomings and in the form of movements through space and time. Both senses of transience involve the development of different relationships with knowledge and different relationships with self and others. One moves through such relationships over time and place, pausing every so often to get attached, or even stuck, somewhere. That is, these relationships occur within specific social dynamics situated in geography and history. The concept of socio-spatial dynamics is used here to describe the movement of social practices through or within space and time, while the concept of social positionality signals their points of fixation. Whereas in some inland regions teachers lead more sedentary lives, fixed in place, so to speak, in others movement is central to experience. This continuum of fixity and movement can be said to take place in both geographical and symbolic realms. Our concern is to map these journeys and in so doing to understand more of the relationship between teaching and place.

Clifford's (1997) book *Routes* has contributed greatly to theories of journeys and social movement. Clifford asks, what happens when we begin with an assumption about human activity 'as constituted by displacement as much as by stasis' (p. 2)? The practices of displacement, he argues, emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extensions (p. 3). This links to Bernstein's notion of the

recontextualisation of pedagogical knowledge in which gaps emerge between the singulars and the regions, that is, new knowledge is generated within processes of recontextualisation (McConaghy et al. 2005). One cannot simply transfer or extend knowledge from one place to another without change taking place. Hence we are led to ask, in what ways do teacher journeys and movements constitute meanings about teaching, pedagogy and leadership? What new knowledge is generated in the practices of displacement?

The story of Meg's displacement is useful in this regard. Meg, a third year out teacher went from a remote Indigenous school, a scenario Meg described as having 'kids swinging from the rafters', to a small one teacher school in the green rolling hills west of the Great Dividing Range. On her first day at her new school as teaching-principal Meg encountered her class of seven children sitting quietly and attentively on the mat, eyes glued to her every move. In her own words she 'freaked out'. She froze for several minutes before them until the eldest boy enquired if she was all right. Replying 'no she wasn't,' Meg instructed the group to have quiet social time together while she stepped outside for a minute. Later Meg confided that the shock of the contrasts between the children at the two schools had completely undermined her sense of teacherliness. Her old knowledge in which classroom management was the focus of her teaching had failed her in the new context. Here, not only did Meg have to develop a new type of relationship with her students, she also had to develop a new type of relationship with knowledge and her own practice. The displacement was constitutive of the new meanings she was able to make about her own practices. This new meaning was not immediately obvious, but was deferred beyond the impact of the strong emotions evoked by the episode. Meg had to deal with the loss of her old certainties.

Freud's (1916) essay 'On Transience' attempts to understand the conditions of displacement and loss – why some people are able to deal with loss successfully, why others can never be consoled. Phillips (1999) develops Freud's arguments and links them to Darwin's interest in the adaptations of earthworms. As Phillips writes in his book, *Darwin's Worms*, both Darwin and Freud were interested in the idea of natural loss. Put differently, asking what loss is natural gives rise to important questions about the limits to politics. In rethinking impermanence and loss as linked to the limits of politics, one wonders about the degree to which policy interventions can ever stem the flow of teachers across schooling regions. Given the significant new knowledge generated in displacement, one begins to ask, should we try? The problem identified by Freud is that loss and grief are so often attached to transience – what is it that we have lost and can we be consoled, or consoled adequately? Elsewhere (in rethinking the life and work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, the New Zealand educator), I have argued that pedagogy emerges as a consolation to loss (McConaghy 2006). Indeed, in the interview with Meg it is also possible to see her emergent teaching-principal pedagogies as providing consolations for her losses, in her case associated with being a closeted lesbian in a small rural community. Not simply nor seamlessly closeted, Meg's teaching identity is lived out in the isolated community through numerous contradictions. During an afternoon tea with women she described as 'the old dears' in her community, one of them noticed a large rainbow flag on her lounge room wall. Not wanting to offend or confront her guest, Meg identified it as a Tahitian prayer flag. To which her guest responded, 'So you've gone a bit funny have you dear?'

Although Meg enjoyed the hidden meaning of the joke, here Said's (2000) identification of the losses associated with displacement in the form of exile are relevant. Unhomed, not here nor back there, the exiled self is located paradoxically. That is, a paradoxical identity is associated with such displacements; a richer, more complex (teaching) self emerges. When asked to identify her pedagogy, Meg responds, 'it's a Jekyll and Hyde show' to indicate the complexity of the teacherly scripts she performs. This also links to Clifford's (1997) elaboration of the formation of diaporica identities, identity formations in which multiple connections are sustained. Meg travels four hours to the coast frequently to visit her girlfriend and her mother. As a rural teacher, Meg has to sustain herself within multiple communities – and the complex socio-spatial politics and scripts for being produced in each.

