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Seeing New Englandly: Reading and Writing Place Right in My Own Backyard

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English. This research began in 2013 as part of the Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant under the direction of Dr. Lee Torda (English). She presented this research at the 2014 National Conference on Undergraduate Research in Lexington, KY. This piece is part of a growing body of work that deals with Place Writing within the Creative Nonfiction genre.

I grew up in New England. Mansfield, more specifically: a suburb of the Boston Metro area. My only sense of regionalism while I was growing up came from the knowledge that the leaves change with the seasons, and that the Pilgrims anchored themselves here four centuries ago. I don't know much about my genealogy except that my paternal grandfather came up from Illinois to marry Pattie Shea, so my name, at least, has traveled. But the other seventy-five percent of me, for all I do know, has been here forever. I am a New Englander. I've never been anything else.

According to Howard Odum and Harry Estill Moore, a region is “an area within which the combination of environmental and demographic factors have created homogeneity of economic and social structure” (Odum and Estill 2). In this vast American landscape, many people come to understand and sometimes define themselves within the context of their regional borders. Perhaps still reeling from Ellis Island shakeups or feeling insufficiently established within the “New World,” Americans seem particularly concerned with placing themselves, in proving that they belong someplace.

In her essay, “Regional Studies in Folklore Scholarship,” Barbara Allen suggests that American cultural regionalism was determined by and formed around ethnic communities. In the early days of American settlement, when populations were still sparse, citizens were not so much concerned with regionalizing—until the Civil War, when they became, as Allen puts it, “keenly aware of sectional divisions between North and South” (Allen 4). Most of the folklore data collected soon after that period, though, indicates that regional boundaries began to form along the same lines as ethnic settlement. Allen concludes that, “much of the ostensibly regional folklore gathered during this period (1880s - 1940s) was actually collected from ethnic groups within particular regions, such as Pennsylvania Germans, southern blacks, and Hispanics in New Mexico...For all intents and purposes, regional culture in these works was ethnic in nature” (Allen 6). Modern inhabitants have maintained these early cultural perimeters, which have evolved into the regions they are today.

This is especially apparent in a region like New England, which retains the very name of its ethnic progenitor. In part, New England's identity has always been rooted in the complicated history of the place. Nowadays, down-

town Plymouth is a peculiar cross-section of historical landmark society and beachside tourist town. Some visitors recline outside the ice cream cafés that mark every block along Water Street on their way to and from gift shops displaying miniature Mayflower paperweights and Plymouth baby bibs. Others walk steadily between placards, headphones on, listening to ancient cassette tapes on the Pilgrim Path audio tour, which winds cautiously along the shore so as not to obstruct the deep blue ocean view. Or they hang, shoulders slumped, on the Plymouth Rock railings, staring absently out to sea. I wonder if anybody ever stands before that rock and considers what the shore was like before it became New England. In his writings, William Bradford describes the pilgrimage to the Americas as an opportunity to start anew in an uninhabited land. He and other settlers often referred to the indigenous people who were, by every right, inhabiting the land, as “barbarians”—more akin in their regard to animals than serious stakeholders of the land. If anything, the Pilgrims reasoned that it was their duty to tame and Christianize these people, as if religious freedom were an exclusive right of the white man.

For my part, as I stood upon the Plymouth Rock precipice, grateful for the intermittent sea-breeze that tempered the high noon sun, and though decrying these odious crimes, I had to acknowledge that my skin is white, my language is English, and I live on Massasoit’s land (in Mansfield, no less, and if that doesn’t scream “White Patriarchy,” then I don’t know what does). And I had to admit that I am entirely comfortable in this modern Western society, founded by the very ships that breached the shore and desecrated Native culture. So part of being a New Englander, I think, is owning that culpability, and recognizing that I have benefitted directly and exceptionally well from some less palatable truths of my heritage. True, this is part of the general history of anglicized America, and aren’t all privileged Americans equally liable? Maybe it’s something about being so close to the epicenter of it all, of being a part of the umpteenth wave of New England settlers. Other regions have their own baggage.

