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Place Studies:  
Theory and Practice in Environmental Nonfiction

*Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvium which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call*

*reality, and say, This is.*  
—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Place studies has emerged as a promising, interdisciplinary field within the environmental humanities, where it connects scholarship within education, geography, architecture, philosophy, and literature by offering a shared forum for the interrelated study of natural, built, social, and cultural environments, individual and community identities, and human experience. Because such thinking spans so many disciplines, however, few transdisciplinary definitions and overviews exist, which has caused much contemporary scholarship in place studies to speak alongside each other, rather than in direct conversation, and for individual disciplines to overlook the contributions they are making to larger discussions of place. This is especially true when it comes to environmental creative nonfiction. Place has a rich thematic history in the environmental literature of the United States, a history that has deepened and grown increasingly complex during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In response to the environmental crises of their age, nonfiction writers have studied with new attention the ways in which industrialization, modernization, and globalization affect humanity's experiences of environment and place. Although much contemporary environmental nonfiction about place advocates for place-attachment as a means to create healthier, more sustainable relationships between humans and their environments—whether urban or rural—other critics problematize this desire for rootedness and argue for a more global “sense of planet.” In the context of nonfiction studies, this conversation—from its origins, to its trends,

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shifts, and tensions—deserves discussion for what it reveals about human thinking about place and global environmental change. Indeed, while we can question how much to celebrate place attachment in an era of globalization and climate change, and although we can complicate experiences of place through gender, race, class, and sexuality, we seem to keep coming back to it, indicating the ways in which place attachment remains integral not only to environmental nonfiction, but also the human experience.

### **Place Attachment: Theoretical Background**

Any discussion of place must begin with a definition—a task more difficult in this case than it at first seems. “No one knows what they are talking about when they are talking about place,” geographer Tim Cresswell writes in *Place: An Introduction*; “Place is not a specialized piece of academic terminology. It is a word we use daily in the English-speaking world” (1). Although the term’s familiarity offers a comfortable lens for analyzing environmental literature, the word’s usage also makes a theoretical discussion difficult because it is inherently interdisciplinary. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan was perhaps one of the first—and certainly most prominent—contemporary scholars to approach the concept, and his influential monographs *Topophilia* and *Space and Place*, published in the 1970s, offer a framework that has since grounded discussions of place in other disciplines, including literature and creative writing. Exploring how more abstract “spaces” can be transformed into “places,” Tuan holds that “[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (*Space and Place* 6)—a definition Cresswell appropriates when he describes place, at its most basic level, as “a meaningful location” (7).

Environmental creative nonfiction, historically, has offered intense, philosophical inquiries into particular meaningful places. Such literature has tended to explore distinct locations in as much detail as possible. For instance, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854)—arguably the most canonical of American nature writing—offers a concentrated reflection on Thoreau’s two-year stay at a particular pond in

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Massachusetts. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1966) treats a particular region in Wisconsin. Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968), in a similar manner, explores a prolonged stay in Arches National Park. Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) opens at a cabin in Virginia, Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985) is about ranching in Wyoming, and John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* (1997) studies Alaska. Though the places themselves differ, each writer uses the book to investigate a distinct location, drawing out the ways in which that location is meaningful to the writer, the ways in which the writer has endowed that location with value and significance, and often the ways in which the place, likewise, has influenced the writer.

However, to limit "place" to a discussion of unique locations is a gross generalization. Not only do the writers mentioned above perceive landscape in diverse and varied ways, but so do the scholars that write about them. Place-based thinking has become increasingly complex, influenced by an array of theoretical perspectives. In *Place: An Introduction*, his overview of the field, Tim Cresswell simplifies academic thought on place into three key strands: regional geography, humanistic geography, and social-constructivism. Regional geography, Cresswell says, tends to describe places in as much detail as possible, starting with the bedrock, ending with culture, and emphasizing boundaries and features that differentiate one region from another (16). Humanistic geography, on the other hand, approaches place "as a universal and transhistorical part of the human condition" (20). Rather than exploring individual places, humanist geographers focus on places as an "essence"—a "way of being-in-the-world" (20). Taking from phenomenology, they see place as a way of experiencing the world, largely through routines and daily practices. Social constructivism, in contrast, questions such humanistic approaches, often calling them "essentialist and exclusionary, based on notions of rooted authenticity" (26). Rather than explore the ways "place is primary to the construction of meaning and society," social constructivists use critical theory and identity politics to investigate the processes by which place is constructed and understood (32). A more thorough definition of "place," then, must account for all three theoretical strands, as Lawrence Buell does

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when defining place as “space that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness” (*Future* 145). In other words, place is comprised of an “environmental materiality” grounded in the physical environment, a “social perception” that is constructed through cultural institutions, and one’s individual “affect or bond” to that cultural landscape (62).

