

HNRS 492

Reflection paper #2

Remembering My Place

When I think about my sense of place, it's hard for me to pin it down. Let's start with my hometown. I was born and raised in Manhattan, Kansas. It's not a particularly exciting place, but it's not utterly boring either. It just is. Yet, I've never wished I were from anywhere else. People wish they hailed from somewhere else because they're unhappy with their current place, or their past. They imagine a life that began in a distant metropolis, with a different house on a different street, because wherever they are leaves them unfulfilled. But I've always been content. Much like Orhan Pamuk, I remain attached to my hometown, "because it has made me who I am" (Pamuk 6). However, I find that my sense of place expands far beyond my home in Manhattan. Truthfully, there are some places in Manhattan where I feel quite out of place. Upon examining the settings and situations that comfort me, I find that my sense of place connects intrinsically with my memory.

When I was younger, my mom used to take me to the bread store. It was a simple, one-room building, worn with age, and named, rather unimaginatively, The Bread Store. I would follow my mother around, taking in the aroma of yeast and trying to convince her to buy me Twinkies or frosted animal crackers. Sadly, the store closed long ago. But now, no matter where I am, if I smell fresh bread, or see a box of frosted animal crackers, I'm back with my mom in The Bread Store. The memory leaves me feeling empowered with childlike curiosity, and a craving for Twinkies.

Sometimes my memories are completely fictional. One of my most vivid childhood memories is a trip to Russia with my mother. I remember sitting in my car seat and gazing out the rear window in awe of those huge, colorful Hershey's kiss-shaped towers. How did we drive to Russia? Well, it turns out we were actually going to Wal-Mart. It's OK if you're confused. Clearly I was too, because as a four-year-old, in my head Wal-Mart and Russia were the same. It makes absolutely no sense. But, as Orhan says, sometimes the memories of "our earliest life experiences" are "a sensation as sweet as seeing ourselves in our dreams" (Pamuk 8). These memories are ones we could not have formed ourselves and quite possibly did not occur. Yet they are often the strongest and most lasting. Maybe one day, if I do travel to Russia, I will look up at those towers and say in a state of utter serenity: "Yes. I am home."

As I said earlier, there are some places in my hometown where I don't feel any sense of place at all. Manhattan has two middle schools, each of identical layout down to the last classroom. The only difference is the color scheme. The summer after sixth grade, my family moved to the opposite side of town, which meant I would attend a different middle school from all my friends. After a tearful protest, my parents agreed to let me transfer. My younger brother, however, attended the school on our new side of town. Even though they were literally the same building, when I went to my brother's school for his band concerts or track meets, I felt completely lost. I could find my way around just fine, but the halls seemed foreign. I had no memories there. No homeroom shenanigans. No notes in my locker. No missing gym socks. I won't equate my sense of being lost in a middle school with what Silvia Morini must have felt upon returning to her home in Havana. But I imagine she would understand where I'm coming from. A familiar building that is void of memories or full of new ones that are not your own, erases any sense of place that may have existed before.

Nostalgia, or the longing for a certain place, offers an escape to a time when we felt comfortable and happy. Again, these places are deeply rooted in our memories. Last spring, after a difficult fall semester and a slight mental breakdown, I sat down with a psychiatrist for the first time. The first questions she asked me were about my sense of place. What made me feel at home. What made me feel safe. "When you were little girl, what did you do for fun?" Well, what do all little girls do? I watched Disney movies and sang along, wishing desperately to be Princess Ariel. I read about the Pevensie children in Narnia and Alice in Wonderland and imagined that I could travel through wardrobes, or looking glasses. My psychiatrist suggested I buy my favorite movies on DVD and reread my childhood books to help ease my anxiety. Sure enough, it worked. Connecting to my sense of place from when I was a child, which resided in my imagination, allowed me to chase away some of my doubt and pain, and ultimately helped me reclaim my sense of self.

This sense of identity is perhaps what makes one's sense of place so important. For Mehran Karimi Nasseri, identity and place were one in the same. He refused to use the passport he had waited so long for because it said he was Iranian. Forgoing a sense of place was more important than accepting an identity he didn't want. In Italy, people directly identify themselves with the bells of their area church. I am Elizabeth Cattell, I hail to the bells of St. Paul's in Manhattan. This statement not only exhibits a sense of pride in one's place, but it also asserts one's identity. But as we age, our sense of place expands. I am Elizabeth Cattell, I hail to the bells of the KU campanile. Slowly, we become more comfortable in different situations. For example, after spending only a week in London, I now feel that I have some sense of place there. When I look at my photographs, or drink English tea, I remember the towering monuments, the streets that always appear damp, the taste of Shepard's pie and the interesting people on the

Tube. I feel a sense of longing, as if I have left a part of myself there. I am Elizabeth Cattell, I hail to the bells of Westminster Abbey.

Yet, when I define my sense of place, it's much more than a dot on a map, or a bell tower in a city. My "place" isn't limited to a geographic location. My place is in my memory. It resides in the smell of the Bread Store, in my yearbook from Eisenhower Middle School, in the land of Narnia, in my photographs of London, and perhaps, in a parallel universe in Russia. I am Elizabeth Cattell. I hail to the depths of my memories and imagination.

A

I loved reading this—it is a truly excellent essay that makes wonderful use of materials we've read + seen to provide a framework for your own wanderings through memory to identity. Terrific. You'll note the connection you made between taste/smell and memory, like Prust. When you have 3 1/2 hours, your mind is clear and nothing has to be attended to, you should see a film by Jacques Rivette, "Celine + Julie Go Boating." A very deceptive journey.