

Making Atlanta Home: Recollections of Place through Narrative

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Keith Basso writes, “Anthropologists have paid scant attention to one of the most basic dimensions of human experience—that close companion of heart and mind . . . that is known as *sense of place*” (1996:54, emphasis in original). Basso examines the connectedness of the Western Apache with their landscape; in this work, we examine the *creation* of a connection to place through family narratives. We follow the thread of stories told in our two families about coming to Atlanta, about the attempts to make a home in a strange place. Our focus is on the power of narrative to recollect the *placed-ness* of the past, to story the poignant and the humorous, and to make the strange familiar. This is, then, a close look at the “lived relationships” that families establish with places (Basso 1996:54).

The storying of the past is part of what Edward Casey calls “emplacement,” or what we might rephrase as a planting of self/family in place. Because our experiences of place are tied to a nexus of social and emotional relationships, these “emplacement” narratives are not solitary adventures. Rather, they are about connecting with people. “For the most part,” as Casey writes, “we get into places together. We partake of places in common—and reshape them in common” (1993:16). We add that family narratives allow for this reshaping of a strange place into a place called home.

In his “Wild Life, Authenticity and the Human Experience of ‘Natural’ Places,” Gary Alan Fine writes of the *Umwelt*, “the ultimate reality of place”: “Although the interpretive significance of place does not derive from . . . location as a physical space, meaning does become attached to place so strongly that it becomes firmly linked and

unquestioned by actors” (1992:156). Narratives of emplacement, we would suggest, thread throughout one’s life and create a sense of place that is “carried” in the stories. For Rosemary, hearing the stories all her life about Atlanta and Decatur, her birthplace, created a (not uncontested) sense of self. For Isaac, the stories about Atlanta merged into his moving sense of place, one that nevertheless always folded back into his place of origin, Rhodes.

In the vein of Carolyn Ellis’s “Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally about Our Lives” (1997), we will frame this examination of narratives of place against the backdrop of the intertwined and conflicted sense of self. Kimberly Lau has written most profoundly about the contested sense of self in “This Text Which Is Not One: Dialectics of Self and Culture in Experimental Autoethnography” (2002). The very format in which Lau published her dialectics of self reflects the multiple nature of personal identities.

As we recount our family narratives of “coming into place,” our stories will be structured dialogically: as texts that run parallel to and speak to each other. This pairing of stories reflects not only thematic concerns with making Atlanta home for both our families, but also our mutual convergence in the same space. Rosemary left Atlanta as a four-month-old infant, while Isaac arrived there as a sixteen-year-old immigrant. Fifty-six years later, we both moved back to Atlanta—more precisely to Decatur—and it is from this vantage point in time that we reflect on our stories of place as we once again make Atlanta home.

* * *

ROSEMARY

When I grew up, my mother always told me that I was a Georgia peach because I was born in Georgia; and my grandmother told me that I was a Georgia cracker. Thinking that she meant a soda cracker, I thought a Georgia peach sounded better. (I still do.) But I countered, “No, I’m a Californian”—I’d spent all my years, save four months, in that state. My mother said, “You’re a southerner

because you were born there. If you go back down south, they'll welcome you with open arms."

Just recently, at a luncheon for alumnae of Agnes Scott College, I told this story. A woman of the class of 1939, a Georgia native, said quite naturally and emphatically, "Your mother's right." Despite my protests, then, it appears I'm southern by birth, and no amount of time in California will negate this!

My resistance to a southern identity was linked to my mother's experience of making home in a strange place. When she moved to Atlanta from Kansas City, Kansas, in 1935, she was known as "that damned Yankee," and there were those in Atlanta who wouldn't speak to her. She would tell me about being so sad and lonesome:

I would get depressed because I was all alone and had no one to talk to. So I'd go to Rich's and ride the escalator, and listen to people talk. I loved the southern accent. And I'd buy a hat.

I grew up with this story about my mother buying a hat as an antidote for her homesickness. So when I

was interviewing her recently for this article, I asked her:

RLZ: Now tell me about when you'd get depressed.

Mom: Yes, that was when we lived on West Peachtree.

I think this lasted quite awhile. I had a lot of hats.

[laughter]

ISAAC

For me, the moving sense of place went from my birthplace in Rhodes; to Tangiers, Morocco, where my family went as refugees in 1939; to my arrival with my mother and grandmother through the port of New Orleans; to Atlanta in February 1945.

We came to Tangiers in 1939. And then during the War, it took us from December to February to come to the States. We had to spend one month, or a little more, in Lisbon waiting for a Navicert, which is simply a small stamp on the passport that was issued from England. So then we came on a Spanish boat through international waters. But we had to go to Trinidad to be cleared by the British. We stayed there three days. Then we went to Cuba, and stayed there three days but we couldn't get off the boat because we had an Italian passport. And then we came to Atlanta through New Orleans.

