

When Despair Grows in Us: Emotional Learning in [Trans]Formative Places

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Abstract

This paper considers a person's endogenous and emotional relationships to outdoor childhood or adolescent (trans)formative places. By revisiting the (trans)formative places of four citizens and filming the experiences, I gained an understanding of how these places engage emotional learning. The emotional data were explored through phenomenology and participatory analysis. Places transformed my participants through identity development, memory and anxiety, resiliency behaviour, nostalgia, and loss. My participants related to places through knowing a place and being home, engendering bliss and appreciation, the development of pride and hope, and experiencing emotionality. Part of our emotional development is linked to our relationships to place because we are, in some ways, part of that place. Returning to (trans)formative places can rejuvenate our relationships to those places through our emotional reactions.

Résumé

Cet article explore les réactions endogènes et émotionnelles liées aux lieux extérieurs (trans)formateurs qui ont marqué l'enfance et l'adolescence. En revisitant les lieux (trans)formateurs de quatre citoyens et en filmant ces expériences, je suis arrivé à saisir la façon dont ces lieux engendrent un apprentissage émotionnel. Le vécu émotionnel est examiné avec l'apport de la phénoménologie et de l'analyse participative. Les lieux étudiés, associés à une foule d'expériences personnelles, comme l'anxiété, la perte et la nostalgie, ont transformé les participants en contribuant à la formation de leur identité et en favorisant leur résilience. Les participants décrivent ainsi leur attachement à ces lieux : ce sont des endroits familiers où ils se sentent chez eux, des endroits qui leur inspirent divers sentiments comme la joie, la gratitude, la fierté et l'espoir. Notre développement émotionnel est lié en partie à nos relations avec les lieux puisque, d'une certaine manière, nous en faisons partie. Retourner vers nos lieux (trans)formateurs peut nous aider à réactualiser notre lien avec eux par l'entremise de nos émotions.

Keywords: environmental education, transformative places, endogeny, emotionality, panarchy theory, sense of place

When despair grows in me
and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free. (Berry, 2010, p. 36)

Western life seems obsessed with the binary of hope and despair. An allusion exists that hope or despair are the acceptable feelings we can have because of the hopeful/horrific lives of environmental and social crises/phenomena that humans and other-than-humans experience. This social dichotomy shows up in pernicious ways, whether it is horrors overtly articulated through the media (Voorhees, Vick, & Perkins, 2007) or more hidden within the hope and despair structures of our society (Kelsey, 2012). Nevertheless, humans do not deal with feelings and needs well in societies that are so focused on marketing and exploiting materialism (Rosenberg, 2003). Wendell Berry's (2010) acknowledgement of despair might act as an important nudge, as many of us working in the field of environmental studies or sciences tend to suppress the complexity of feelings experienced from and in our work. Berry presents his remedy to this despair by coming "into the peace of the wild things...rest[ing] in the grace of the world" and becoming free. This line suggests that the hope/despair phenomena might be addressed through the decision not to nourish the binary and get stuck in a feedback loop, but to look directly at our feelings in and with place.

I am curious about the psychological processes induced within and from places themselves as a form of emotional literacy intervention. Our very orientation to the world is highly influenced by the places, cultures, politics, and languages in which we are engaging (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Thus, when we move through biophysical places, we also move through multiple worldviews and are expressing a panoply of values, morals, and belief systems that interact and conflict amongst each other and with the environment (Macy, 2007).

Being mindful of the effects of place on our emotions and our relationships to our self-identity is a fascinating area in environmental studies literature and many have come before me in exploring this area of research (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Kudryavtsev, Stedman, & Krasny, 2012; Sobel, 2004). These relationships have been catalogued, and descriptions exist in Mitchell Thomashow's *Ecological Identity* (1995), in which the author helps practitioners focus on the environmental reflexivity of past experiences and place. David Greenwood (2008a, 2008b) (formerly Gruenewald) has also provided rich explorations of the critical, ethical, and nuanced considerations of human-place connections and in particular, place-based pedagogical and curricular implications. Also, Louise

Chawla's *In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry, and Childhood Memory* (1994) represents a poetic and phenomenological inquiry into perceptions of place-identity creation.