Place is also affected by modernization, globalization, and mobility—processes that further complicate discussions of environmental creative nonfiction and in fact have influenced the field more profoundly than theoretical debates between phenomenology and social constructivism. When describing humanity’s changing means of place-attachment, Buell explains that, prior to modernization, most human communities were relatively sedentary, their sense of place limited to a smaller geographical area than it is now. Traditional versions of place-attachment, then, can be compared to concentric rings, where one’s individual attachment to a distinct place/landscape diminishes with distance from a central site. Modernization, on the other hand, has caused place-attachment to “spread out to look more like an archipelago than concentric circles,” largely because individuals work farther from their places of birth, sometimes in different countries and hemispheres (72). “As scale and mobility expand,” Buell recognizes, “placeness tends to thin out”—a situation with profound effects on place-conscious writing (91). Indeed, increased mobility, industrialization, and the resulting space-time compression have influenced humanistic and social-constructivism theories alike, challenging them to redefine their theories in a world where place is less stable a term. For many environmental writers, the reaction has been to “put down roots” and advocate a lifestyle that reaffirms place through an increased awareness of localities, a reiteration of social practices that emphasize dependence on the environment, and a distinctly spiritual attachment to place. Such thinking has both sprung from and led to a wide body of literature advocating place-attachment and dedication to local spaces as a means to fight environmental degradation.

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**Application: Living In Place & Valuing the Local**

Scott Russell Sanders's *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*, first published in 1993, is a compilation of essays that describe Sanders's attachment to the landscapes of his youth and his commitment to Bloomington, Indiana, where he has settled as an adult. The book challenges readers to recognize where they are on the earth and to form deep, sustaining relationships with their locales. "Only by understanding where I live can I learn how to live," Sanders writes in the preface, and the book becomes exactly that: an exploration of where Sanders lives and how to best inhabit the earth (xiv). In his lyrical descriptions of the landscapes that speak to him and the way his family has built a home, Sanders celebrates the bonds that can form between individuals and their local environments and makes a philosophical argument for committing to one's home. Such placeness, Sanders contends, offers an antidote for western culture's inability to address—whether as a result of immigration, forced relocation, slavery, or environmental change—"the lifelong, bone-deep attachment to place [...] the pain in yearning for one's native ground, the deep anguish in not being able, ever, to return" (14). In fact, the book as a whole is a direct response to globalization and displacement. As Sanders also acknowledges:

There's no need to go looking for home, of course, unless you're lost. I have been lost, in ways no map could remedy. I cannot return to my native ground and take up residence there. The farm in Tennessee where I spent my earliest years is buried under asphalt; the military reservation where I lived next is locked away behind fences and soldiers; and the farm in Ohio where I spent the rest of my childhood has been erased entirely, the house and barn bulldozed by the army, the woods and fields flooded by a boondoggle dam. If I am to have a home, it can only be a place I have come to as an adult, a place I have chosen. (xiii-xiv)

But while Sanders does not deny Lawrence Buell's assertion that we have become more mobile, or that place-attachment has thinned—and does not obfuscate the realities of the modern world, including the

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difficult of committing oneself to a place—he nonetheless asks readers to recognize the importance of place in their lives and the benefits of forming and nurturing strong, complex, place attachments.

The benefits of place attachment, for Sanders, are twofold. First, one's ties to a local space is spiritual. Sanders argues that, “in belonging to a landscape, one feels a rightness, at homeness, a knitting of self and world. This condition of clarity and focus, this being fully present, is akin to what the Buddhists call mindfulness, what Christians contemplatives refer to as recollection, what Quakers call centering down” (121). He believes that living consciously in a particular place is a spiritual necessity and that place consciousness enriches human life on a profound level. Second, he links this intense knowledge of local settings with a greater appreciation of global landscapes and global environmental crises. As a result, reestablishing an attachment to place becomes a healing experience and a step toward a healthier planet:

To become intimate with your home region, to know the territory as well as you can, to understand your life as woven into the local life does not prevent you from recognizing and honoring the diversity of other places, cultures, ways. On the contrary, how can you value other places if you do not have one of your own? If you are not yourself *placed*, then you wander the world like a sightseer, a collector of sensations, with no gauge for measuring what you see. Local knowledge is the grounding for global knowledge. Those who care about nothing beyond the confines of their parish are in truth parochial, and are at least mildly dangerous to their parish; on the other hand, those who have no parish, those who navigate ceaselessly among postal zones and area codes, those for whom the world is only a smear of highways and bank accounts and stores, are a danger not just to their parish but to the planet. (114)

In other words, by understanding the nuances of the place in which they live, and by living as thoughtfully as possible within that place, Sanders believes humans can better contribute to a more environmentally sustainable world.

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Sanders's vision that humans create strong bonds with their landscapes, and that these local bonds not only have personal, spiritual value but also are necessary to maintaining a healthy planet captures the grounding principles of much place-based writing, and his work resonates alongside other oft-celebrated conservationist texts. Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," published in 1966, decades before Sanders's *Staying Put*, calls humanity to recognize that it is "only a member of a biotic team" (204) and to act in ways that "preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community" (225). He asks readers to recognize the inherent worth of other lifeforms and to reestablish an attachment to land. "We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in," Leopold writes, establishing a series of values and assumptions that continue to influence place-based environmental writing (214). Wendell Berry, Sanders's contemporary, similarly connects displacement from land and agriculture with a variety of modern qualms, from overspecialization in academia; to the undervaluing of field-, farm-, and housework; to fragmentation on an even larger level. "The only real, practical, hopeful way to remedy the fragmentation that is the disease of the modern spirit," Berry writes in *The Unsettling of America* (1996), "is in a small and humble way—a way that a government or agency or organization or institution will never think of, though a *person* may think of it: one must begin in one's own life the private solutions that can only *in turn* become public solutions" (23). Reconnecting "place" with "culture" through a healthy agriculture that forces humans to see themselves, plants, animals, and land as "part of one another" is, for Berry, not only a necessity, but "our most pleasing responsibility" and "our only legitimate hope" (22-23; 14). This insistence on local regions has roots in an interdisciplinary field called bioregionalism. "People who stay in place may come to know that place more deeply. People who know a place may come to care about it more deeply. People who care *about* a place are more likely to *take better care of it*," Robert Thayer, Jr. writes in *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice* (2003). By learning the distinct characteristics of a bioregion, and being receptive to life practices that work best in that region, Thayer argues we replicate a lifestyle closer to the evolutionary norm, where small bands of humans

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survive in a distinct region, cooperating socially in place (55). The result: humans who can better “guide those regions’ futures” and a “deepened sense of personal meaning, belonging, and fulfillment in life” (55; 71)—familiar tenets that have, in many ways, become the underpinning philosophy of much environmental creative nonfiction, against which contemporary writers have worked to respond. And question it they have.