TEACHER-BECOMING AND RURAL PLACES

Freud argued that impermanence confers value (Phillips 1999, p. 26). Not necessarily a progress story, nonetheless the impermanence of rural teaching confers its value. We all leave rural teaching, eventually, and usually remember it fondly, often as the place where we learnt to become a good teacher. I began my community education work in a remote community in Arnhem Land twenty-five years ago, being unable to find teaching work in the ACT. Bob Meyenn (2004, pp.125-126) remembers leaving Balmain Teacher's College in anticipation of his first appointment:

I remember clearly not having much of a clue as to where I should choose to go, but I was an avid enthusiast of the Sydney Royal Easter Show, particularly the buck jumping events. The best buck jumper of the time was Lloyd Bates from Gunnedah, so I thought to myself 'That sounds all right', and I put Gunnedah as my first choice. I was sent to a two-teacher school at Somerton... That was January 1963. Looking back, those three years at Somerton were certainly three of the happiest years of my life.

It is interesting to note what Bob remembers as pleasurable about the time: milking the jersey, learning to ride a pony, water skiing, learning to drink beer, pool and card tournaments at the local pub, teaching the kids to swim in the river, falling off his chair in class, and earning the trust of the community. Often though, rural teaching experiences are more complex or difficult affairs, our memories littered with losses as well as delights, with both equally formative. After three years, as he recounts, Bob moved on.

RURAL TEACHING'S EXCESSES

Teacher professional learning doesn't capture the experience of transition we wish to describe here, but certainly there is a sense in which one learns to become a teacher, or more accurately learns to perform as a teacher, and adopts teacherly affects. Similarly one learns what works in terms of pedagogies in rural schooling, and one learns what is required in leadership within rural contexts. Britzman's (1998) notion of learning as conflicts between old investments and new, following Anna Freud's notion of new editions of old conflicts, is useful for our purposes. But something else happens other than learning, an excess of learning, in rural teacher-becoming. Our notion of transience seeks to capture more of the embodied experience of teaching, of teaching in place, in

this instance in rural places, wherein the experience is more than learning. This notion of rural teaching as an excess of learning suggests a vital link between place and teaching, with place in part accounting for this excess.

That there is an excess of teacher learning presents significant challenges for teacher education and teacher professional learning strategies: important aspects of good rural teaching and good rural leadership belong in the realm of the experience of place and cannot be contained or prescribed within the teacher learning curriculum. Hence the value of rural teaching experiences such as 'Beyond the Line' in which student teachers are provided with opportunities to flirt with rural teaching (McConaghy and Bloomfield 2004) and 'Beyond the Bridge' where rural student teachers encounter themselves and complex south-western Sydney schools. One cannot prescribe the experience in advance, nor hope to capture the extent of learning in such programmes. The best that can be done is to map the experience, to develop cartographies of teacher-becoming, locating exits and entries and lines of flight. This felt now here is understood later there. As one of our participants said, 'I didn't feel comfortable teaching Indigenous Studies so I got a transfer'.

ENTRIES: FANTASIES AND INVESTMENTS

How are the entries to rural teaching experienced, felt and understood? The collection of testimonies compiled by members of the School of Education at Charles Sturt University, *Into the Whirly Wind* (Harrison et al. 2004) are rich in this regard. This is how Lorina Moss experienced her teacher-becoming in Goodooga in 2003:

*2003 was the year I left the rolling hills of the Great Divide, drove into the sunset and stopped at the edge of the vast terracotta desert. The year I lost my mind, found a family, swam in waist-deep floodwaters... The town I headed towards was the end of the bitumen, the end of civilisation as we know it... it was the end of many things but also the beginning...I pull into the driveway and unpack... I am nervous. ... The grounds are bone-dry, wide and flat, like the rest of the land out here. A few spindly trees line the playground. Soon the tired buildings are alive with voices from small mousy whispers to the loud, raspy crackling of adolescent boys. The variety of a Central School. There are questions everywhere. Who you is? Miss, 'ow long ya 'ere for? Miss, where you from? ... I bet they ask everyone the same thing. They see us come and they've seen us go. I tell myself that it is what we do in between that counts. I am ready to try to save the world in two years or less. I kid myself that it can be done. But first, I've got to get used to this heat.... One particularly stinking day, while I was lucky enough to be Head Teacher, I was called over the two-way to deal with a student who was swearing repeatedly... The concept of beginning teacher is almost nonexistent out here. You get in, do your job, and at times education inevitably gets lost amid the struggle to survive. As you often are your own faculty, you find that uni did not prepare you for the onslaught of assumed knowledge, and worse still there is no-one nearby who knows it either... Most students seem to be passively resisting the work. "I'm not doing that there"; "F**k that, I'm goin' home'. All this tied in with the realisation that some of your year 10*

students can barely read, let alone write. Around the time when you accept that you will not be teaching students to deconstruct Shakespeare... you realise that the task of 'teaching' falls well behind the task of igniting the students with the desire to learn. (Moss 2004, pp. 93-104)

Here Moss evokes teacherliness as a set of complex relations with place, self and others, teaching knowledge and one's own desires and fears. For Lorina Moss going to Goodooga involved her in a fantasy of 'saving the world'. Such saviour fantasies, as Robertson (1997) writes, tend to lock teachers within situations of inconsolable loss. Moss mourns the loss of her fantasy of deconstructing Shakespeare, but one anticipates that before long she will find some other target for her passions.