Inquiring about Emotionality and Place-Connection

As part of my doctoral dissertation, I created a participatory process that sought to intervene on traditional (and often colonizing) place-centric research approaches (Scully, 2012; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). I analyzed my research by looking for synergies of complex relationships; forms of spiritual, compassionate, and respectful mindfulness; and a sense of responsibility for the outcomes of the research. My primary objective was to investigate the emotional, physical, spiritual, and ecological experiences elicited when four participants revisited their important outdoor childhood or adolescent places. My second objective was to examine the role that these places may have played in awakening an individual to the relationships among social systems, citizens, and nature, to inspire learners about the value of living “as if the world mattered” (Jickling, 2009, p. 215), thus engaging them in civic and ecologically responsible actions. I viewed this research through three conceptual frameworks: endogeny (Dilger, 2012), complex systems thinking (Gunderson & Holling, 2002), and Indigenist lenses (Smith, 2005; Wilson, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the endogeny of a person's connection to place. Endogeny refers to the processes that originate from within a person or system. This usually describes a person's internal processes like emotions, rhythms, intuition, or subconscious processing.

To recruit my participants I used a criterion-based selection process (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2005), particularly unique-case sampling where participants were selected by having an attribute or characteristic that set that person apart from others. In the summer of 2013, I identified four individuals and interviewed them in their childhood or adolescent (trans)formative places.¹ Below are short biographies of each participant; more detailed descriptions can be found at < www.transformativeplaces.com > :

- May Sam, a Tsartlip elder, Malahat and Khowutzun member, great-grandmother, knitter-extraordinaire, and embodiment of generosity has helped transform her communities with her practice of knitting, relational respect, and traditional ceremonies. Along with four generations of her family, May led me through her childhood places in Malahat traditional lands and Cowichan Valley.
- Dr. Wade Davis, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, anthropologist, photographer, writer, father, and husband, with Gail Percy, anthropologist, adventurer, and wife, shared stories about their summer home in the Tahltan traditional territory of Ealue Lake and their experiences in the Spatsizi Plateau Wilderness Provincial Park and Mt. Edziza Provincial Park. Wade has been coming to this

area of northwestern British Columbia since his early twenties, as the first park ranger when it was only accessible by a rough patchwork of logging roads.

- Her Honour, Iona Campagnolo, Former Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, MP for Skeena Constituency, radio host, mother, and change-agent took me to a childhood place under a dock at North Pacific Cannery on the land of the Lax Kw'alaams and Metlakatla people. This cannery has now been adapted into a historic site and museum along the Skeena Slough. Iona told me an incredible story that wove her early childhood experiences through her life as a politician, then her life as representative of the Queen of England in British Columbia.
- Claudia Li, a descendent of Chinese settlers in Vancouver and the co-founder of the Hua Foundation and Sharktruth.com, took me back to her childhood home in Burnaby, British Columbia, the Musqueam traditional territory, to rediscover her connection to place, somewhere she had not been since she was five years old. With memories of her grandma, smells of tomatoes, and the discomforting realization that memory can play tricks on perception, Claudia led me through an experience full of emotion, connection, and healing.

I analyzed each of these exemplary citizens' interviews using a phenomenological analysis approach, where theories were generated directly from the data (Hycner, 1985). By listening and watching the films directly without manipulating language through transcription, I derived units of meaning relevant to the research objectives (described as memes below) and reflective of my conceptual frameworks (Rose, 2006). I also asked the participants to help give feedback on these units of meaning through participatory analysis methods. In addition to this, I compared the memes generated to data derived from a publically accessible mapping tool, where a small subset of the submissions were analyzed with the same method (Stanger, 2014).

The reading of this paper would be greatly enhanced if readers also view the iBook or connect with the website < www.transformativeplaces.com > . Specific excerpts of the video are referred to within the text by indicating a range of numbers (e.g., 1:02 - 1:40 mins), in addition to the description of the events and language within those clips. This technique is used to indicate notable non-verbal cues, point out emotional aspects within the interviewee's voice, or note other nuances that would be lost in a direct transcription.

From Meaning to Meme-ing

The mycelia of transdisciplinary research methods pertaining to nature connection are an ever-changing complexity of interactions, much like that seen in ecological systems (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). That our ecological evolution is entwined with human cultural evolution adds to the complexity of this research (Bateson, 1972). According to Gregory Bateson, thought and behaviour evolve, change, and interrelate similar to evolution, change, and interrelation of ecological systems. A term that explicates this evolution of thought was coined by

Richard Dawkins (1989): meme, “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation and replication” (p. 192). Meme theory has taken its own memetic path, growing beyond an analogy to a mode of synthesis where pathways of thought evolution can be mapped (Costall, 1991; Laland & Brown, 2002). My research leans partially on the evolution of thought, looking for locations of paradigmatic change within scholarly research, and extends beyond memetic analysis to the analogy of ecosystem-level adaptation, namely panarchy theory (Gunderson & Holling, 2002).