### **Questioning Place-Attachment: David Gessner, Ursula Heise, and Greta Gaard**

If the first wave of place-based creative nonfiction established a foundational appreciation for and value of the role of place attachment, the second wave worked to probe that foundation. Here, we see writers grappling with the difficulty of enacting place-based philosophies in their own lives and interrogating whether or not such lifestyles—so honorably endorsed by Sanders—actually contribute to the sort of environmental awareness and care that place-based philosophy proposes. Although these writers often admire the writing and ideas of Sanders, Leopold, and Berry, they experience a disconnect when trying to enact place-based philosophy in their own lives. Often, this disconnect relates to identity. Sanders, Berry, and Leopold—like many of the environmentalists and theorists who defined the first wave of place-based writing—were white, male, college professors. The economic and cultural privileges they obtained through these traits allowed them to stay put and make a career out of their philosophies. When, on the other hand, the races, ethnicities, economic backgrounds, genders, and sexual identities of the second wave of place-based writers prevent them from having the same attachment to place, they are forced to acknowledge and come to terms with the field’s limiting and incomplete understanding of place attachment.

A prime example of this conflict and questioning can be found in David Gessner’s *The Prophet of Dry Hill* (2005). A small book, often overlooked amongst Gessner’s other titles, *The Prophet of Dry Hill* advertises itself as a sort of eulogy for John Hay, the well-renowned northeastern conservationist and



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nature writer, and a celebration of Massachusetts's Cape Cod. The premise: David Gessner has the opportunity to spend an extended amount of time on the Cape, where he joins Hay for bird walks and long conversations. The descriptions of the cape, the ocean, the birds, and the meditative appreciation of bird watching create the lyrical, spiritual "sense of place" that Sanders and other place-advocates celebrate, and the conversations with Hay, vividly and often lovingly recreated on the page, offer a tribute to a well-renowned and respected nature lover. Beneath this thread, however, *The Prophet of Dry Hill* also becomes a test of the philosophy of living in place as Gessner reflects on his own sense of placelessness. "The more I moved around, the more stability and rootedness appealed to me," Gessner writes; "in John [Hay] I saw a parable of finding a place and rooting down" (64). Gessner listens to Hay with respect and admiration. As the two note the changing of the seasons, Gessner yearns to "commit" to Cape Cod and "form a deeper relationship." He yearns to take up that lifestyle and live like Hay—or Sanders, or Berry. Yet, he finds this lifestyle difficult to enact. He is an emerging writer and an academic in an era when academia requires multiple relocations. His employment on Cape Cod is temporary; if he is to continue as an academic, he will likely need to move. When he and his wife consider staying on Cape Cod and making it their permanent home, they discover they cannot afford the real estate. Such barriers lead Gessner to an uncomfortable conclusion: "John had written extensively about the need for human beings to marry the land they love, to commit to it and form a deeper relationship, and I had taken his words seriously. But while I believed in those words, I was of a different generation, a different time. Maybe it wasn't possible simply to repeat and relive the old verities. The world was more crowded, land more expensive" (129-130). When Gessner and his wife leave Cape Cod at the end of the book to pursue careers elsewhere, his writing, sparse and honest, is riddled with a sense of loss:

We knew that leaving the edge house meant leaving a happy and productive period of our lives. More than that, we had a sneaking suspicion that we were leaving the best place we had ever lived and the best place we would ever live. We'd be losing something

when we left, something subtler than a nice view. We were going to miss the raw stimulation of living so close to the water and the bluff. And we were going to miss a deeper connection that we couldn't yet put into words. (131)

Leaving Cape Cod, in other words, does not just mean leaving a beloved home, a location of deep spiritual sustenance, and a location that, as an environmental writer, Gessner feels compelled to commit to, but also a discarding of an entire philosophy. Unlike Sanders and Berry, Gessner cannot have both: a life rooted in this particular place and an esteemed academic career. He must choose one. And in being forced to choose between these two ideals, Gessner recognizes the ways economics, culture, and privilege (or lack thereof) can limit an individual's ability to stay put. Gessner's tone is mournful, and his conclusion that he, even as a white male, cannot enact a place-based philosophy carries with it resignation. "I was giving up not just the place but the idea that I would ever commit to a place," Gessner writes, giving voice to a failed yearning (164).