Moss begins her narrative of teacher-becoming as she enters the 'vast terracotta desert'. Meyenn moved from Balmain to Somerton, and then moved on again. Ask any teacher about their life as a teacher and they will begin with their experience of place. First I taught there and then I moved there, the matter of time often hazy or more peripheral to the story of place. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, becomings are matters more to do with geography than history, our lives punctuated by entries, exits and re-entries as forms of symbiosis. Becoming is a dynamic of space and place. Swept up by or leaping in to the flow, we move across the folds of the map rather than occupying its fixed points. Teacher-becoming, in a Deleuzian sense, is a series of lines of flight, journeys through both exterior and interior spaces. The rural sociologist Urry (2000) suggests that the rate of flow, the volume of movements, of people, things and ideas, is more a feature of the current century than previous. Tied up with the commodification of things, space produces and consumes objects, including teachers. Hence through Deleuze's social geography and Urry's mobility sociology it is possible to reframe the notion of teacher movements in new ways, not as a problem for education, but as an increasing phenomenon linked with teacherliness in the contemporary era.

At the level of the personal, Deleuze describes becoming is a change in the intensive 'speeds and slowness' of the components of the body enabling a new set of affects (what the body can do). Becomings are assemblages of bodies, signs and affects that are more than the sum of their parts; they occupy territories. Processes of occupying territories, territorialisation are followed by processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. If teacher-becoming is an assemblage, of bodies, signs and affects, a phenomenon more than the sum of its parts, what is the rural teacher-assemblage and in what ways does it assemble, dis-assemble and re-assemble in different places?

BEING THERE: DIS/COMFORT PEDAGOGIES AND RURAL TEACHING INTIMACIES

It is useful to consider the issue of comforts and discomforts in rural teaching in more detail. On arrival at her new school in the tablelands, in a matter of moments, Meg had had to make a decision to give up her investment in a teaching strategy that focussed on behaviours for one that focussed on content. The focus on student behaviours is often a ploy to disguise the difficult relationship that a teacher has with knowledge in the classroom. In Britzman's (2003) elaboration of difficult knowledge, our difficult relations with knowledge are so often projected as difficult relations with others. It is possible that for the first time in her teaching career Meg had been faced with the

absence of obstacles to her encounter with classroom knowledge, that in the attentiveness of her students her knowledge, not herself, was under scrutiny. Later when describing her discomfort in her new classroom Meg explained that the sense of intimacy between her and the children in that moment was too much for her to bear. More used to the missed encounters and 'chaos' of the class of Indigenous children at her previous school, she had become comfortable with a different type of teacher-student encounter, one that she described as almost content-free in terms of the curriculum. Here, in the new surrounds, she and her knowledge had become more exposed, at any rate, differently exposed. Central to Meg's pedagogy was her regulation of such intimacies in her teaching and communal life.

EXITS: PROVOCATIONS AND CRITICAL EVENTS

In Meg's career trajectory, a significant event or critical incident led her to leave the remote Indigenous school, one still too raw to retell. Meg was appointed as a teaching-principal at a one-teacher school in her third year of teaching, a position of considerable responsibility and administrative demands.

The transition to teaching children who hung on her every word was at first an enormous strain. Over the next two years she developed numerous strategies to regulate the levels of intimacy in both her life in the classroom and her life in the community to something that she felt comfortable with. As a closeted lesbian teacher, after two years this work of managing the emotional climate and the complex dynamics of personal and professional risk in both the classroom and the village began to take a toll. Despite her many successes Meg began seeking a transfer out of the school in her third year.