Memes were identified by looking for salient messages, emotive moments, and synergies with the theoretical frameworks within and around the interviews, and were derived with as much bracketing (the process of suspending pre-formed conclusions) as I could realistically muster. That meaning should be extracted in scholarly research through some post-interview deconstruction does not sit well with my yearning to decolonize my approach. I have come to understand the importance of prolonged engagement to be able to explore some of the complex findings. Endogenous understanding has been linked to concepts like intuition, instinct, and empathy (Barrett et al., 2016). Throughout the interviews, I relied on my intuition to support my participants in telling their stories. This co-analysis impacted my reading and viewing of the films as data, since I was also there co-constructing an experience with my participants. Thus, I focused on my participants’ sharing as thoughts and concepts that have potential to grow, conflict, evolve, and die: they were memes rather than themes.

Looking Nearby the Emotions of (Trans)formative Places

In the summer of 2013 I traveled with participants, filmmakers, and research assistants to each of the interview locations. The following section investigates the endogenous and emotional relationships to places that were conveyed within those interviews. Preliminary data and descriptions of each of the participants from this research as it relates to the complexity theory framework have been previously articulated (Stanger & Beauchamp, 2015). Approximately 100 hours of combined footage was edited down to 13 videos that range from 5-20 minutes long. These videos were accompanied with photographs of the (trans)formative places to create a visual and auditory storyline of each of the participants, which was published as my dissertation in an Apple iBook (Stanger, 2014).

Each interview was conducted *in situ*, in the place that was being discussed. Thus the places are a particular character in each of the videos. You can see the lichen-encrusted lava-beds in Nass Valley with Iona, the luscious green forests along Cowichan River with May, hear the lapping of Ealue Lake with Wade and Gail, and almost smell the imagined tomatoes in the backyard in Burnaby with Claudia. So the land, in a way, is also being interviewed in this research. The participants’ stories are coming from and inter-connected to the specific places of which they are speaking.

Emotions and (Trans)formative Places

In the course of my research, I found three clusters of memes (“place and family,” “place and transformation,” and “place and connection”) that are interrelated and interacting. Emotional memes were found in each of the clusters and represent the interrelatedness of the data through their overlapping nature (Figure 1):

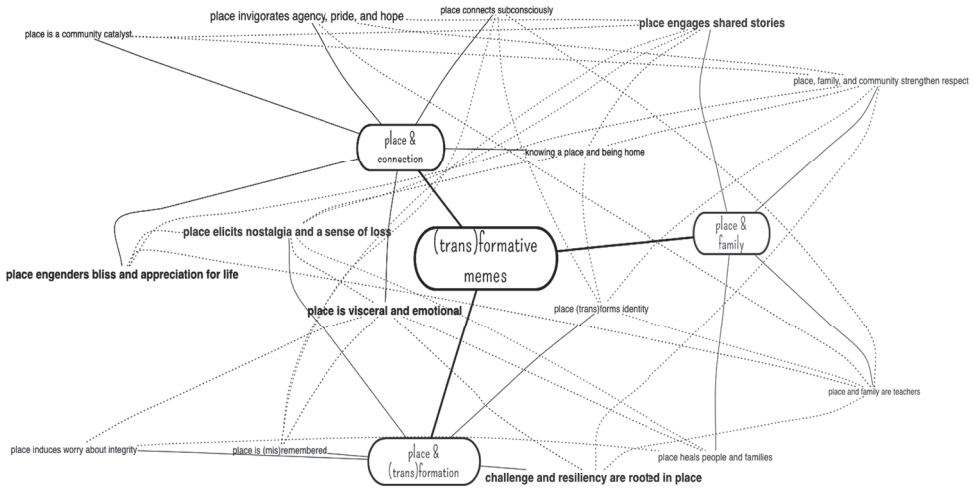


Figure 1. All of the interrelated memes, with the overtly emotional memes labeled in bold

Place Engages Shared Stories

Wade Davis and Gail Percy’s relationship to Ealue Lake seemed to be entwined with their daughters’ relationships to that place as well. Wade recounted how his two daughters return annually to Ealue Lake and how this ongoing relationship fostered a deep connection to the place for them, and in turn deepened his relationship to it: “You can’t think about this property without thinking about that period [his daughter recovering from a disease at Ealue]... So, I mean there are layers upon layers of joy, agony, and happiness, which is typical of all places.”