David Gessner's conclusion—that as much as he wants to commit to Cape Cod, economic forces will not allow him to enact that particular lifestyle—warrants attention within the field of place-based creative nonfiction because it raises two key questions. First: Gessner asks whether living-in-place is even feasible or if, on the other hand, economics, culture, and identity make such a choice a privilege that now all populations have. Though Gessner focuses on economic privilege, his recognition that not everyone can realistically commit to a place opens the field to a more nuanced understanding of place-based philosophy. Second: Gessner questions the correlation between living-in-place and environmental commitment. As a recognized and acclaimed environmental writer who nonetheless does *not* commit himself to a particular location, he challenges the assumption that living-in-place offers the only lifestyle and the best narrative trope for writers/humans committed to strong, local environments and environmental values. In doing so, he joins a growing conversation as scholars explore not only whether the desire for rootedness is ineffective, overly nostalgic, idealistic, and pastoral/parochial to a fault, but also

whether living-in-place provides the only—or the most effective—means of improving the relationship between humans and their environments. Although place-conscious writers such as Berry, Sanders, and Snyder have responded with their own counterarguments—insisting that “being place-based has never meant that one didn’t travel from time to time, going on trading ventures nor taking livestock to summer grazing” (Snyder 26), and that “those who *have* no parish, those who navigate ceaselessly among postal zones and area codes” are most dangerous “not just to their parish but to the planet” (Sanders 114)—discussion remains. A call to “be in place,” such critics argue, overlooks larger national and international forces that cause migrations and refuges and make it a privilege for certain people to stay put—or, in Gessner’s case, for certain people or generations to be able to support themselves financially in a particular location. In his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), Lawrence Buell summarizes critiques against local place-based philosophies and writes that they risk overvaluing “environmental determinism” instead of “understanding placemaking as a culturally inflected process” (*Future* 67). When such a trend “takes a good thing too far,” Buell says, it overlooks larger criticism made by ecofeminists and environmental justice critics, producing “maladaptive sedentariness, inordinate hankering to recover the world we have lost, xenophobic stigmatization of outsiders and wanderers” (*Future* 68). Buell identifies bioregionalism as an attempt to expand the bounds of the local and recognize the ways in which globalism affects all local boundaries, but he argues that critics and writers alike need to recognize that “the locale cannot shut itself off from translocal forces even if it wanted to” (88). It needs to recognize a sense of “vulnerability and flux,” and it needs to address place on a global level—a project that “understandably gets more multivocal, contentious, and fraught” (90-91). Buell’s conclusion—that ecocriticism has approached global visions of the environment less effectively than other environmental disciplines (91)—signifies a major shift in place-based thought in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

With the publication of *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* in 2008, Ursula Heise has positioned herself as the most vocal ecocritic advocating an environmental awareness well beyond the scale of the local. Heise

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describes the “insistence on individuals’ and communities’ need to reconnect to local places as a way of overcoming the alienation from nature that modern societies generate” (28-29) as a trend unique to American environmentalism—and as a trend that prevents American environmentalists, writers, and theorists from envisioning a broader, yet just as necessary “sense of planet.” Even if the local “is presented as a miniature version of the globe and indeed the cosmos,” Heise argues that by “denying that a global perspective might yield useful insights and solutions,” environmentalists disconnect themselves from the political and economic realities of their time (38-39). In particular, Heise criticizes contemporary American environmental literature and thought for ignoring cultural studies and the work it has done to “dismantle appeals to ‘the natural’ or ‘the biological’” and instead ground them in cultural practices (46). For Heise, who clearly falls in the social constructivism camp of place studies, the overvaluing of the local has led to an impasse. Notions involving rootedness conflict with “concepts such as diaspora, nomadism, hybridity, mestizaje, borderlands, and exile,” Heise writes. As a result, “advocacies of local and global consciousness have achieved equal plausibility when they are formulated at an abstract theoretical level. It no longer makes sense to rely mechanically on a particular set of terms with the assumption that it always describes the ideologically preferable perspective” (50-51). Instead, Heise contends that “the increasing connectedness of societies around the globe entails the emergence of new forms of culture that are no longer anchored in place” (9). Heise calls this process “deterritorialization” and defines it as “the detachment of social and cultural practices from their ties to place” (51). Though many ecocritics, environmental writers, and general advocates of place-conscious living would criticize such a process, bemoaning the way it weakens the link between culture and natural environment, Heise believes deterritorialization “does not necessarily have to be detrimental for an environmentalist perspective” (55). She calls upon environmentalists and ecocritics to embrace deterritorialization’s ability to create new “cultural encounters” and “broaden horizons”: “If a knowledge of one’s local place has value because it is a gateway to understanding global connectedness at various levels, then nonlocal types of knowledge and

concern that also facilitate such an understanding should be similarly valuable” (56). According to Heise, then, increased mobility could and should lead to a “shift” in the “cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet” (56).

Heise’s and Buell’s critiques have had a large impact on contemporary place-conscious writers, whose work, in keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the subfield, often responds directly to current scholarship and discusses issues alongside cultural critics, scientists, and philosophers. As a result, the second wave of creative thought on place has led to a genre of increasing complexity. This, of course, is not to say that the work of Berry, Sanders, Snyder and other local-centric writers is not complex. The place-conscious lifestyle that Sanders advocates remains topical and is in no way seen as dated. In fact, when Sanders mourns the loss of his childhood homes to development projects and admits that “to have a home, it can only be a place I have come to as an adult, a place I have chosen” (xiv), he gives voice to the complexity of placeness in the current age. However, while Sanders is able to set down roots and stake a claim in a distinct locality, Gessner is not. Nor are a great deal of other environmental writers, often as a result of their identities. Sanders—like Berry and Leopold—is a white male, with a certain degree of economic privilege, and all three, as already discussed, established careers as college professors. What happens to someone outside of those categories? One of the large goals of the resulting creative nonfiction, as a result, has been to interrogate their senses of place and explore how other cultural contexts—such as gender, race, class, or sexual identity—affect one’s experience of place attachment. A prime example of this can be found in Greta Gaard’s *The Nature of Home*.