Still, there is something undeniable about feeling placed that provokes an individual to ally him- or herself loyally with a homeland. In his essay, “The Work the Landscape Calls Us To,” Michael Sowder writes about his itinerant childhood, during which he moved between twenty-one homes across the country. He writes, “I’ve been harried, like many, by a sense of never having had any home ground, a place to stay” (Sowder 43). Sometimes it is merely the desire to feel like we have a home, a point of reference by which we can measure what we know and who we know against everything we don’t. Our region, our landscape, is the somewhat narrow and very distinct spyglass through which all of our worldly perceptions are formed. It’s

like a safety blanket, the way it incubates and isolates us, but it’s a necessary and profound one, inasmuch as we need a home, unless, like Sowder, we can rise above it, becoming: “cosmopolitan, not of any provincial locale” (Sowder 43). Those of use still tied to this provincial life have, in the most meaningful sense, our motherland, and like it or not we grow into it.

Our landscapes make us unique. No two people interact with their landscape in the same way, and not everybody is aware of how their landscape shapes them, but each person is incomplete without it. In *The Pine Island Paradox*, Kathleen Dean Moore crafts a metaphor from the tide, writing, “it is impossible to know where land ends and water begins...it is the same as the line that separates the human from the natural” (Moore, 10). Thus, on the cusp of a paralyzing disconnect between the people and their land, Place Writers endeavor to memorialize and revive their kindred landscape: to make us aware of the forces surrounding and influencing us.

Emily Dickinson—arguably the quintessential New England poet and notorious shut-in—was, by the very nature of her reclusion, bound to write only from her New England perspective. Her relationship with the New England landscape is evident in her “Poem 285.” Written from the point of view of a speaker reflecting on her habitat, and the role that it has played in forming her inherent biases, it reads:

*The Robin’s my Criterion for Tune—
Because I grow—where Robins do—
But were I Cuckoo born—
I’d swear by him— (1-4)*

The robin, representative of all things indigenous to New England for Dickinson, serves as the standard against which she measures all else, because that is the only standard she understands. Had she been born anywhere else—like in the Cuckoo’s climate—her perspective would have been formed to abide rather by those norms. She lives by the seasons, as all of us must, writing:

*The Seasons flit—I’m taught—
Without the Snow’s Tableau
Winter, were lie—to me—
Because I see—New Englandly— (12-15)*

She can only see “New Englandly.” Place necessarily shapes perspective. Of poem and place, Roger Sedarat, in his study of *New England Landscape History in American Poetry*, writes that, “the speaker’s perception of her environment, her ability to ‘see New Englandly,’ determines the nature of her voice” (Sedarat 2). By virtue of her homeland, she is limited to a distinctly New England perspective.

The leaves change with the seasons. That's one thing that always defined New England for me. Lush summer ferns. Spring apple blooms. Bare and tantalizingly sinister winter branches. My favorite is the autumnal crunch underfoot, when chill mornings smell like engine fuel on the way to back-to-school, which for me—more than any budding spring—has been the season of fresh starts.

This whole provincial world changes with the seasons. In her "Poem 130," Dickinson writes:

*These are the days when Birds come back—
A very few, a Bird or two—
To take a backward look. (1-3)*

It's the winter's end, when birds return from migration and those who love their song can rejoice at the onslaught of spring. While she relishes the return of summer, she cannot forget that winter, invariably, will come again—so she writes:

*Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee—
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief (7-9)*

It's the same aching many New Englanders feel, knowing all too well the rhythms of the seasons, knowing the lovely weather and the birds will give way to the onslaught of bitter cold. It's the natural order of things and one to which we have become accustomed.

The geese in my town have stopped migrating. Fulton Pond, just off of Main Street, has become stagnant and too polluted with goose shit and sewage for fishing anymore. Mosquitos come at dusk and picnicking families flee, tossing bread as they go to the flocks of waterfowl that wait along the shore. To geese that can hardly fly anymore because the locals have conditioned them out of instinct, so they grow big on yeast and never try to leave their pond, because isn't this the life? Then winter comes and freezes them in place.

