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Klayder/Rosenthal
Honors 490 Tripping

Reflection Paper #2: El Dorado, Arkansas

In Orhan Pamuk's book *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, he describes growing up in a dying city, a city representative of a collapsed, impoverished empire. While his writing reflects the melancholy of living in Istanbul, and the diminished sense of self he possesses as a result, I couldn't help thinking while reading: there are much worse places to grow up. My parents grew up in El Dorado, Arkansas. Unlike Pamuk, they made a conscious decision to get away. They spent their adult lives, and raised my brother and I, in a much different part of Arkansas, in Fayetteville, a college town not unlike Lawrence.

Although I've never been to El Dorado, KS, I can't imagine it's too different from its southern counterpart. Both were oil boomtowns in the 1920's and 30's, and both drop the original pronunciation "Dor-ah-do" in favor of "Dor-ay-do". The Americanized pronunciation of the Spanish phrase "city of gold" almost seems like an intentional attempt to point out the irony of a town founded on hopes of economic prosperity now dwindling in the rural South or Midwest. I hear people from Kansas, especially Western Kansas or Southeast Kansas, complain about how conservative or hick their hometowns are. Now that I've seen most of Kansas, I feel that I have the right to claim that Arkansas does hick on a much grander scale.

Like Istanbul to Pamuk, El Dorado ~~is~~ now seems like a faded vision of a more glorious past to its citizens. Certain residents of the town look back to the early 20th

century as something of a golden era. There are certain reminders of El Dorado's classier past- the old theater built in the 20's, the elegant square downtown. But their nostalgia is not just for the economic boom following the discovery of oil. El Dorado is an extremely racially segregated town. Despite the achievements of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's and 60's (including the infamous 1957 desegregation of Little Rock's Central High, only 2 hours North), El Dorado's public schools weren't integrated until the 1970's, and even then with great upheaval from the white community. As recently as the early 2000's my grandparents were still vocal (vocal is an understatement- they were angry enough to throw around racial slurs in front of me and my young cousins) about their disappointment in seeing African-Americans moving into their neighborhood.

El Dorado holds a much different sort of nostalgia for me. There are memories of family, of opening presents at Christmas, of teenage angst and boredom when I began to feel too old to get excited about Christmas. Whatever feelings the town evokes, I have never felt connected to it. I've never felt at home there. Even from a young age I saw how dingy it was, how run down and ugly it was. Scrappy-looking pine trees grow out of dirty sand from the Mississippi River delta. Everything smells funny because of the oil refinery, and the only fashion statement anyone makes is camouflage with bright orange vests. I was embarrassed to go there because I felt like it would make me more "white trash". As I grew into adolescence I began to realize an even more shameful aspect of the town: the deep-seated racism of its white citizens. I could see it in what my relatives were saying, in the way my uncle's country club was staffed, and especially in the severe economic gap between blacks and whites. I did not want to come from this kind of bigotry; I couldn't accept it.

El Dorado never really accepted me either. My family lovingly refers to me as a "Yankee" because I don't have a strong Southern accent like theirs. (I consider this to be a well-dodged bullet.) I'm one of the first members of my extended family to live north of the Mason-Dixon line. I don't dye my hair white blonde, I don't hunt, I get uncomfortable around racist and homophobic language, and I take weird honors classes about travel and tourism. I drive a Prius, not a pickup. I'm an alien to them.

Now that my family is aging, and my grandparents are becoming ill and passing away, my place in El Dorado is changing. I feel distanced from the town for different reasons. As an adolescent there was a strong cultural divide that separated me from El Dorado. Now there is an emotional divide. When I go there it is not to take part in a family activity or to return to my parents roots. Every trip is a potential goodbye to my grandfather, who is battling stomach cancer. With every trip there are two conflicting emotions that drive me. One side of me is trying to overcome my previous discomfort with the town in order to reconnect with my elderly family members. Another part of me is coming to terms with the fact that within about five years my grandparents will be gone and I will have no reason to visit there again. As much as I hated this place, it was a large part of my childhood. I've spent every Christmas and Thanksgiving there since I was a small child. Now I have to prepare myself for what life will be without El Dorado. It feels the way you act around a friend you know is about to move away. You try to get those last bittersweet moments in, you act teary and emotional, but at the same time you restructure your sense of reality, and you begin to imagine daily life without them in it. Eventually, you learn to accept their absence.

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This is really beautiful. I really like the contrast that you've embedded in this place and your sense of how that has changed over time from wide-eyed kid at the holidays to bored teenager to an adult who is coming to terms with mortality. You've come a very long way. (I love the notion of "dodging" an accent.)