Greta Gaard’s *The Nature of Home* (2007), in many ways, begins much like Gessner’s *The Prophet of Dry Hill* by approaching place with an expectation of commitment and an understanding of place’s significance. “As much as my father’s brown eyes and curly hair, or my mother’s full lips, this land is ancestor to my flesh and bone, blood, breath, hair,” Gaard says of her childhood in California’s Sierra Nevada; “Because of this land, these parents, I am” (40). Place, for Gaard, is an intimate relationship that

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impacts all aspects of her life and perception. She embraces its phenomenological resonance and makes a conscious effort to live in ways that value place. When she and her partner consider a move—from the relatively flat Minnesota to mountainous Bellingham—place becomes of central, though not unquestioned importance. Gaard considers how the scattering of her extended families affects and influences her “ecological desires.” She wonders if she’ll ever she’ll “ever feel like [her] authentic self without mountains and oceans surrounding me,” and she questions why her relationship to place seemed “the most compelling force” in her life (5). Though *The Nature of Home* contains ample descriptions of long hikes, backpacking trips, and rappelling down mountains—descriptions that have long characterized environmental writing by heterosexual, white men—Gaard finds that these activities and her emplaced life in Washington do not produce the “knitting of self and world” that Sanders praises. Instead, Gaard struggles to fit in with Bellingham, she and her partner break up, and Gaard returns to the Midwest where she reflects that there “are many facets to place,” and that “the ecological environment is but one component”:

As a bisexual woman in a same-sex partnership, I did not have the same experience of wild nature in the Pacific Northwest as *Outside* magazine and *Backpacker* claimed I would, rating the town where I lived as among the top ten in the United States for those who love nature. Returning to Minnesota, I found a balance of culture and nature, history and economics that finally allowed me to feel at home. (197)

Gaard’s conclusion is particularly striking because at the beginning, she and her partner make every effort to engage in the process of *making* the place a home; they become involved in the community, learn about the ecology, and explore the region in order to form personal ties—all actions that environmental scholars and bioregionalists would advocate for their place-making value. To Gaard’s surprise, however, Bellingham does not turn out to be the ideal environment she and her partner had sought, and the reasons its doesn’t are entirely rooted in gender privilege. The trails surrounding Lake Padden are not always safe for women.

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During Gaard's time in Bellingham, a twenty-year-old woman goes for a walk and is abducted, raped, and killed. Although Sanders and Berry could make their homes without fear for their physical safety and under the assumption that they could make that landscape work for them, Gaard does not have the privilege to commit to a locale without carefully considering her personal safety and psychological well-being. She cannot *make* her home. Gaard must accommodate and adjust to the environment she finds, as a woman and, separately, as a lesbian, and it turns out that the community does not welcome Gaard and her same-sex partner. Indeed, Gaard's identity as queer forms an additional layer that affects—and in this case profoundly limits—her ability to attach to place. “As queer transplants,” Gaard writes, “we were sending roots into shallow soil. Smalltown Western culture was proving to be an impervious surface: rampant heterosexuality, born-again Christianity, and European American rugged individualism did not welcome our kind” (96). The couple considers having a child together—a child Gaard deeply desires—but they balk, knowing they would not have a community of queer families in Bellingham (113). Gaard's quest to embody a place-based philosophy thus fails, and the experience as a whole forces Gaard to reconsider her conceptions of place. By the end of the book she sounds much less like a proponent of the place-based philosophies proposed by her literary forebearers, and more like a new group of scholars within the interdisciplinary field of place studies.

Within geography, two scholars—David Harvey and Doreen Massey—have developed theories that attempt to better understand the effects of globalization on placeness, and their conversation mirrors the conversation that occurs between Sanders and Gaard. David Harvey, who sees place as socially constructed, contends that modernity has caused the “permanence of place” to exist in conflict with the “mobility of social capital,” a situation that has led to a new awareness for place (Cresswell 58-59). The desire to develop strong place-attachments, and to distinguish one place from another, is thus both a reaction to globalization—a wish to “retain capital investment” (qtd. in Cresswell 59)—and a “form of resistance against the forces of global capitalism” (61). From this lens, Sanders's place-based philosophy

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can be easily understood as a reaction to globalization's erasure of localities and a means of fighting that erasing force. Knowledge of one's place and the embracing of a local economy become radical, countercultural choices. Dorreen Massey, on the other hand, offers an even more complicated perspective when she argues that in a globalized world "there is a need to face up to—rather than simply deny—people's need for attachment of some sort, whether through place or anything else" (qtd. in Cresswell 66). Although Massey warns of misidentifying "place" with "community," she ultimately argues for a more local-global revision that recognizes place as a process, always in flux, and as a point of intersection between local and global forces, whether economic, political, or cultural. In this way, places can be unique locations, defined by their intersections, and also have multiple identities and histories (Cresswell 74). Gaard, as a queer, female transplant, who has lived in California, the Midwest, and Washington—sometimes due to economic reasons, sometimes due to choice—and who experiences these places differently as a result of her identities, sounds very much like Massey, as evidenced in the following passage:

home is not a static place or destination, not a noun but a verb, a process of creating relationships to place, to creatures, and to people. Being at home beings accepting impermanence, entering fully into the cycles of life, stepping into the flow of relationships, a movement of energy, a dance of creation, preservation, dissolution, and re-creation.