I know in my heart that this is home, but sometimes I wonder if man was meant to stay stuck in one place for so long. Isn't the modern man descended from nomads? I think we rue the birds' migration because we envy them. We're stuck. I am a New Englander. I've never been anything else. That seems, at times, so banal.

East Mansfield, where I grew up, is a part of Bristol County cut out of the woods halfway between Boston and Providence. It's the 8th stop on the Stoughton Line. Residents learn to take a detour around Chauncy Street after six if they want to dodge

station traffic. Main Street has potential, but the Main Street businesses always fail. Pizza place income is steady, and the Town News Smoke Shop stays busy with old men's tobacco habits and young men's contraband pipes—but new enterprises are working against high turnover rates. Some short-winded upstarts are just bad ideas. The Family Dog was a 50s-style restaurant that served nothing but specialty hot dogs and bad fries. The Family Dog deserved to die. But the honest places die too. The Green Earth Grocer went out of business years ago. The sign still hangs like a reprimand telling us that this is why we can't have nice things. All the bookstores and cafés have gone under—taken over by tanning beds and overpriced flower shops—so there's nowhere to go anymore and the young people don't know what to do with themselves or anyone else unless they're getting high in the back of someone's car.

East Mansfield is built on uneven terrain, so the roads dip and turn without warning, and the rain water pools and bleeds into the concrete and warps the roads when it freezes so that they're perpetually riddled with potholes. Those of us who live here grow into a certain East Side Pride.

"Are you an Eastie or a Westie?" we ask. If people answer, they answer with such a relish, and often a snort, like there's only one proper reply.

"I'm an Eastie, of course!" Westies get confused and try to hedge.

"Uhm, I'm in the middle I think?"

Westies think they're the center of everything. *No, I'd say. You're not "in the middle." You're a Westie. Spoiled by your straight roads and wide lanes. You've probably never popped a tire twenty feet from home, and you should feel bad about that.* I've never popped a tire twenty feet from home, but I've come close.

Westies couldn't make it over here. They turn off the beaten path of 106 and see the woods encroaching over our property lines. They double check their maps and wonder where the hell they are. Am I even in Mansfield anymore?

I know a guy from out-of-state who says New Englanders have a maddening underdog complex. Westies don't know they're called Westies. I don't think they even know there's a designated East and a West side of town. No outsider could tell the difference. And anyway, all any of us want is to get out.

We all wound up here in the same way: we're sprung from the urban exodus. We're children of the non-rhotic tongue, but most of us have been schooled out of it. We're almost all Irish,

Catholic, and middle-class, and we live well enough that we shouldn't be so bored. But when everyone in a place is so woe-fully similar, it seems only natural to want to get out, to distinguish ourselves elsewhere.

Mansfield looks like any other New England town I know. Trees spring up around the houses, thick enough to offer privacy that borders on reclusive. And yet, I remember. In the uncritical bliss of childhood, it was the charmingest place in the world. Old pines bend and cast shadows like ghost stories, and when we were young and our ears untuned to the forest sounds, my brothers and sisters and I could barely sleep. The mating calls of crickets and frogs at first astonished and terrified us.

To occupy myself, I would take to the woods, to the dozens of acres of oak trees and white pines that flesh out the no-man's-land between Mansfield and Easton. A well-worn path extends from the end of our lawn to the forest precipice, right before it takes a sharp dip down into a blanket of fern leaves and fallen trees that lead to the soggy marsh at the base of the woods. It was our unofficial boundary as children. To the top of the hill and not a step more. Every summer my arms and legs were covered in mosquito bites from afternoons climbing trees through sap-sweet leaves. I'd scratch them until they bled. By the time the scabs had faded, I'd be covered in a thick rash of poison ivy.

"Should have bought stock in Cortisone," my parents would say. But I was Henry David Thoreau in those days! All, "rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs" and full of quiet desperation. And the back woods were my Walden, and I went there to live deliberately. "From the desperate city you go," says Thoreau, "into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats" (Thoreau 12). I understood him better then than I did once I was old enough to know him, for we spoke the language of New England woods.

