

## Forever Belonging in Nature

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*Second Place: Synthesis, Analysis or Research Writing*

Nature is a wonderfully welcoming collection of the diverse beauties of the physical world, and each and every being is offered belonging within it. In “Belonging: A Window into Social Change,” Vanessa May offers a comprehensive and largely accepted definition of belonging, offered first by Linn Miller. According to Miller, a sense of belonging yields feelings of “ease or accord with who we are in-ourselves” and “a sense of accord with the various physical and social contexts in which our lives are lived out” (qtd. in May 163). In “Building My Community Through Nature,” Yakuta Poonawalla thrives in nature as she is removed from the influence of others and enabled to grow authentically as an individual. Resultantly, nature serves as a “home” by granting control, comfort, and acceptance. As described by Tommy Orange in the “Prologue” from *There There*, nature comprises a foundation that supports everything, by connecting and intertwining physicalities of the world, bringing people together, and providing nourishment for a community. By offering constancy worth a lifetime and beyond—an extent that people alone fail to reach—nature is an ally in cultivating a sense of belonging.

Being in nature removes one from the influence of others, and in doing so, allows one to live as and connect to a truer version of oneself as a unique individual, which in turn evokes a sense of belonging within oneself. “How we make connections becomes increasingly complex with age. Early on, we achieve a sense of belonging to groups such as family . . . but as we grow older, we are also able to develop a sense of belonging to abstract groupings” (May 165). Nature is a prime example of the aforementioned abstract grouping, and it is one that forever remains

available unlike groupings made by people. In the instance where groups like family lack a means of connection, one may desire to escape from that group—which is devoid of connectivity and stunting identity development—and seek true belonging elsewhere. As Poonawalla grew up, she felt disconnected from the way of life that her family and community expected her to follow, as it inhibited her freedom to explore interests and passions that she felt a more genuine connection with. Upon escaping she says, “For the first time in my life, I found myself deep in nature, away from the expectations of society . . . The trips I led gave me much-needed respite from the increasing pressure to conform and allowed me the freedom to develop my love for nature” (Poonawalla 229). A relationship with nature does not push expectations, regarding personal identity and way of life, onto an individual in the way that social groupings are generally bound to. Thus, nature encourages the growing complexity of identity and allows for meaningful connections to be made, which yields a sense of accord with who one is, or in other words, a sense of belonging.

Nature can serve as a home for an individual, and it is potentially a truer version of “home” than the literal home which one lives in. Firstly, “Belonging is not a static state . . . nor is it necessarily about fixed roots, but about something more transitory and fluid” (qtd. in May 167). “In other words, belonging is not tied to a specific place, but is a phenomenon that emerges in many situations, contexts, and also in the imaginary,” (May 167). Home is a place one feels a sense of belonging within. Since nature is inherently evolving and ever-changing, it exhibits a promise to forever support and enable an individual’s dynamic desires that develop throughout self-exploration. This support results in a sense of control and comfort, which are key elements in defining “home.” Home “is a private space that inhabitants are meant to have considerable control over . . . Home is where we can ‘be ourselves’” (May 166). Nature not only allows for

one to be oneself, but also nature inherently enables that authenticity, as evidenced previously. Poonawalla recalls, “The giant metamorphic rocks, thick with rhododendron forests, and smooth smelling pines opened my senses, and the glacial melt that created a network of braided rivers arrested my heart. These new mountain friends felt real, and I instantly felt a sense of belonging and comfort” (Poonawalla 229). She felt that existing in nature granted her the “chance to build a home” (Poonawalla 230). Even for one living in a place quite opposite of Yakuta Poonawalla, like Tommy Orange, who is surrounded by buildings rather than trees, nature still provides scope for the imagination, and belonging can often arise through the imaginary. Tommy says, “the land moves with you like a memory” and “an urban Indian belongs to the city, and cities belong to the earth” (Orange 218). Through memory and imagination, nature has the potential to exist as a home that faithfully follows one no matter where they physically go.

Nature is a foundation that connects and supports everything, and by bringing people together, it exhibits itself as the essential underpinnings of a community. “Everything here is formed in relation to every other living and nonliving thing from earth. All our relations. The process that brings anything to its current form—chemical, synthetic, technological, or otherwise—doesn’t make the product not a product of the living earth,” (Orange 218). In this way of thinking, connectivity is a certainty where nature is involved. Though, while an individual can make connections apart from those directly with other people and still feel a sense of belonging in concurrence with an absence of people, it is important to remember that belonging is not a fixed state, and thus, that sense of belonging completely void of others is unlikely to last. This is because, “belonging also has a collective element: it is a negotiated accomplishment involving other people” (May 167). Involving other people still does not necessarily entail people directly connecting with one another, but rather, it entails people

sharing a love for and connection with the natural world; as a result, a grouping—to which otherwise solitary individuals can belong—is formed. “People from all backgrounds can come together and share a connection with the natural world,” (Poonawalla 230). The connective ability of nature sows the seeds in creating the community one seeks to belong within.

Nature is a means by which one can fabricate a place of belonging for oneself. In that sense, it is notably unique from other types of groupings that an individual could possibly belong within. Nature is welcoming to those who may not be able to achieve the satisfaction of belonging anywhere else. Where other people prove unreliable in helping one to obtain a sense of belonging, nature compensates for those shortcomings with everlasting opportunity. Nature is not only an unwavering ally, but one that actively enables one to take charge in cultivating one’s own sense of belonging.

Works Cited

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