

The Facilitation of Belonging: Nature, Spaces, and Land

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Belonging: the inherent capacity in people to develop a sense of self; the sort of relations which contextualize who and what we are. When thinking about the sense of ease one feels when they belong, the link to interpersonal relationships is often what immediately resonates. However, through various texts, the importance of the relationship between space, land, nature, and belonging is elucidated – primarily by highlighting the function of belonging as neither turning in nor shutting out the surrounding world. Furthermore, this relationship is particularly integral to members of groups who have historically been labeled as “otherlings,” cast away from the collective nature of society, and repressed. The necessity of land and nature within subordinate communities to facilitate belonging is evidenced through their determination to remain connected to it in the face of tribulation. Additionally, this determination has led to the reclamation of physical spaces as their own, and created a dependency on it for both spiritual and physical survival. Although the narratives surrounding nature in many subordinate groups have been diminished, the resiliency to form a sense of belonging inevitably ties groups back to physical elements, and the capacity to be open to the world around them.

While dominant groups have continuously attempted to deprive subordinate groups of the claim to both land and nature, it remains integral to their existence. Stripped of parts of nature traditionally used in spiritual customs, the Hotai tribe in “The Way to Rainy Mountain” not only traveled across the country to acquire remnants of the animal necessary for sacrifice, but adjusted how they performed their ritual in accordance to the destruction of the land around them. The

text states, “In order to consummate the sacrifice, a delegation of old men journeyed into Texas, there to beg and barter for an animal” (Momaday 203). However, when the tribe could no longer perform the sacrifice, they mourned its loss, and the practice ceased to exist. The erasure of this specific ritual carried immense sorrow, but also impacted how they cherished the natural elements, wove its way into new prayers, and the stories they chose to bequeath unto further generations. The sentiment of new traditions stemming from loss is echoed in “Black Bodies Green Spaces,” as the author describes how the black departure from the South, although integral to survival, was cloaked in the grief of regional beauty. However, upon their arrival to Northern urbanity, Black migrants planted gardens of species familiar to their history, and recreated cuisines utilizing these ingredients, both indicative of a connection to nature, and its ability to bring communities together through shared meals and experiences.

For indigenous tribes relocated to urban cities, the reclamation of the land as their own allowed them power over their own narrative. The prologue to “There, There” states that “Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere and nowhere... An Urban Indian belongs to the city, and the city belongs to the Earth” (Orange 240). The Indigenous peoples’ awareness of oneness between manmade and nature allows them to reject the reservations, or the land placed upon them by the government, and reclaim power over their identity through the embracing of migration. This is echoed in “The Way to Rainy Mountain,” through the tale of the Hotai’s ascendance into the sky. According to the tale, they found their way out of the confinement of the land and into the safety of the sky: “Whatever they were in the mountains, they were no more, however much they suffered, they had found a way out of the wilderness” (Momaday 203). Although the land they had once called home had been depleted of

the resources historically relevant to their rituals and traditions, by utilizing the sky as spiritual and physical refuge, their unique stories and identity claimed a safe space of their own.

The complex nature of subordinate groups' interactions with the land is exemplified through their dependence on it both spiritually and physically, equal parts in the perception of belonging and identity. The text, "Black Bodies, Green Spaces" affirms this through the juxtaposition between land acting as "a bludgeon against the bodies of black people," and its utilization to escape slavery and create a new life. Through using the stars in the night skies to navigate treks, "The natural world could support their escape attempts ONLY if they watched and worked with it" (Miles). The survival of the slaves was therefore dependent on their interactions with the land, regardless of their complex history. Additionally, in "The Way to Rainy Mountain", N. Scott Momaday describes how "the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory" in his grandmother's blood; consequently, she made long rambling prayers out of this memory, "out of suffering and hope, having seen many things" (Momaday 204). Despite the absence of land bound historic rituals, spiritual awareness was built on the foundation of the land, and drove everyday practices of religious and personal enlightenment.

In the narrator's personal experience, the view of the mountain where his grandmother was buried made him experience a feeling of being "whole and eternal" (Momaday 205). Observing the natural beauty and recognizing the complexity of the land allowed him to "look back at the mountain" and come away with a sense of oneness (Momaday 205). This moment of enlightenment illustrates how nature and the formation of personal identity are woven within subordinate groups; through recognizing history and the land as interconnected, individuals are enabled to solidify their sense of self as well as continue the bond with their ancestors. This partnership with nature is detailed through the life of Frederick Douglass. Douglass, "In his well

known escape from slavery, was also strengthened through this sort of partnership with nature,” where he was “shut in with nature, and nature’s god” (Miles). The solitude of nature and the emergence out of it allowed him to label the experience as “how a slave became a man” (Miles). By relying on nature in both spiritual and physical aspects, subordinate groups come to terms with their evolving identities, and experience renewal of spirit.

While the land enables subordinate groups, it also has shaped various narratives aiming to confine them. The prologue of “There, There” exemplifies how the forced placement of indigenous people’s enacted “the kind of silence that just makes the sound of your brain more pronounced,” leading to greater feelings of alienation and suffering (Orange 240). Additionally, their move to the city was not only supposed to serve as the “final step in (our) assimilation,” but the permanent erasure of identity and culture (Orange 238). Through forced displacement of groups, the previously inflicted suffering becomes more pronounced, and forces groups to question their relationship with the land. The prologue also states how white Americans called the newly moved indigenous peoples “sidewalk Indians,” labeling their identity as solely connected to the reservations or a “pre-modern society” (Orange 239). Despite the narratives placed upon them, the group was able to recognize that “the city made us new, and we made it ours” (Orange 239). Overcoming these stereotypes to create a sense of belonging in Urban areas allowed the Native Americans to reshape their own image of what their relationship with the land looked like in a modern context.

These “false narratives” are also noted in “Black Bodies, Green Spaces,” where perpetuated stereotypes labeled them as “dissociated from nature” despite their unique and complex knowledge of the land and its origin (Miles). Contrary to the uplifting nature of the prologue to “There, There,” the piece demonstrates how this view continues to negatively affect

the identity of Black Americans and relationship with the land today. Uniquely, the article weaves the degradation of the land into the narrative of Black Americans, noting how as the land devolves due to a lack of care for the environment, their “knowledge of the natural world,” which is historically represented through their wisdom concerning the winding forests of the South, healing root work, traditional food production methods, and farming collective practices, “becomes less applicable” (Miles). When facing a modern world grappling with climate change, its intricacies limit, perhaps not even purposefully, the narrative of Black Americans; narratives which both enable resilience and quiet defeat, undeniably defining their identity and culture.

Shown not only through a multitude of narratives and stories, but also through their continuous involvement in environmental activism, restoration, and conservation, subordinate groups continue to prove that nature is a fundamental aspect of identity building and preservation. Despite the fact that long standing connections are continuously severed by those in dominant positions, it is clear that nature’s implications on belonging, in terms of community and history, drive indigenous and minority groups to forge new traditions, and create new interpretations of the important role nature plays in their lives.

Works Cited

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