

## **A Dictionary of Atmospheres – Performing Place as Self**

Between September 14<sup>th</sup> and October 8<sup>th</sup>, in the year 2001, as one component of the Triple Alice 3 interdisciplinary laboratory at Old Hamilton Downs Station, amidst the partially renovated ruins of a deserted cattle station, left abandoned in 1948 and converted into a youth camp in 1973, one hundred odd kilometres NW of Alice Springs, on the edge of the Tanamai Desert, 12

Bodyweather practitioners were briefed by Tess de Quincey, the founder of the discipline of Bodyweather in Australia, to compile A Dictionary of Atmospheres of the place: located, embodied and performed according to a tripartite methodology of attractors, elements and atmospheres.

Bodyweather is, in one sense, about performing place. Min Tanaka, butoh dancer and founder of Bodyweather proclaimed, “When I dance, I don’t dance in the place, but I am the place”.

Here, today, with the help of Kristina Harrison, an experienced Bodyweather practitioner and one of the leaders of the group at Hamilton Downs, I intend to iterate, investigate and demonstrate an elaboration of the method with which this group of performers set about incorporating the place through a Bodyweather derived process of softening the body, perturbing the self, listening to the place, understanding and analyzing elements and qualities of the place, and taking these qualities up, or allowing these qualities to come through their bodies, in a manner analogous to a concentrated version of embodied, emplaced self-making processes of *tenacity* and *subjection*, as introduced by Edward S. Casey in an article entitled “Between Geography and Philosophy: What does it mean to be in the Place-World”, published in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, in the same month, September, of the same year, 2001, that the Bodyweather practitioners took to the desert at Old Hamilton Downs Station.

Kristina will begin by inviting you to participate in a very short, very simple, but surprisingly effective 2-3 minute Bodyweather perception modification exercise. You are welcome to participate fully or partially in the exercise, or sit back and observe, or analyze, or dismiss the whole thing as a wank, or take up whatever position relative to the performance that makes you feel comfortable.

I will then describe the processes of hearing, collecting, working, taking up, and performing atmospheres.

Tina will perform one of the atmospheres she collected at Old Hamilton Downs Station. And I will make some final observations on how places are in us, how we are in places, how self, body and place are co-informed and held a priori in the conaturality of the relations of their constitutive coingredience.

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The Bodyweather day at Triple Alice 3 at Old Hamilton Downs Station begins around dawn. The appointed bell ringer for the day walks around the camp hitting an old heavy rusted metal triangle with an iron bar, sending a fast disappearing clang into the thin open air, dispersing without echo in the wide valley.

The dozen or so Bodyweather practitioners emerge from a bunkhouse consisting of rows of metal double bunkbeds in a wide screened-in verandah built around a nearly hundred year old handbuilt, two-roomed, stone and rough-hewn bush timber hut, in a semi-arid valley gashed with seams of rock and quartz crystal being spat from the earth at barely measureable speeds approaching infinite slowness. Amidst this rock time, the mostly young, mostly confused, mostly eager and earnest group of fast-dying, soft-fleshed bipeds, relatively more or less trained in the discipline of Bodyweather emerge purposeful into a still cool, pale, blueing grey dawn which will turn hard yellow and about 20° Celsius hotter over the next couple of hours.

They gather and huddle, in and around another, larger building of similar construction, provisioned as a kitchen, eat a breakfast of fruit and grains, and sit, mostly silent, grouped by their proximity and shared purpose, on the back porch, looking out across a scrappy lawn and a dry sandy riverbed, towards the few hundred kilometre long, snaking ridge of the West MacDonnell Range, rimming the horizon some 10 km in the distance, Yeperenye, the caterpillar dreaming of the Central Desert peoples, Warlpiri, Arrernte, Pitjantjatjara, Alyawarra.

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They feed, wash and prepare themselves for the first session of the day's training, MB, Muscle bone work. Beginning with an instruction to image their skeleton in the space, they walk, first at random, then forming lines to perform a series of increasingly high velocity, increasingly complex stretches, imagings, aerobic breathings and co-ordination exercises, designed to heat, speed and liquefy their bodies; singly, in pairs, in rows, as a group. For between 1 to 2 hours, they hop, step, run, dance, leap, stretch, crawl and slide, moving in patterned waves across a small patch of red dirt, sending up clouds which stain their skin and cake their bodies, as the sun comes up, filling the valley with warm yellow light.

At the end, for the last ten minutes or so, the tempo decreases, the exercises become less strenuous, slowing down, exertion diminishing, bodies cooling, movement dissolving into stillness. Their bodies pulse, directed, fast, clear the way to the next session of the day's work.