In the clip entitled *Wade on Ealue and Montréal* (5:00 - 7:19), Wade talked about his “daughters’ melting” at hearing the word “Ealue.” He spoke proudly of his commitment to bringing them to Ealue almost every summer of their childhood and adolescent lives. This long-term multi-generational connection to place connects with Wade and Gail’s own stories. They are able to share their love of this place with their daughters and through this have an intersubjective experience of their transformational moments.

There are two aspects of this meme that are compelling. First, shared stories occur from shared experiences in and of a place, though these experiences do not necessarily have to be concurrent or even congruent. For instance, Wade's memory of the Spatsizi area is layered with history back to the early 1970s, whereas his daughters' experiences were more recent. Yet all father and daughters have accounts of place that are collective and diverse in some ways. This diversity of stories brings about the second notion that is compelling about this meme: shared stories do not always mean the same story. Meaning is therefore a negotiated act through the sharing of stories, the interpretation of the land and experiences in and with it. They might be contradictory, but the point of this meme is that they act as part of the fabric of understanding a place. I noticed that shared stories might also be an act of witnessing a family member's development of connection; Wade was able to see his daughters grow a connection over time with this place.

Place Elicits Nostalgia and Sense of Loss

One of the most powerful moments of interviewing Iona occurred at the end of the discussion at North Pacific Cannery in the clip *Iona Campagnolo visits her childhood home at North Pacific Cannery* (6:40 - 8:09). I asked her, "How does it feel to be here?" Her response was surprising. "Sad ...yes...they [my friends] are mostly all gone." The remarkable experiences under the cannery still resonated deeply to the point of bringing Iona to tears. She was mourning the loss of friends and the memory of those moments. The train then blew its whistle directly behind her, and the moment of vulnerability passed.

In another interview Iona pointed out the ever-shrinking Bear Glacier on the highway to Stewart, British Columbia (*Iona Campagnolo visits Stewart BC* (0:00 - 0:57)). When she was a Member of Parliament in the 1970s, the glacier stretched across the moraine lake to the edge of the highway. During this trip in the summer of 2013, Bear Glacier did not reach the once-hidden edge of the lake on the far side of the valley. Iona suggested this is likely due to climate change.

"I guess it won't be there 50 years from now, but people will remember it." Iona described how she thinks northwestern British Columbia will be drastically altered due to the changing climate, likely drawing large numbers of people to settle there as seen in the clip *Iona Campagnolo visits Stewart BC* (2:45 - 3:51). I believe that in her view, migration is how humans will adapt to the complexity of climate change. When she was telling this, I could hear her sadness of the loss of the more glacier-rich landscape, with the ruggedness of ecology paired with a rugged community of people. That reconnecting with place can stimulate a sense of loss in Iona suggests that our absence from place can mute or suspend our feelings. On return, the differences in those places can challenge our need for stability and sameness.

Claudia Li talked about a sense of loss when she returned to her (trans)formative place in the clip *Claudia Li visits her childhood home* (1:27 - 2:07):

“It makes you sad a little.” She was referring to her childhood memories tricking her into thinking it was going to be more magical. I learned this from the process of asking her to draw her memory in the clip *Claudia Li drawing her childhood memory*. In that video, you can see her drawing an idyllic scene, with mountain backdrops, high fences, and a sizeable backyard. To her, the difference between her revisiting experience and her memory represented loss, change, and difference, something she was struggling to come to terms with during the interview.

Time plays an obvious role in the meme “Place elicits nostalgia and sense of loss.” As humans get older or move away from their (trans)formative places, they lose an immediacy of the memory through the visceral and physical experiences of returning to a place. As in the cases of Claudia and Iona, humans also engage in other experiences, connection to other places and people, and a moment of (trans)formation might be layered with other moments of development. Thus returning or remembering a (trans)formative place can elicit memories that trigger nostalgia or a sense of loss.