Now ready to leave her current school, it is interesting to speculate whether another significant event will force Meg's hand to leave. Does one require events somewhat outside of personal control to cut the ties formed by dedication and saviour fantasies. In our discussions about the significance of critical events as provocations for transitions in rural teaching, Meg stated that 'often you need something out of the ordinary to happen, a type of last straw, in order to give yourself permission to move on'. The levels of professional and personal commitment to the students and the community required to survive and stay are not easily broken. Often it takes something eventual, momentous or of sufficient threat to one's sense of self and safety to enable the cutting of the ties. Some teachers, of course, move on for the sake of other pleasures. Elsewhere we have discussed the need to consider the libidinal economies of rural teaching, the weights and balances of fears and desires in understanding teacher mobilities (McConaghy & Bloomfield 2004). In rural Australian contexts such weights and balances frequently include the degrees of emotional attachment and investments in one's life choices, complex processes of unhoming, and anxieties about white presence in a postcolonial landscape. As we argued elsewhere (McConaghy & Bloomfield 2004), rural teaching can be a site of awkwardness and anxiety.

THE POLITICS OF ASSOCIATION AND DISASSOCIATION: PROBLEMATISING REMOTENESS AND PROPINQUITY

Meg stated that she worked at regulating the intimacies between herself and her students, their parents and other community members with humour. When she's in a good mood (plotting for encounters), her classroom is full of kids with 'giggle fairies in their

tummies', at other times (plotting for distance) the kids are all 'dungeon rats'. Here Meg alludes to the social dynamics of her location within complex politics of association and disassociation. Many of our teacher participants discussed the challenges of living life in a gold fish bowl (see Miller et al. 2005) and here the theories of proximity and propinquity of Sorkin (1999) and others is helpful. As Sorkin (1999, p. 7) argues, 'the idea of constant encounter (in our social lives) inevitably produces friction'. In the face of the possibilities of friction emerges our desire for 'the freedom of speedy dissociation'. Fantasies of flight preoccupy us in contexts of constant encounter. Rather than understanding rural teacher challenges in terms of teacher social isolation – that is, the absence of social encounters – our interviews suggest that rethinking the challenges of propinquity – an excess of social encounters – may hold fruitful possibilities for understanding the complexities of teacher fears and desires in rural communities.

Socio-psychoanalytic Dynamics of (Rural) Teacher Mobilities

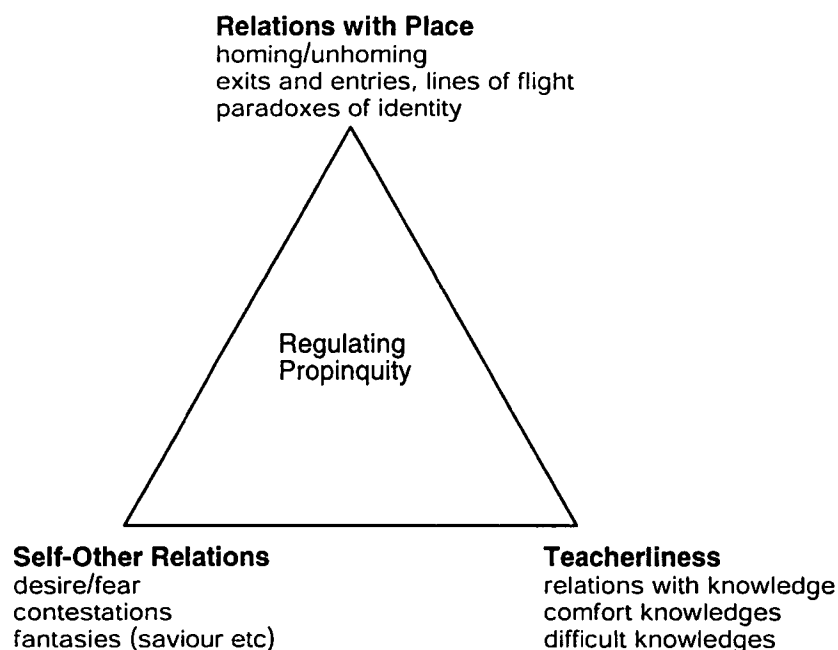


Figure 1

RETHINKING RURAL TEACHING TRANSITIONS

Rather than a problem, or merely a problem for schooling, teacher transience may indeed be necessary for teacher learning and the generation of new pedagogical and leadership knowledge. Such transitions may not always involve geographical displacements, but it appears they may always involve loss, complexity and paradox. In rethinking teacher mobilities, Freud's warning about the dangers of our own redemptive or utopian longings is useful – could it be that rural schooling will always be characterised by teacher transience? If so, what other more useful questions could consume our attentions? What could rural education research look like outside of the questions about how to encourage teachers to stay longer?

Within teacher mobilities are the requirements for the generation of new knowledge. Hence, as one principal at a large remote secondary school remarked 'here we train good teachers for the coast'. In a sense it is possible to consider the singular knowledges, such as the models of quality teaching and other context-free teacher knowledge, and the rural education research that seeks to identify the characteristics of long-staying teachers, both as monuments to the fact that we have been seduced by the idea of continuity. This begs the question in relation to teaching, how much permanence should we aspire to?

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