Some stand around talking about the session for a couple of minutes; most head straight for the toilet block to shower: partly ritual, partly in a vain attempt to try and wash away the red dirt which cakes their seams, clogs their crevices, fills their folds and permeates them, partly out of

consideration for the partner with whom they will share breath during the next session of the day, Manipulations.

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The Manipulations session takes place in the rapidly warming mid-morning under a shade cloth canopy. The practitioners, working in pairs, breathing in unison with their partner, in and out, vocalizing a loud sssshhhh which resounds, rising and falling in the valley in waves of crescendo and decrescendo. Small birds hop around the perimeter of the shade cloth tent, heads cocked, listening, observing.

The practitioners systematically work through sets of manipulations of each others' bodies, giving and receiving different weights, different velocities and different distances into different body parts and regions, placed and held in different positions. Stretched, opened and held in unaccustomed shapes to allow sensation and energy flow in muscle, nerve and skeleton, in directions and intensities unattainable in a habitual day to day upright posture going about its chores and leisures amidst the cities, towns, streets, houses, rooms, furniture, clothing, routines and functions that shape us. Slowly and carefully, under the strict instruction and supervision of a leader, they fold, bend, ply and stretch their partners' bodies into positions designed to release flexibilities, potentialities and energy flows which will soften, open, prepare and make their bodies available to meet, sense, measure and take up the textures, speeds, shapes, rhythms, weights and densities of the atmospheres of the place in the afternoon session.

Kristina will now perform an atmosphere which she collected in the dry riverbed at Hamilton Downs Station.

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The Bodyweather practitioner stands on the threshold of the horizon which unfolds as the meeting of her body with the landscape in which she moves.

And she begins to walk. As she walks, the horizon, shaped and proportioned by the frontality and verticality of her movement and perception, moves with her; the landscape as it appears to her changes its face as she faces it. As she walks, she opens to hear the call of the atmospheres of the places in which she moves. She opens to hear the call. The call of a moment in which the conaturality of the place and her body's perception thematizes itself as an attractor.

As a Bodyweather practitioner, she has spent time in training, preparing herself to be open to the attractors of the place. The shadow of a crevice, the tremble of a flower, the vastness of a sky, the brisk prickles of a bush, the swarming of ants, the folded texture of a piece of bark, the silhouette of a gum tree against a dirty white sky at dusk, the space between grains of sand.

The Bodyweather practitioner, opened, softened, sensitized by the day's MB and Manipulations, opens to the place.

On hearing the call of the attractor, she stops. It is in the stopping that the place gives itself. She listens, she dwells, she abides, she weighs densities, measures speeds, modulates permeations, navigates the grain of textures. All the time, mapping, measuring, naming, finding sense, analyzing elements of the place.

These named, measured, weighed and mapped elements, as speeds, weights, densities and textures are commensurated in the dwelling-with, and found coresonant in her body, in its blood and breath, its rhythms and scales; a precise measuring, finding and imbibing of the place in her body.

She dwells, she listens, she studies the place and her body consonant in the dwelling. Attuned to the atmosphere of the place.

And with time, abiding in the dwelling with sustained attunement, she finds the place in her body, as her body is in the place. The place leaves its footprints, its residues, in her flesh, vibrates her, making her something else. Someone she wasn't.

She opens to and bears the place as surely and as tangibly as the forces colliding in and tensioning the earth's surface open to and bear her weight.

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In the article I mentioned earlier, 'Between Geography and Philosophy: What does it mean to be in the Place-World?', published in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* in September 2001, the Philosopher Edward S. Casey begins an address to the question of "the constitutive coingredience of self and place" through the "enactive vehicle" of the body.

Proclaiming that "there is *no place without self and no self without place*", Casey lays down a challenge, predicated on the assertion that "they (places) are in us – indeed, *are us* – thanks to their incorporation in us by a process of somatization whose logic is yet to be discovered". He begins a possible way into the discovery of this logic by following the *incoming* and *outgoing* ways that bodies and places encounter, transform and coinform each other, through processes which he designates *tenacity* and *subjection*.