Under the docks of the North Pacific Cannery, Iona ended her statement by sharing her emotional response to returning to this (trans)formative place: “So this is it, the sacred place for me...and it makes me sad...to think that they [her friends] are mostly all gone.” This place was sacred to her as it represented the hope that was actualized 60 years later in her life, and in the same breath, it brought back feelings of longing and loss. This place still moves Iona to tears and continues to play a role in her life. Iona was also considering her own mortality as it related to her sense of place. Her friends are all passed, and she too will pass.

Both Claudia and Iona exhibited grief at the changes they witnessed, an emotional response that relates to loss, disconnection, and yearning. The pain of losing a place, even if the place is part of memory, was clearly difficult—in some ways it also represents a sense of losing oneself. This can be described as a form of solastalgia, the pain caused by the loss of a place of solace or the events that occurred there (Albrecht, 2010).

Challenge and Resiliency are Rooted in Place

For Claudia, her Burnaby home elicited complex feelings that led to a statement of resiliency, as seen in the clip *Claudia Li visits her childhood home* (8:34 - 10:39). She said that she felt she should have done more with her grandmother when she was around. She also talked about reaching out to her elders to try to make sure that she connects with them while they are still alive. She suggested that it is important for her to let go of the conflict she had with other people in her family so that she could engage them through love:

To experience really true, deep joy, it is often tied to some sense of deep loss, sadness, or pain. Because when you are in the darkness and you see a just a tiny bit of light, it is just that much greater if you have been in the darkness before.

When I asked Claudia how the interview went for her after the camera had been turned off, her response was, “healing.” She revealed to me that her experience of the Burnaby home was a mixture of complex emotions, and revisiting it helped her come to terms with challenging memories and celebrate the good memories. The meme “Challenge and resiliency are rooted in place” helps name the sometimes-challenging relationships that places present to us. The emotional challenges of Claudia returning to a place that represented pain enabled a movement towards recovery.

Place, and the communities it represents and nurtures, comes with a variety of potentially challenging opportunities. Place contextualizes our socio-cultural activities, and through the process of overcoming the physical, cultural, emotional, or spiritual challenges that manifest out of those places, humans can potentially learn to appreciate the cyclical relationships and inter-dependence of places and their socio-cultural values.

Place Invigorates Agency, Pride, and Hope

Agency, pride, and hope are invigorated by (trans)formative places through the processes of feeling connected and supported by the communities in which they are interrelated. Iona was proud of her connections to the First Peoples, settler communities, places, and stories of Northern British Columbia. Over the four days of traveling with her from Prince Rupert to Stewart, she recalled many stories of the people, connections, and events that she engaged in throughout her diverse career. As the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, Iona’s jurisdiction was widespread, and she was expected to connect with communities in all corners of the province. Yet, she said that one of her proudest moments was returning to the Nass Valley with her official cadre where she was welcomed as a friend, supporter, and as family. She talked about the series of events that led up to the Nisga’a Treaty (the first of the modern treaties to be signed in British Columbia) and related it back to her time under the sidewalk, as seen in the clip *Iona Campagnolo visits her childhood home at North Pacific Cannery* (1:54 - 2:54).

Iona connected this pride of the completion of the Nisga’a Treaty with the notion of hope, as seen in clip *Iona Campagnolo revisits the Nass Valley* (0:00 - 3:38). This hope stemmed partially from the visit we had with some administrative staff that she referred to in *Iona Campagnolo revisits the Nass Valley* (4:24 - 4:56). Seeing friends and relatives of friends prompted her future aspirations for the multiple generations that are working towards justice and equity within the challenged First Nations landscapes of British Columbia.

For Iona, a sense of agency was self-motivated and stemmed by the experiences of growing up where inequality was rampant, institutionalized, and commonplace. She saw a community that she could support through her life and career, and by helping them she was also helping herself be part of the community.

After 100 years of Nisga'a governments trying to negotiate a settlement with the Crown, Canada, and British Columbia, this modern treaty was finalized in 2002. Iona was a great supporter of the process, and the final positive outcome stemmed from her influence and, as she articulates, from her early relationships with young First Nations people. Not only did the activities and landscape of the North Pacific Cannery influence her actions, but she suggests that it is "these kinds of places" that influence many of the people who ended up working on the Nisga'a Treaty and other related projects.

