

An Exploration of “Home”

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Each and every person has their own sense of home, but how can it really be defined? In Wilfred McClay’s essay “Why Place Matters,” he discusses the complex concept of one’s sense of place, and how human beings have a need to create roots in order to thrive even though this has become one of the most challenging things in the world today because of the uncontrollable effects of globalization and technology. His analysis of the word “place” is reduced to a conflicting maze of ideas, going from defining it as a “niche in the social order” to an “essential basis of our freedom” to a “counterforce” to a constantly transforming world. In another text, “Some Houses (Various Stages of Dissolve)” by Claire Vaye Watkins, the author tells a series of short stories at various stages of her life, specifically with each story relating to a correlating location. Each section has a header of a certain home from her past, followed by somewhat random details about her life while residing there. In the end, she reflects on her relationship with her mother after she died from an overdose. McClay explores the intangible concept of “place,” and Watkins proves that various periods of life will impact what home can be throughout a lifetime. Although the establishment of “home” is almost impossible to define, as it differs from person to person, it can be explored through a sense of place that is not restricted by any specific location, or even physical object permanence, but most importantly the relationships and bonds with other people that allow oneself to feel at home.

A home is not equivalent to a specific location, but rather where one’s own sense of place is. Both of these texts emphasize a lack of importance in physical location. Specifically in

McClay's essay he writes, "For place is always grounded in the particular, even the provincial. Such affirmation is not mere attachment to the abstraction of "place" but to this place, scaled to our innate human sensibility" (McClay 5). In other words, grounding oneself in a geographical location, as if to plant roots, does not mean that the location itself will indefinitely be home. Another example that shows the value of the physical location is minimal is when Watkins discusses her feelings about one of the houses she grew up in, the Tecopa House. She specifically recalls her distaste for the house that she spent so much of her life in. "It's possible that one day we will go back, and it will have been bulldozed. Sometimes I wish for this. The shack or house or ranch, ... splintered in a dusty scrap pile" (Watkins 4). Even though she had so many memories in this house, there was no reason to call that physical place home, but it was rather a location where her sense of place wandered. McClay explains Watkin's situation as a mere attachment to the abstract of the house, which is why her home or sense of place is not the Tecopa House at all.

Even when the landscape, the specific location, where memories were once made changes or disappears, there is still permanence in those memories because it lives eternally in our consciousness and therefore is still home. It is an ever changing world; earth does not look the same as it did ten, a hundred, or a thousand years ago. However, no matter how different the world may look to the physical eye, the memories from each place are infinite. McClay makes a metaphysical connection between a landscape and a sense of place by claiming that "specific hometowns and neighborhoods and countrysides and landscapes, even having its own enveloping aura of thoughts and desires and memories-that is to say..." (McClay 5). In other words, one landscape has its own unbreakable energy, which is what allows for someone to feel at home in a place that no longer looks the way it used to. The eternal permanence of one's memories will not

change just because the view of the place has been altered. McClay's assertion ties in with Watkins' reflection on her past with her mother, because the changes in and of the location where she created memories with her mother did not change the fact that they created a sense of home for her. She writes in the very last section of the essay, "And yet, you and I have loved each other and her and been loved by each other and her in all these houses, through all these memories which were once moments, real and felt even if forgotten" (Watkins 6). It is evident that Watkins' relationship with her mother throughout her lifetime was rocky. Nevertheless she still loved her, and that love is what created a sense of home for Watkins, not necessarily in the places that the relationship was fueled. This phenomenon is explained by McClay in his claim that every specific landscape is entitled to change even though the memories and relationships formed there are not.

The most important part of what creates a sense of place are the relationships that are formed. People, specifically one's relationship with said people, are a crucial element in the establishment of a home and a lack thereof can result in a loss of that sense. As humans, we are social creatures, drawn to each other in search of meaningful relationships. Within each geographical location, relationships are formed, and these people become the anchors that pull us back to home. McClay supports this idea in his essay when he explains the results of a loss of these anchors, "In any event, when one of those anchors disappears or changes...we are left alone... our minds and hearts burdened by the weight of uprooted and disconnect memories which can no longer be linked to any visible or tangible place..." (McClay 1). Although McClay says that we are left alone without these anchors, or relationships with people, the consciousness of memory in one's mind is infinite and that is why these relationships are key to what one calls home. Another example of how an anchor can create home is when Watkins told a story about

help she received from someone she barely knew. She writes, “We got to know the EMT’s. One was only a few years older than me, a friend of a friend, and did me the dignity of never acknowledging that we knew each other.. he never let on that he’d carried my mother naked on a stretcher down our stairs on more than one occasion” (Watkins 5). The relationship that Watkins formed with this “friend of a friend” was miniature, but the memories made with him at each event created a connection between them and what Watkin’s home really was. To find a sense of home through relationships with others, no matter the existence or location where formed, is the most important factor.

Both McClay and Watkins wrote about a sense of home, of belonging, of place. However, McClay’s analysis is based on research and studies, compared to Watkins who told stories from her life demonstrating this theme. It is evident, through these two texts, that the establishment of home can be explained by a sense of place that is not restricted by any sense of superficial location or existence of one, and is ultimately tied to the relationships between people that create an anchor of a home. There is only one thing left to ponder now: what is your home?

Works Cited

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Watkins, Claire Vaye. "Some Houses (Various Stages of Dissolve)." *Space and Place: Focused Inquiry*. Edited by Focused Inquiry Textbook Committee. Hayden-McNeil, 2019, pp. 381-86.

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