Thoreau writes about this shedding of the numbing routine of the material world, but not as a means to the material end, rather to escape those distractions that keep us from truly connecting to our landscape and thus ourselves—what he calls "the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and the joys of life" (Thoreau 13).

It's not necessary to get away—away from our provincial life to discover our own uncharted land, to bury our head in the sands that bank Walden Pond. Even if we wanted to, Walden today is nothing like Thoreau's idyllic retreat. Not the one he wrote of when he said:

My house was on the side of a hill, immediately on the edge of the larger wood, in the midst of a young forest of pitch pines and hickories, and half a dozen rods from the pond, to which a narrow footpath lead down the hill. In my front yard grew the strawberry, blackberry, and life-everlasting, johnswort and goldenrod, shrub-oaks and sand-cherry, blueberry and groundnut. Near the end of May, the sand-cherry, (*Cerasus pumila*.) adorned the sides of the path with its delicate flowers arranged in umbels cylindrically about its short stems, which last, in the fall, weighed down with good sized and handsome cherries, fell over in wreaths like rays on every side. I tasted them out of compliment to Nature, though they were scarcely palatable. The sumach, (*Rhus glabra*.) grew luxuriantly about the house, pushing up through the embankment which I had made, and growing five or six feet the first season. Its broad pinnate tropical leaf was pleasant though strange to look on. The large buds, suddenly pushing out late in the spring from dry sticks which had seemed to be dead, developed themselves as by magic into graceful green and tender boughs, an inch in diameter; and sometimes, as I sat at my window, so heedlessly did they grow and tax their weak joints, I heard a fresh and tender bough suddenly fall like a fan to the ground, when there was not a breath of air stirring, broken off by its own weight. In August, the large masses of berries, which, when in flower, had attracted many wild bees, gradually assumed their bright velvety crimson hue, and by their weight again bent down and broke the tender limbs. (Thoreau 73-74)

Now the two-thousand-or-so acres of forest surrounding the pond make up a protected landmark reservation. It's wild to think that one man could ever have occupied that land alone. Some of that forest used to be fields tended by neighboring plantations, but still with enough wilderness surrounding to buffer his solitude, and the whole massive pond before him. With all the space outside, the replica hut doesn't seem so small—though there is hardly room enough for a bed and a writing desk. And so much for solitude, the park today caps visitor access at 1,000 people at a time. If they were to spread out, they'd have nearly two acres apiece. In the summer heat, though, most crowd the shore for swimming, or hike on designated trails. A road has been paved between that space where the hut once stood and the pond, which seems to me like blasphemy. And the hillside of his account has been demolished for parking. There's not much marrow of life there anymore.

In the grand scheme of things, that's all beside the point. The landscape is constantly changing. Emily Dickinson's quiet Am-

herst landscape is now overcome by thousands of this region's most boisterous college students. Thoreau's retreat has become a museum, and my parents cut down all our trees. As much as we rely on our landscapes, as much as they transform us, we too transform them, until the relationship between the two becomes so complicated and convoluted that we wonder, what is the point? It is a symbiosis. It is the blood-brother finger prick. It is a collaboration of fates. Not to escape the land, but to become a proud and active part of it. We cannot expect to preserve the land tangibly forever as we have known it in our lifetimes. To preserve the land—to save the land, we need only acknowledge the tremendous impact it has had on us in our lifetime.

I think I saw nothing remarkable about my own landscape until I left it. I went to Israel for three weeks to write, thinking: *At last! Something to write about!* Everything was remarkable to me in a way that I thought nothing was at home.

The seawater in Israel is perpetually warm. You can walk in any time at will and without caution. It is so unlike the Atlantic Ocean, which is cold all year. You have to be wary of the tide. It's an exercise in patience. One is always fighting the waves.

My father taught me how to skip stones off Hough's Neck Beach a block away from his childhood home. He sifted through the sand to find long flat rocks that were best for skipping. He told me to look closest to the shoreline, where the tide beat them smooth.