Place is Visceral and Emotional

Claudia's visit to her childhood backyard was an emotional experience for her. I saw these emotions from the outset of her returning to her place. She physically reacted to entering the backyard. In the clip *Claudia Li visits her childhood home* (0:00 - 1:27), you can watch her first steps into the yard after 20 years. She made quiet noises indicating apprehension and as she came around the corner, her arms curled and tightened. She said, "It's different....It's different."

Similarly, Wade described returning to Point Claire, his childhood home outside of Montréal, as being a visceral experience. Our plan originally was to return there together, however, due to my budget constraints we were unable to go there for this research. He had recently returned there for a book he was writing, and he talks about it in the clip *Wade Davis talks about his connection to Ealve Lake and Montréal* (1:52 - 2:51). When he talked about every blade of grass resonating with memory, you can see by his reaction that he was struck by the changes that had occurred in Point Claire since his youth. "Shadows marked the ground where trees had fallen in my absence." Wade's memory of that place was drastically different to what it looks like now.

Connection to place can often be a visceral and emotional experience arising from triggered memory events. This meme was most apparent with participants returning to their childhood and adolescent places after a long hiatus. Iona's fascination with all aspects of the North Pacific Cannery was a good example of this. We toured the entire space, looking at where she worked as a child packing cans, and each of the houses that her family lived in along the sidewalk. She was also very excited to return to the place under the sidewalk, where the clip *Iona Campagnolo visits her childhood home at North Pacific Cannery* is primarily filmed. The activities that my participants ended up doing in these places were relatively benign, despite having the opportunity to get in a boat or re-enact childhood experiences that used to occur there. Yet the smells, sounds, tastes, and textures were resonant enough to remind the participants of experiences in those places. They were physically drawn to specific sites within their (trans)formative places and these sites acted as memory-catalysts as well as talking points. The places were communicating to them in a way that is nested with layers of story, engaged in them physically being on the land.

Place Engenders Bliss and Appreciation for Life

Claudia referred to bliss, appreciation for life, and how the simple smell of a tomato transports her back to her five-year-old self learning from her Apō, in the clip *Claudia Li remembers her childhood home* (2:20 - 2:52). This feeling of bliss was very poignant for her. She mentioned it a number of times through her interviews with a culminating thought that: “[this place] taught me this kind of appreciation of life. Because when I think back to that moment I keep thinking of the word bliss. And you can only appreciate it really deeply, like from your head to your toes.” Bliss represented a time when love was uninhibited for Claudia. This memory and the sense of bliss also helped frame her connection to the wonder of life, something that she reported she brings to her work on a daily basis (*Claudia Li remembers her childhood home*, 3:26 - 4:58).

May Sam also exhibited an appreciation for life through her discussion of Khowutzun. The concept is most apparent in the last few moments of our interview when she picks a berry to give it to the camera man. We convinced her that she should eat it in the clip *May visits Tl’ulpalus* (6:10 - 7:43): “To think of everything that is happening today, the violence and everything... So glad that we were okay....[May then eats the berry she has been holding in her hand]... mmm so sweet. Huy ch q’u [thank you and all my relations in Hul’qumi’num].” This simple word is offered as thanks to all her relations for the sweetness of the berry. Thankfulness is an act of appreciation that many Coast Salish people practice as part of ceremony and healing practices.

Similarly, throughout the film *Iona at the North Pacific Cannery*, you see Iona playing with the riverside sedges in her hands (2:20). For this interview, she quite willingly sat on a stump after walking down there with us, despite a recent hip-replacement operation. You can also see her looking into the distance at times with a look of contentment (6:18). She mentioned multiple times since our interviews that she appreciated this opportunity to revisit her important places, since they helped her find direction in her own life.

Learning with and in (trans)formative places may support the development of appreciation of life. For May and Iona, these moments were not overtly discussed, but rather tangentially apparent through their interactions with the places. Looking wholly at my interviews with those two, I can see that they took me on a celebration of their lives through the lenses of significant outdoor places, and that celebration was as much for them as it was for the places themselves.

Although Wade’s interviews were structured slightly differently, he also spoke of appreciation and bliss, in that we arrived at the beginning of a protest by the Tahltan First Nation against a resource extraction company that was setting up camp in their traditional territory. Wade indicated that he wanted to take us to this protest to show solidarity with the Tahltan after we had a chance to do my interviews. We travelled three hours up an unused rail-bed to show our respects to the camp. At one point during this side trip he said, “I am inspired by the Tahltan and their relationship to the land. They have been coming to this site for thousands of years to hunt and have every right to. Yet they conduct

their protest with utmost respect to the engineers, surveyors, and negotiators.” Wade’s relationship to the Spatsizi could be described as one of reverence and appreciation for the place and the people, and he continually mentioned how much he has to learn from them both.

