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M1.3 Final Draft: Sense of Place

The importance and value of the concept of place becomes extremely fluid depending on the beholder in question. Humans are selfish and the only way we truly care about the environment is if we have a personal connection with it. We assign emotional significance to **spaces and places** we've inhabited and often times rely on a personal connection to a location to develop empathy for active problems such as environmental concerns and issues. Memories and the sense of nostalgia is what sentimentally connects us with a place and drives us to value some places over another. We, either subconsciously or consciously, chose to react to certain environments and ignore others. In Robert Sullivan's "I Sing the Meadowlands!", he describes his experience of venturing out to New Jersey's trash and litter infested swamps in hopes of completing a personal goal. Written in 1998, his prose piece exposed the disgusting and environmentally unfriendly state of the Meadowlands which became a driving force in the efforts to raise awareness of our human impact on the ecosystem and created a sweep of statewide clean ups. The poignant and powerful descriptions Sullivan uses in his writing were one of the main components in getting people invested in the Meadowlands. **Using poetic language and a play on words, he tricks the reader into visually picturing typically beautiful imagery until destroying it with truth** - "the little streams that [ran] from the old garbage-filled hills that are

composed of things like oil and grease, cyanide and arsenic, heavy metals” and of “herons the color of Styrofoam cups thrown out of cars with necks curved like highway off ramps”. Now described as a wildlife reservation with official state workers on duty to clean and enforce regulations and laws, in comparison to 1998, the modern day Meadowlands has taken a complete change for the better.

Although the Meadowlands has come a long way from what it once was we must ask ourselves, what would this place be like if not for Sullivan's emotionally triggering writing? Would have anyone taken out the time to discover this space? Would we have projected the bystander effect onto it and ignored it until someone else came along and made a change? **Does the lack of action taken before Robert Sullivan's article show that humans truly only care about a place if it's brought to our attention as a negative component?** Michael Pollan tackles this thought process in his own prose piece called “Why Bother?” published by The New York Times Magazine in 2008. He eloquently presents his ideas in one precise and simple sentence: “Virtually all of our needs and desires we delegate to specialists of one kind or another—our meals to agribusiness, health to the doctor, education to the teacher, entertainment to the media, care for the environment to the environmentalist, political action to the politician.” We tend to delegate tricky matters to others. He also argues on whether making a change on a personal and singular level can truly make a difference on a larger scale in our environment and if it even matters. Using our eco footprint as his main example, Pollan makes an interesting argument that humans are too irresponsible to care about the places around us because of our own narrow-minded preoccupations. This claim of his flows into the fact that our human need to

act on our selfish and almost narcissistic feelings is what associates profound experiences to places.

As a society, we've collectively damaged earth's environment because of egotistical desires but on the other hand, our human desire to learn how things function has allowed us to glean insight about further complex concepts. "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman is a perfect example of how our human desires can lead us to comprehensions that apply to moments beyond a certain place. The main character of his poem gets bored of the bland lectures from professors and decides to go out and experience observing the stars by himself. His need to escape and have a personal connection with nature allowed him to become knowledgeable on constellations and the cosmos because of the insight he had while bored in a classroom setting. **In the assigned readings we've had over the couple weeks, all of them focus on outside environments and experiences but what about inside places and their impact on us - can they be as profound as nature or are non-artificial spaces more important and valuable?** Speaking from personal experience I believe they can. As a child, I was raised in many different places. Ranging from cramped apartments and large houses to inner cities and rural settings, my childhood memories quickly become one large blur of moving from place to place. In the midst of the chaotic nature of floating through homes and towns, the one constant variable in my life was my faith. I followed the Roman Catholic religion and going to mass every Sunday became my emotional anchor. The beautiful and colorful windows, the crisp and fresh air enriched with incense, and the clicking and clacking of heels across the marble floors made me look forward to returning each week. An emphasis on sacred space is shown

throughout all major religions and similar to a mind blowing and breath taking view of a mountain or cityscape, this inside environment has inspired and motivated many to become more involved with place and nature. My experience of connecting with not a singular place but the combination of many, as a child, has given me the ability, as an adult, to set aside the egotistical human nature we all develop and truly care and connect with any environment.

Although I am no longer as religious as I once was, I am still profoundly affected by my experiences as a child in church. The short poem, “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon, relates to my central claim that emotion is the principle aspect behind the relationship of y relying on the reader's personal experiences and memories in order to individuals to place. In Lyon’s writing, she lists many attributes of the places she’s grown up in as important pieces that constitute her identity. **Ranging from the “dirt under the back porch” which was black, glistening and tasted like beets to the “forsythia bush” and “Dutch elm”.** **She paints a powerful image by relying on the reader's personal experiences and memories in order to convey the complete weight of her claim.** The discourse we must have as members of society is can we invest the same amount of importance and care to situations and places we are not actively affected by? Currently, **disturbing details to issues such as** the Dakota Access Pipeline and Flint’s water crisis are coming to light because of social media but as outsiders not being directly affected **by the tragedies in question**, we don’t go to the extreme efforts that we probably should. You - **the person that is reading this paper** - probably has not gone to these spaces, rallied or protested. You might have not even shared and highlighted the voices of activists on your Facebook or Twitter. We look at these saddening and disgusting truths on TV and might

even talk about it at the dinner table with family or friends but the lack of an emotional connection to these places is what stops us from actually participating in the process of making a change for the better and valuing it on the same level as places we've had personal relationship.

As important as identifying what is wrong on a fundamental level with society, it's equally important to find a solution. How can we facilitate more conversations about connecting with locations? The writer, Barry Lopez, addresses the problem of spiritual collapse in the West in terms of the relationship of individuals to place and the search of modern human identity that lies beyond nationalism and material wealth in his writing "A Literature of Place". His paper gives us a great opportunity to learn how to talk about selfish motives and how to foster a relationship with places. Lopez bases his whole argument on **the study of indigenous culture and people**. Using the claim that the West has been negatively affected by technological progress, he hypothesizes that the indigenous peoples lack of tech creates a closer bond with earth that transcends the moral dimension and transitions into the biological. His personal advice to becoming closer with place is to become vulnerable. "By opening yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe." Lopez also advises to study and become familiar with the land you are trying to become closer to by using your senses - **smell, hear, touch, look, and talk to landscape**. "The purpose of such attentiveness is to gain intimacy, to rid yourself of assumption." By putting yourself in a place and truly allowing yourself to become one with it, no matter if it has a prior sentimental value to you, is what will enable us to transcend our selfish and self-preoccupied

mindset, we have as humans, and connect with new environments and passionately care about the issues within it.

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