ROSEMARY

As I recall Isaac's mother's stories about this trip made at a time of great danger during World War II, I remember her telling about having to unpack her trunk at each stop:

I would have to take everything out of the trunk and pack it all up again, over and over. Every place we stopped, they would make me unpack the trunk.

ISAAC

I recall this unpacking and repacking of the trunks:

Every place we stopped. In Algeciras, they had to check everything. We arrived in Sevilla, they checked everything. Before we left Sevilla, they checked everything. We went to Badajos, Spain, the border. They checked everything. About ten minutes later we crossed into Portugal; they checked everything. But the Portuguese were nice. They sealed everything. My mother said, "We're not going to open it." They sent it right to the harbor. And we never opened it again.

ROSEMARY

Somehow my mother-in-law had managed to pack away what seemed like endless treasures to bring with her from Rhodes; years

later, in her apartment in Atlanta, she would go into her bedroom and search through her dresser drawers to pull out yet another piece of embroidered linen or gold-embossed velvet tapestry to give to me. And she would say,

We had to leave behind so many things, but I want you to have this.

In response to my protest that she was giving me too much—

What am I going to do with it? I'm old! You take it and use it in good health!

For Isaac's mother, memories of place were stored in narratives (almost all situated in Rhodes during her young life), in material objects, and, perhaps most importantly, in her cooking. It was in food that she kept place alive. And to make sure that the quality reached perfection, she sought out the ingredients that yielded the best results.

White Lily Flour, you should use White Lily Flour for biskocho[s] [cookies] and burekas [filled pastries], and Winn Dixie rice is the best.

From the vantage point of years, I assume that she used White Lily Flour and Winn Dixie Rice because these were most like the ingredients used in Rhodes. It was as if she were taking the ingredients of place and bringing the flavor of life lived in other regions to the here and now.

I asked my own mother to recount how she came to Atlanta:

We stayed in the hotel probably a week. And then we located this house on West Peachtree. It was right in back of a fenced in—seems like this land belonged to a steel company, or big company. And so it was isolated, if you can believe that on West Peachtree. . . . And this house—

She uses her hands, first enclosing the space of a house within them, then gesturing to the windows of my Decatur study,

—had bars on the window, and it was built down. And you would look out and see red dirt like you had never seen! Red dirt like Atlanta had. And when it rained, the red mud dripped down. Oh, that red mud was awful! When you looked out, all

*you could see was red dirt.
When you're homesick and
lonely—I cried! I was so
lonesome. And I didn't have
a friend . . .* (6 October
2001).

ISAAC

My memories of coming to the United States are not easy ones:

I didn't want to stay here. I wanted to go back. I didn't have any friends, I didn't speak the language, I didn't know the place.

Many of my personal narratives from my early years in Atlanta have to do with learning the language:

I went to a school for retarded children. They called it Opportunity School. So people went there who were slow. And each one of us worked with one teacher at our own speed. And I was doing a chapter a day, while some poor kids would do a chapter every two months, three months.

From Opportunity School, I went to Boy's High School, where my first course was the most advanced English class, Shakespeare. I didn't understand a word of Shakespeare. But all you had to do was memorize things and be able to regurgitate them in writing. So I remember "To be or not to be." I had to buy a book; on one side it was written in English, on the other side it

was in French. And I memorized it, and when I went to class all I had to do was write it down. Of course, I didn't know what I was doing—but I got an A.

Part of the reason that I didn't want to stay in this country had to do with my problems with language:

I felt more at home in Tangiers. Over here because of my pronunciation or choice of words, I was ridiculed, or I felt so.

Once, in the Shakespeare class, one of the students came and told the teacher that he had a message for me. And the teacher pointed at me and the hall monitor came to my desk and said slowly: "Principal wants to see"—he pointed to his eye— "you"—he pointed to me—"in the office."

And then I went like this, closed my eyes, thought out each word in the sentence carefully, and said, "I see principal in the inter-course." And everybody laughed, I mean really! And I felt like two cents.

And the teacher said, "Isaac is correct. He said *inter*, in Latin, meaning 'between,' *course*, 'class.'" But he looked at me and said—wagging his finger—"But don't say it again."

ROSEMARY

Out-of-place, moving from place to place, my mother recounts:

And I'm going to skip moving into a duplex because we moved from Orm Circle to this place that I don't remember because I didn't like it. On Orm Circle, our neighbors were the Chottas, who owned a Greek restaurant. She was the same age as me so we were good friends. They had lots of parties and we were invited to all of them because they said we couldn't sleep [with the noise]. Then we moved to Lafayette Way in Buckhead.