The appreciation for life and the relationships among humans, other-than-humans, and the land was something that Claudia’s interview helped articulate more fully. So much of Claudia’s interview focused on her reverence for her grandmother that at one point, I asked if she felt like her grandmother, now passed, was still present in her life. She stated that she could sense that her grandmother was here still and at the same time, returning to this place made her appreciate her community that is currently alive (*Claudia Li visits her childhood home*, 8:46 - 10:17):

I feel like I should have done more to share some of these memories when she was still around...I know regret’s not a good way to live by. But it just reminds me that you never know what you have until you lose it. ...It encourages me to reach out to my elders and try to make sure that I can do that with them while they are still around...I think a big part of being able to do that is to let go of all the crap that is between you and the other person so that you can show them love. So yeah, so mostly it is a memory of joy. But I think in some ways to experience really true deep joy it is often tied to some sense of deep loss or sadness or pain. When you are in the darkness and you see just a tiny bit of light, it’s just that much greater.

Claudia’s relationship to her childhood backyard is not necessarily rooted in the ecology of the area or the stunning vistas, but a connection to her grandmother and the wisdoms she shared. This memory of her grandmother represents an interrelationship of generations, where this backyard provides the context for rich and visceral memories.

Claudia traced her current work as an activist with the Asian Canadian communities back to the teachings of her grandmother. That sense of love, peace, and awe she experienced as a young girl with her grandmother is something she keeps close to her heart in her work. She frequently felt bliss from the memory of this place. She described this as a very deep appreciation for life, and noted that this appreciation is not only for people and the family, but for the larger world. She understood this memory as a function of joy, love, and appreciation for other lives and for the Earth as a whole. She sees the value of tradition as shown through her reverence to her grandmother, yet seeks to find new ways to support her culture to embrace more sustainable behaviour as shown by her work with < sharktruth.com > and the Hua Foundation.

Endogeny, Emotions, and [Trans]Formative Memes

Much, if not all, of human experiences are framed by the places we interact with, and these are coloured through nuanced reactions rooted in personal, intuitive,

and internal dispositional motivations or needs. Despite recent research that suggests that some cultural norms are inherited through epigenetics (Wallace & Wallace, 2011), our intuition and reactions to events and experiences are still somewhat of a mystery from the modern social and physical science domains (Hunt, 2012).

Viewing these data through an endogenous lens begs the question: How might (trans)formative places, arguably an external-to-self concept, relate to internal motivations, emotions, or intuition of a person? I saw endogenous reactions of each of the participants through their body language. It was obvious they all had a range of visceral and emotional connections to the places that they shared with me. Not only did they talk about this connection, but I could feel it in the energy of the interviews, and see it expressed by their faces, what they were drawn to in the landscape, and even in their pauses between talking. I spent many days with each of the participants during this research process and I experienced a dispositional change with each of them when we returned to these places.

Let me point out two examples of these non-verbal cues and explore the memes to which they relate. First, the visceral connection and endogenous understanding of place was obvious in Claudia's body language, as seen at the beginning of her video of returning back to her Burnaby home. The noises she was making, mixed with her wrists curling towards her body, suggested a reluctance and apprehension. However, she kept going into the backyard. She was drawn to see how the place had changed or how her memory had changed her perception of it. Only moments later, when I asked her about what she learned from this place, she was able to tie the notions of bliss and appreciation for life that she felt as a five-year-old to her current work and attitudes towards her culture and the environment. I believe that Claudia's experience of returning to her childhood backyard was more profound than the process of looking through old photo albums or watching home movies. The backyard itself engaged Claudia's memory by presenting a number of familiar and unfamiliar elements. Claudia walked into the experience with a set of expectations and memories that were only recently considered due to the pre-interview, and the process of walking into the backyard with different sights and sounds challenged those expectations. She then articulated those feelings as a mixture of sadness and of joy and through those feelings, described the bliss and learning to appreciate life and life processes. I believe that the backyard prompted these reactions in addition to the questions I posed to her. In a way, the backyard stored those questions through its own interiority, only to be unlocked through the process of revisiting.