Casey's prose is breathtaking. He writes:

**places come into us lastingly; once having been in a particular place for any considerable time – or even briefly, if our experience there has been intense – we are forever marked by that place, which lingers in us indefinitely and in a thousand ways, many too subtle for us to name. The inscription is not of**

**edges or outlines, as if place were some kind of object; it is the whole brute presence of the place. What lingers most powerfully is this presence, and, more particularly, *how it felt to be in this presence*: how it felt to be in the Crazy Mountains that summer, how I sensed the lower East Side during January. Proust points out that the essence of a place can be compressed into a single sensation, which, being reawakened, can bring the place back to us in its full vivacity.**

This intrusive aesthetic tenacity by which places mark us with their brute presence forever, activated as much by the intensity as the duration of our dwelling, is, in my contention, the very means by which Bodyweather does its work. It is the process of somatization which enables Min Tanaka to claim "I am the place". And Tess De Quincey's elaboration of the schema of attractors, elements and atmospheres, with its complex conceptual filigree of qualities of textures, weights, densities, speeds and permeations executed through bodies in the laboratory of the dirt, sand and dust of Old Hamilton Downs Station, amidst the ghosts in the shadows of the windowless rough-hewn buildings, the gnarled desert casuarinas, red river gums and spinifex, to the sparse cacophony of crows, mad galahs, cockatoos and warblers, constitutes a very advanced state of the discovery of Casey's logic of the coconstitution of place and self.

A Bodyweather workshop, or more particularly, the Bodyweather component of the Triple Alice 3 laboratory, with its brief to collect a Dictionary of Atmospheres, is a hothouse of tenacity and subjection. Tess De Quincey, in one on one sessions with the practitioners, continually exhorts them...

Forget you for a minute. What was coming out of the space?

The original experience is the anchor.

Every single millimetre of your body is at the service of the architecture.

Take on the life...which is not yours.

It's way more interesting because you're investigating something that's not you...try to find another body...that's the biggest gift.

Take on an investigation of the life of the object.

Your body transforms in that.

Completely change the inside of your skeletal structure. The inside of your head...the skin of your head...the whole of your face.

Your body has to change.

It must be a specific embodiment of place. It's highly specific. You've got to be highly specific to take on something other than your own body.

Unless you have the specific, your body goes into a replay of your habits.

That's your interpretation. What was the nature of the place?...not you...the place...otherwise you're into the utterly unmeasurable...you can't generate the atmosphere until you've got the objective reality...go back into the experience...

There is a relentless bracketing out of the habitual bodily self of the everyday world and an intense focus on the experience of the place, melded with an unforgiving rigor in the precision of the measurements in blood, cell and stone.

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The congruence of these two bodies of work, the collection of the Dictionary of Atmospheres by the practitioners of the skills in the Tanaka/De Quincey Bodyweather tradition, and the written poetic peregrinations of the State University of New York philosopher, Casey, is remarkable. I read Casey's *Getting Back into Place* shortly before I began a sustained two year long period of fieldwork with the De Quincey company.

No doubt, my reading of Casey helped frame my experience of the Bodyweather work, as much as the embodied experience of the Bodyweather work has influenced my subsequent interpretations of Casey, but there is more at work here than me as some sort of hermeneutic funnel or focus puller.

Something even more than the contemporaneity of these two works at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though doubtlessly symptomatic of a move in Western Art and Philosophy at that stage of history to a cry for renewal in the relationships between human bodies with the different selves and places that shape and inhabit them, and are shaped and inhabited by them.

I believe they are heirs to a tradition announced as a possibility by Maurice Merleau Ponty, in his call to:

**Oppose to a philosophy of history...not, doubtlessly, a philosophy of geography...but a philosophy of structure which, as a matter of fact, will take form better on contact with geography than on contact with history. For history is too immediately bound to the individual praxis, to interiority, it hides too much its thicknesses and its flesh for it not to be easy to reintroduce into it the whole philosophy of the person. Whereas geography—or rather: the earth as *Ur-Arche* brings to light the carnal *Urhistorie*. In fact it is a question of grasping the nexus—neither “historical” nor “geographic” of history and**

**transcendental geology, this very time that is space, this very space that is time... the simultaneous *Urstiftung* of time and space which makes there be a historical landscape and a quasi-geographical inscription of history. Fundamental problem: the sedimentation and the reactivation.**

These two bodies of work are symptoms of the necessity for a big rethink. They are rigorous, dedicated responses to questions of how to constitute a concrete and tangible grounding for value. Of how to make and work value in the most immediate, embodied, emplaced way thinkable by locating the very processes of where, how, and who we are and what we are made of, in an attempt to work with actual processes of embodied self-formation. Not sociological theories of oppression, not abstract metaphors of textualization, not discourse analyses of power formations, but dirt and muscles and mountains and bodies and the shit that goes into them and the shit that comes out of them.