Mom's very finality—"Then we moved to Lafayette Way in Buckhead"—conveys a sense of beginning to feel "in place." I like to connect this with putting down roots, literally planting the pine trees that, at least in my mind's eye, now tower in the front yard. I also see the vegetable garden. I asked my mother:

RLZ: Did Daddy plant a victory garden?

Mom: Yes, it was, a victory garden. Good excuse. We couldn't get any grass to grow. So he said, "I know how I'll get it to grow. I'll plant a vegetable garden." He planted corn, and tomatoes, and probably

some okra. And probably squash. It was a good-sized front yard. And the neighbors didn't even complain. . . .

ISAAC

For me, “getting into place” meant literally moving into different places, but always with family:

In the beginning when we came in—after living with Aunt Judith on Parkway Drive—Grandma, my mother and I, and I think my brother Julian, in the beginning, moved to Boulevard, which is the next street.

While I began to feel more “at home” in one sense, problems with language constantly reminded me that I was in a different place:

And somebody called for Mama. And Mama was over at Uncle Harry's. And I said, “Okay, I'll tell her you called.” I picked up the telephone. And that was the South. And the operator said, “Yes, sir.” And I said, “Operator, Operator, I want the telephone number for [with a Spanish inflection] Sanítari Delicatessan!” The poor woman didn't know what in the hell I was talking about. And I kept getting mad, “Sanítari Delicatessan!” I kept

getting mad and she didn't know what I was talking about. And then I decided, well, I'll give the street name. I said, "You know, Sanitari Delicatessan on Poncé de Leone!" Well, it didn't sound like Sanitary Delicatessen on Ponce de Leon. She got it. And I called it.

ROSEMARY

The victory garden wasn't enough for my father, so he moved us all to a forty-two acre farm "out by Stone Mountain." I never knew the farm, because I was four months old when we moved away—but I *knew* it emotionally, through family stories.

While researching this essay, I listened to an audiotape I had made in 1991 of my mother and me watching our home movies. I was struck by the affection in my voice when Mom and I watched the scenes of the farm:

RLZ: And now we switch to the 1944 film that is flickering. What do you think that is a picture of?

Mom: That's the farmhouse.

RLZ: That's the farm.

Mom: There's Sweetie Face [our cow].

RLZ: And the wisteria.

Mom: Beautiful, it was beautiful. The bush, and that yard.

RLZ: And the bee's getting
in Patsy's hair.

Mom: That was our front
yard. Dogwoods, red buds,
and daffodils growing all
around it. Sweetie Face—it
finally got too much trouble
to cut the grass and we put
Sweetie Face out on the
front yard. We didn't have
to cut grass, but we sure had
lots of spots of grass
growing real well!

ROSEMARY

Okay. So what was it like coming
into the Port of New Orleans? Do
you remember anything about it?

ISAAC

Yea, we—the first thing I noticed,
the sea where the Gulf met the
river was beautiful. The sea was
blue, and almost a straight line
where it met all the red mud of
the Mississippi.

ROSEMARY

I'll be darned. That was in—what
month was that?

ISAAC

January, February of '45.

ROSEMARY

Two months later, in April 1945,
my family headed west, and we
crossed the Mississippi. The
impression the Mississippi made
on my two older sisters was passed
on to me in our endless childhood
chanting: M-I-DOUBLE-S-I-
DOUBLE-S-I-PP-I !

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In "Finding Self in the Recollection of Travel," Mark Neumann suggests, "For many, the meaning and significance of travel assume value in the moment of recollecting for others the experiences that occur away from home" (1992:179). For us, narratives about making home in a strange place have less to do with the adventuresome disjuncture of self and place discussed by Neumann and more to do with bringing self and place along to the next new place. A bit like a snail's shell, the narratives provide a way of moving the home with oneself, of connecting in memory with a new place while refusing to abandon the other places from which one came. This snail shell of memories and narratives is protective but not impenetrable. It can be cracked, and the self thus exposed can be punctured by this experience but not necessarily destroyed. Elaborations of self are added as the new experiences become part of the self and embedded in the new-old sense of place.

For Marcel Proust, memories of things past counter "the anguish of solitude, . . . of being detached from things and beings" (Poulet 1956:297). Only the memory of a certain moment in the past connected with a sensation, a smell, a feeling, can promise hope of connection, an antidote for despair: "Now to recognize oneself in a place, in a piece of music, in a sensation, is more than to regain this sensation; it is to rediscover there one's own being" (313). We would add that it is in the storying of this past, in the telling of it, that the sense of self-in-place is created and recreated.

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