Places affect our internal, emotional, and intuitive processes, despite being usually described as external to our bodies. Perhaps places act as a geo-spatial storage location for memories and teachings. If our arms and legs are considered extremities to our bodies, so too are these (trans)formative places corporeal entities. We are intrinsically linked to them. The act of visiting them

evokes emotional responses that could only be experienced through the proximal nature of being there. When these relationships to place are broken due to development, climate change, emigration, or other means, so too could the responses to revisiting the places be painfully and emotionally visceral. That is, if we have the privilege of returning to them at all.

The second example of non-verbal endogenous relationships to place occurred in the interviews with Iona. Her moment under the North Pacific sidewalk was a synergistic experience in that many divergent elements came together at one time. I had confirmed that Iona was going to be part of the research in the spring 2013, and I could tell that she was bursting to get her story out. It is because of this need to share her story that the main meme that showed up for her was so profound. The meme I saw within that moment, and also in all of the other videos with Iona, was that place invigorates agency, pride, and hope. This agency, pride, and hope was both borne of the place, and also borne through her own disposition in relation to returning to the place.

Iona's feeling of pride and agency were influenced by the social circumstances from the place and also related to the place itself. She is known for her support of First Nations' rights as well as environmental activism throughout her late career, all of which were invigorated by her outdoor childhood experiences. Therefore much of her development of agency throughout her life is both internally motivated and externally supported. She learned from the people and the land that her own aspirations for leadership could be developed in congruency with equity, reconciliation, and self-government for First Nations in British Columbia.

May, Wade, and Gail also expressed these emotional connections to places as articulated in the data above. This made me wonder how the act of revisiting (trans)formative places goes well beyond unlocking simple memories, but unleashes an active and emotional relation to them.

When I was exploring these data, I realized the interrelatedness of the memes and that representing them through hierarchic, dendritic, or linear models could misrepresent these relationships and the complexity of what my participants were sharing. This became evident to me when I identified an excerpt of video and reported on a (trans)formative meme. I realized that embedded within that single clip were many other concepts, emotions, and stories. Many emotions were concurrently being presented by my participants. For instance, the memes "Place is visceral and emotional," "Place heals people and families," and "Place elicits nostalgia and a sense of loss" are all bound together within the moments under the wooden sidewalk at North Pacific Cannery with Iona. These notions are less basic units of meaning and more memetic in their relationships, where a notion exists as an organic entity influenced and contextualized within the larger eco-sociological realm. My participants' relations to place are deeply complex and convoluted – and this is exemplified by the breadth and diversity of emotions that these places evoke.

Since time immemorial, places have been teachers of respect, relationships, and ecological systems. They have engaged humans in story-telling, in humility, and in community awareness. My participants helped articulate that lessons that come from connecting to (trans)formative places were profound in their lives. The emotions that are derived and co-created from and with our connections to place are entwined within the memory, and the triggered experiences of returning to (trans)formative places expose this complexity. When despair grows in us, we might return to (trans)formative places to access our emotions in powerful and nuanced ways, perhaps to find solace, to seek comfort, or to lose or find oneself.

With the idea that emotion, knowledge, and behaviour are central to the processes that occur for humans in (trans)formative places, I believe that this work has relevance to research in three major realms:

- The creation of geo-spatial memories, where memories become contextualized by ecology, land-features, and people. These memories are tied directly to place and therefore act as reminders to our connections to place. Part of our cognitive, emotional, and behavioural development is linked to our relationships to place because we are in some ways part of that place and it is part of us.
- The synthesis of life experiences, including a process of healing, catalyzing, and identifying new priorities can support the development of compassionate approaches to life. This seems to be particularly true when returning to previous (trans)formative places after many years.
- The decolonizing and Indigenizing of place-based research and its methodologies require practical examples for working with and in multicultural worldviews, especially of First Peoples.

Notes

- ¹ This note is a comment on my intertextual approach to (trans)formation and other uses of parentheses in this document. For some people, behavioural change, paradigm shifts, and even existential thought might feel like they are occurring in a fundamental way for the first time, suggesting a “formation” of identity, rather than a change from one being to another (Taylor & Kuo, 2006). However, my ecological understanding of human development and learning re-structures this understanding of the prefix trans- as an acknowledgement of the constant adaptation of all systems at multiple scales and times (Schatzki, 2003).

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