In every present moment, home is where you are. (199).

By emphasizing "place" and "home" as *processes* rather than *locations*—as malleable ways-of-being—and by identifying how gender and sexuality affect one's experience of environment, Gaard offers a distinct revision of place to the subgenre. Not only does she address the conflict in wanting to be emplaced in a mobile world, but she develops a philosophy that accommodates the conflict while also identifying how



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gender and sexual identity can hinder an idealized vision of place attachment. Although Gaard's revised understanding of place, in some ways, sounds hollow and less than complete in comparison to the visions of Sanders and Berry and Snyder, in it we see a new, yet still purposeful attempt to align place-consciousness with the realities of a diverse and fragmented world.

### **A Sense of Planet? David mas Masumoto's *Harvest Son***

With the publication of texts such as Gessner's *The Prophet of Dry Hill* and Gaard's *The Nature of Home*, we see the subfield working hard to increasingly diversify and complicate its understandings of place attachment. It is trying to understand the role of individual places, and an individual's attachment to place, in an era of globalization and global climate change, and it is trying to interrogate what "place attachment" looks like for different people, and how gender, class, sexual identity, and race affect one's experience of place. These alternate understandings of place contribute much to the discussion of place-attachment in a global age, and yet the field continues to struggle with a central question: how does such writing lead to "a systemic sense of planet?"—the kind that will propel global environmental citizenship and global environmental activism. Though Gessner and Gaard both come to accept—and thus manifest for readers—a mobility that transcends the boundaries of a single region, they each still rely on stories of individual locations to ground their reflections. The question as to whether nonlocal knowledge can contribute to understandings of global environmental connectedness—understandings that environmentalists and policy makers argue are increasingly necessary to address climate change—remains difficult to answer within this body of work. Nonetheless, writers continually strive to complicate their discussions of "place," and a discussion of one more text—David mas Masumoto's *Harvest Son* (1998)—offers insight into the potential role of place-based writing in capturing and promoting a more global environmental vision.

David Mas Masumoto's *Harvest Son*, in many ways, reiterates the common themes of environmental creative nonfiction. In it, Masumoto explores his longing for a sense of place—for a sense

of history and intergenerational ties to the land. As a third generation Japanese American farmer, Masumoto is haunted by the loss of family and cultural stories that connect him to the environment. He longs for such stories—he mourns their inexistence—and his personal narrative eulogizes their necessity:

Without an old farmer around, Dad could not talk with someone who had worked this earth before him, who knew the lay of this land. I never overheard a conversation about the history of a field—why one row of vines was planted closer together than any other row or why our irrigation well was only fifty feet deep and whether the water table had changed over the decades. I heard no tales about the rainstorm at the turn of the century or the Depression years or the hail just before World War II. Until we had a devastating freeze, no one told us about the lowland area where the killing cold air could gather, freezing the delicate new shoots of spring. All the farm stories I heard were new.

(37)

Masumoto's desire for cultural stories rooted in his environment speaks to the bioregionalist call for local knowledge and could in many ways be read as purely that. However, Masumoto's resulting quest moves beyond a stereotypical bioregional narrative in its examination of the ways transnational forces and race can affect experiences of place. It could be argued that Masumoto requires a bioregional narrative that echoes Wendell Berry as a foundation to question the relationship of race to place. As Masumoto describes, Masumoto's grandparents left farms in Japan and came to the United States "so there'd be one less mouth to feed" (121). In Japan, their ability to commit to the land was affected by poverty, and in the United States, it was further affected by racism. They migrated from farm to farm, providing manual labor, until they could save enough money to buy their own—only to face another form of relocation when forced to a Japanese internment camp during WWII. As Masumoto researches his family, bereft at the lack of photographs and documentation his grandparents have left behind, he must come to terms with the way his family's identity, in their particular cultural contexts, prevented them from living emplaced lives.

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Because of their race and class, it simply wasn't an option. Indeed, even when Masumoto returns to his father's farm and takes up organic farming, he recognizes the intricacies of culture and environment and the ways each are always affected by privilege, race, and movement. Masumoto witnesses strikes between the landowners and migrant workers. As Masumoto's Japanese-American neighbors leave their farms due to age, Chicano farmers move in, changing the culture of the region. When Masumoto's father's generation can no longer lead the community, Masumoto and the other Sansei sell the community hall the Nisei built, exchanging a physical symbol for community-in-place with a "conceptual" symbol "based on history and memory instead of the need for structure" (207). Place, though always deeply felt, remains constantly in motion for Masumoto, and his own experience of place as narrated through the book captures global interactions and movements between people, continents, and cultures. In doing so, it, perhaps comes closest out of the canonical works of environmental creative nonfiction to embody, at least in its blurring of national boundaries and its depiction of cross-cultural forces, what Heise might consider a "sense of planet" that could encourage readers to care about environment on a global level.