"Hold it between your thumb and your first finger," he said, pulling one arm back sideways as far as he could reach, keeping it steady and parallel to the ground before launching it forward like a slingshot.

"Keep it straight. Aim for Raccoon Island."

Raccoon Island wasn't far but it was impossible to reach at high tide, when the waves would span the shore and slap violently against the concrete breakwaters. By low tide the waves would recede back far enough to clear the sand and create a damp walking path to the island, directly between the shores.

We weren't allowed to walk to Raccoon Island. My father told us not to tempt the tides. So when low tide came and the waters receded, my siblings and I only looked out to sea and satisfied our curiosity by inventing stories of the legendary raccoons inhabiting the island, and how spectacular they must be to have named it. And we threw stones and tried to reach the island, or at least to out-throw each other.

On our last visit to Quincy—a summer day spent packing up boxes for my grandmother's move to a retirement community in Halifax—my brother, my sister, and I escaped to Hough's Neck Beach to say goodbye to the shore. By some chance of fate the tide was low and the shore stretched out to Raccoon Island as if they were one bank—and we wondered if we'd ever have another chance to walk upon the island we'd been casting stones to for years.

Without any deliberation, Jimmy took off and walked full-force toward the island. Amanda and I followed. The sand in between was saturated and sucked on our shoes and I thought perhaps it meant to keep us back. The island was closer than it looked and we were there in only a minute. It was smaller than it looked, too. We could spread along the length of it and barely had to shout across. Weeds grew thick and high over our heads. Was there poison ivy here? I hadn't had an outbreak in years. I'd learned to keep out of the woods. So I explored from a safe distance, scanning the island from its small sand perimeter. Jimmy rushed straight into the thicket, and straight out again, swarmed by mosquitos.

"The water, guys..." Amanda said, as we slapped at the bugs now swarming us too. We weren't there five minutes before the tide was advancing. "We have to go."

We looked once more on Raccoon Island, wishing we could boomerang our glances around to see all the land left unexplored. We'd never get another chance.

We ran back to Hough's Neck beach, our sneakers sinking, the sand up to our ankles this time. Jimmy screamed. He'd been afraid of dying in quicksand ever since he'd seen it in a movie. The way back, racing the tide, seemed a lot longer than the way there. We didn't breathe until we hit dry coast, and then we collapsed on the sand. We wrung out our socks on the concrete stairs that led back up to the street, and we collected shells for an alibi, breathing heavy and satisfied as we tried to hide our smiles, and we never spoke of Raccoon Island again.

"Some - keep the Sabbath - going to church," as Emily Dickinson poeticized, but she kept hers at home. If anybody knows anything about beauty from afar, it's Emily Dickinson, who quartered herself in her room and was content to appreciate a world apart from her own without needing to interject herself into it. There's something about New England spirituality that hedges on finding some "otherness," never satisfied with home. I went to my Other, to my own Promised Land on Raccoon Island. There were no raccoons, and it wasn't very big. The Quincy shore was better.

In *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*, Kent Ryden writes: “Places do not exist until they are verbalized” (Ryden 241). It’s bringing the land to life, simply by paying attention to it, and how it connects to us. According to author Jennifer Sinor, “writing about a place can equate to saving it” (Sinor 9). What she is referring to is the menacing schism drawn between people and their place ever since ego took over and pride gave way to introspection, and we all but forgot the whole world around us. The trouble with this is that our place is so central to who we are that in forgetting it we lose the ability to orient ourselves spiritually and intellectually as much as physically. Hence the imperative of this work: to understand and communicate the relationship between the individual and his place in an effort to recover that bond. To recover that bond myself.

This place and I, we’re fickle. New England has a little bit of every extreme: the winter, the summer, the ocean, the hills. It is the sun’s heat at noon always tempered by the breeze. I am never wholly satisfied, but always quite content. I am the Canada goose, instinctively migrant with a backward look, for I couldn’t love the robin if I’d never seen a cuckoo replace it, and I didn’t love New England before I left it. And so, at last, I’m caught somewhere between the Pilgrim’s Progress of exploration and the simple resignation of a home. No longer stuck in a place, but at last rooted.

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