That said, local, place-based stories, as a means of establishing place identity and a means of living well on the land, maintain a decidedly prominent significance in the book—and for good reason. Scholars of place studies have long discussed the powerful effects that story, whether in oral or written form, have on our senses of place, and thus the need for story to craft relationships to the environment. In *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan argues that one of literature's functions is to "to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of place" (162). Lawrence Buell expands on this notion when he writes:

Perhaps the commonest attraction of environmental writing is that it increases our feel for both places previously unknown and places known but never so deeply felt [...] Whether from laziness or a desire for security, we tend to lapse into comfortably inattentiveness toward the details of our surroundings as we go about our daily business

[...] Environmental literature launches itself from the presumption that we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to. (261)

When it comes to inspiring activism, then, story becomes the means of change—the mode of obtaining new mindsets and thus more environmentally conscious lifestyles and policies. Bioregionalists such as Thayer, Jr. and Snyder call readers to study the literature of their bioregions and to write of their bioregions. The accumulation of local knowledge and perception—the accumulation of local stories—is central to the bioregional mindset and the creation of more sustainable lives. Interesting enough, Bill McKibben, who has become a particularly prolific environmental writer and whose nonfiction often addresses environment on a global scale (much in the way Heise might want), also insists on the local as his inspiration:

Were I a better person, I'd tell you that the deepest motivation has been worry for the people of low-lying Asian nations, or fear that we're triggering new waves of malaria, or some one of the thousand other more clearly moral concerns. But mostly it's because of these yellow birches, the bear who left that berry-filled pile of scat, those particular loons laughing on this particular lake. (133-34)

[...]

I have the great good fortune to have found the place I was supposed to inhabit, a place in whose largeness I can sense the whole world but yet is small enough for me to comprehend. (157)

David mas Masumoto's *Harvest Son*, in this context, is particularly notable for the way it offers a tale of global displacement—and eventual emplacement—while also emphasizing the paradigm-shifting power of story. *Harvest Son*, in fact, is very much a book about story. Masumoto is trying to capture and understand his family's story—his family's history—and he wants to understand and heal the link between family,

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story, and land. “Maintaining this orchard,” Masumoto reflects after deciding to help with his father’s farm, “requires [my father’s] vision and sense of history, his intimate knowledge of each tree—which ones have dying limbs, which grow languid with each passing year, which few are near death. I want to know the stories from the many seasons that have passed. We walk and begin to talk, mapping the fields with his memories” (134). As a result, Masumoto manages to push the subgenre forward—to directly address racism and transcontinental migrations in a manner that many of the writers before him did not—but he manages to do so without overlooking individual place attachments, and he manages to do so while purposefully working to generate new stories. “Every year, as I work that vineyard,” Masumoto writes with pride at the end of the book, “a grandson has stories to remember” (299). It is not just any land, but the particular fields his family has worked that draw significance. The narrative in fact could be about anywhere. But only by describing, in detail, his own experiences of place attachment, linked to very specific locations, can he capture his experience of place and his larger environmental vision.

To return to Heise’s question: Can environmental nonfiction establish a politically activating sense of planet without relying, to some degree, on individual senses of place? It seems more likely that, by offering glimpses of individual locations and the ways in which they connect, environmental nonfiction as a whole can perhaps develop a sense of planet large enough and diverse enough that its readers will feel compelled to care not only for their own hometowns, but also the entire earth. Indeed, calling on the subgenre to let go of its individual stories and instead to focus on global imaginings would in fact diminish the subgenre’s greatest strength: the ability to dramatize stories of people and place, with all the complications that result.

### **Place-Based Writing Today**

Today, writers and scholars continue to seek new perspectives on place, especially from voices that the work of earlier decades ignored. J. Drew Lanham’s *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man’s Love Affair*

*with Nature* (2016) has received significant publicity and acclaim for its African American perspective on place. Praised by environmental writers such as David Gessner, Lauret Savoy, and Janisse Ray, *The Home Place* has been couched as a “groundbreaking work about race and the American landscape.” And it certainly is. Despite the field’s diversification when it comes to race, class, gender, and sexuality, environmental nonfiction has struggled to conceptualize and recognize African American writing about place and environment, since African American writing about place often did not fit the tropes initially established within the genre. As Evelyn White describes in “Black Women and the Wilderness,” the ongoing trauma of slavery and racism, especially rural lynching, has often made “wilderness” a place of fear and vulnerability for African Americans rather than a site of personal exploration and illumination (1064). As a result, African American writing about place has often gone ignored since it didn’t celebrate outdoor recreation and solitary pursuits in wilderness like so many of the subgenre’s canonical texts.

Lanham’s *The Home Place* describes his experiences as an African American wildlife biologist connected to his family’s land in South Carolina, land his ancestors worked as slaves, directly addressing how race affects place attachment. In “Birding while Black,” perhaps the most moving and important chapter in the book, Lanham describes the fear he feels when, while birding or conducting studies in rural areas, he encounters homesteads sporting confederate flags or, in one particular instance, is followed by white men in a rusted, dented pickup. “I thought my color would cost me my life,” Lanham admits (154). Lanham’s experience as an African American, in fact, has led him to doubt his ability to succeed in his career: “After all, I was in wildlife biology, a profession where work in remote places is often an expectation. Any credibility I was trying to build would be shattered if I showed hesitation in venturing out beyond some negro-safe zone of comfort” (157). Rather than hesitate, Lanham describes “swallowing” his fear in order to do his work, but he makes it clear that African Americans interested in the outdoors should not have to swallow their fear. By the end of the book, he calls on people of color to get “out there”: “The presence of more black birders, wildlife biologists, hunters, hikers and fisherfolk will

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say to others that we, too, appreciate the warble of a summer tanager” Lanham writes. He wants to “Turn oddities into commonplace” and to see “young people of color reconnect with what so many of their ancestors knew—that our connections to the land run deep, like the taproots of mighty oaks” (157). He makes the claim that African Americans should have access to wilderness areas, too, and that they can—and should—gain as much as anyone else from access to wildlife—and he hopes that such access will help heal the wounds of the past that have led many African Americans to fear nature.

However, what is perhaps most notable about *The Home Place* as a text is that, while it does examine place attachment through the lens of a minority perspective not often included in discussions of environment and place, it does so without actually departing significantly from the tropes and patterns of earlier writing. Much of the book, in fact, is spent describing, with nostalgia, the land Lanham grew up on and the ways that he continues to love the land. Lanham recounts childhood memories, food, the daily practices of rural life, and family traditions all with a great deal of care. He recounts his admiration for Aldo Leopold, and he offers extended descriptions of landscape and wildlife. He ultimately reiterates the messages and themes upheld by so much place-based writing when he says,

I’ve been all over the world, now, but my wanderlust seems to always find its way home to piedmont clay, loblolly pine, and prairie warblers. And though I can’t be at the Home Place, I’ve been lucky. I have land, and I think about it. I think about quail calling in the pines that I’ve just thinned. I think about hunting lovesick turkeys in the alley between the cutover and the creek bottom. I think about the comfort of eating food that comes by my own hand and hard work. [...] And so I think about land. But more and more I also think about how other black and brown folks think about land. I wonder how our lives would change for the better if the ties to place weren’t broken by bad memories, misinformation, and ignorance. I think about schoolchildren playing in safe, clean, green spaces, where the water and air flow clear and the birdsong sounds sweet. More and

more I think of land not just in remote, desolate wilderness but in inner-city parks and suburban backyards and community gardens. I think of land and all it brings in my life.

I think of land and hope that others are thinking about it, too. (183)

In doing so, Lanham's *The Home Place* illustrates, once again, the ongoing push and pull within environmental creative nonfiction: the desire to question experiences of place, and to understand the ways in which identity, affected by race, gender, sexuality, and class might challenge earlier philosophies, as well as the ways globalization and environmental change may require alternate place-based visions, while simultaneously upholding the role of place, and place attachment, in individual lives. Lanham grew up in rural South Carolina. His love of the environment and sense of himself as a member of that environment is no different than Sanders's vision, or Gessner and Gaard's desire to belong to the land. Place, it seems, has an ongoing and lasting impact on the human experience. Within environmental creative nonfiction, this means that, try as they might, writers interested in place studies and place attachment, even though those interests are often propelled by global environmental concerns, keep coming back to local places and local sites of place attachment. The places might change. And the human experiences of place will continually shift and renew. But the impact of place on human experience, and the importance of individual places in human experience, will remain.

Indeed, place-conscious writing is in many ways as important as ever, and as a field it is primed for renewed interest and recognition. Traditional environmental venues for publishing remains strong, with journals and magazines such as *Orion*, *Ecotone*, *Fourth River*, and *Terrain.org* and literary publishers such as Milkweed Editions, Beacon Press, and Counterpoint Press maintaining a healthy list of titles about environment and place. In addition, *Best American Essays* expanded in 2000 to include *Science and Nature Writing* as well as *Travel Writing*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, a literary journal not among the list often associated with environmental writing, has focused recent issues on "The Due North," "Revisions of the American South," "Prairies, Plains, Mountains, Deserts," and "The West Coast and Beyond." The



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forthcoming anthology *Thinking Continental: Writing the Planet One Place at a Time* even approaches the local/global debate directly by compiling work that “braids together abstract approaches with strands of more-personal narrative and poetry, showing how our imaginations can encompass the planetary while also being true to our own concrete life experiences in the here and now.” There prevails, amongst writers, editors, and publishers alike, a lively interest in stories about place.

This interest carries over into other fields as well. In her overview of scholarship on place attachment, psychologist Maria Lewicka discusses how the public increasingly values “place” as a concept, even amongst populations that tend to travel often and do not live particularly rooted lives. Similarly, a recent *Guardian* article critiques environmentalism for aligning itself with neoliberalism. In discussing Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, Paul Kingsnorth concludes that “Globalism is the rootless ideology of the fossil fuel age, and it will fade with it. But the angry nationalisms that currently challenge it offer us no better answers about how to live well with a natural world that we have made into an enemy.” Kingsnorth calls on environmentalism to reaffirm its attachments to place and the psychological need for people to belong to place and tribe—a call that could rejuvenate place-based initiatives, including the now-decades-old philosophies of bioregionalism.

As a result, the next few decades will very likely see place studies and environmental creative nonfiction continue to emerge as necessary and vital components of human thought. As global climate change demands the attention of our politicians, scientists, and citizens, the task of educating and encouraging place-conscious mindsets, whether on a local or global level, will grow, and the task of validating, affirming, and encouraging environmental citizenship will remain as vital as ever. Indeed, the balance between local agency and global change will require further thought from place-conscious writers, and as communities around the world adjust to climate change, it will be up to those writers to mourn lost places and to craft new stories that help us imagine who we are and how to live on a changed earth. “Place” is not a location, but a process, Dorreen Massey and Greta Gaard conclude. Place-based writing,

similarly, will always be in flux. But as long as humans exist on a physical earth, the need for stories connecting humanity to their many environments will persist—and the interdisciplinary conversation will continue.

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