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Keywords

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**A Call to Climb, A Call for Consumption:
The Role of Place in Tim Gautreaux's *The Clearing***

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To those writers from the American South, the differences between scene and place are monumental. According to Frederick J. Hoffman, “[p]lace is indispensable to scene in any literature that is more than merely abstract” (13). He goes on to say that “[i]t is really a question of types of knowledge and kinds of emotional commitment” (14). Scene is simply setting and props: the sun setting, trees lining the driveway, yellow curtains in the window, a broom or bucket in the girl’s hand. On the other hand, place is about cultural implication and the significance of people living in a certain area. With place, the audience builds an emotional tie to the land, the people of the land, the history it holds, and the future it leans toward. For the Southern writer, then,

place acts as a concrete foundation to the world of stories and characters, creating believability and a sense of depth. The question the writer must wrestle with is how deeply he or she is willing to go. For Tim Gautreaux, a writer from Southern Louisiana, the commitment to place is comparable to the strength of a marital promise. This commitment is evident in many of his published works, which include two story collections, *Same Place, Same Things* (1996) and *Welding with Children* (1999), as well as two novels, *The Next Step in the Dance* (1998) and *The Clearing* (2003). Specifically in *The Clearing*, Gautreaux creates a world that reveals and influences specific behavior patterns of characters, a world that flows naturally with the rhythm of Southern living but a world that holds a unique place for each character. Gautreaux's place, characters, and events are so intertwined that they cannot stand independently - each consumes the other.

Tim Gautreaux acknowledges the significant role "place" plays in his own life and how that shapes his literature:

I consider myself a writer first who happens to live in the South. If I had been born in North Dakota I would still be a writer. I would probably have had a similar life. But my people and my settings, my moods, my skies, my waterways would be from North Dakota or South Canada [...] Wherever you are born and raised tends to have profound

effect on your fictional world." (Birnbaum Interview 4)

Here Gautreaux points to the importance of place in daily living, the importance of place in details that naturally spill out and flood other areas of life so that, in some ways, place creates a person. This idea carries over into his fiction wherein Gautreaux intends that place have a similar impact on his characters. For Gautreaux, creating the world where characters live is as important as creating the characters themselves; "I [Gautreaux] spent so much time placing the reader in this world [...] it's something that I worked very hard to achieve" (Birnbaum Interview 15). After such a statement from Gautreaux, his readers must understand that every detail relating to place is intentional and significant. A variety of influences in Gautreaux's life led him to valuing such details, the details that are intended to create a place as influential as everyday reality.

Three specific factors have influenced Gautreaux's commitment to develop place in his writings. The first influence is that of his own Southern upbringing where "this metaphor of a place inhabited, worked, and loved, dominates" (Hoffman 20). In this literature, place may present the particulars to a scene, act as a record of tradition, or stand as a moral which establishes meaning to a story's overall message (Hoffman 28). The second influence comes from Gautreaux's own Catholic faith. According to L. Lamar Nisly, the Protestant faith generally emphasizes the separation between God and the world while for Catholics, God presents divinity in and through nature (Nisly Class Lecture).

In other words, nature and place point individuals directly toward God, which is an important aspect of Gautreaux's writing (Nisly 117). Finally, the third influence comes from Gautreaux's love of machinery. Gautreaux claims that what he loves about machinery is that every piece plays a part: "The thing about a properly designed mechanism is that there are no non-functioning parts. Everything has a purpose, every bit and tag, screw and eyelet" (Kingsbury Interview 51). For him, "[g]ood fiction's the same way" (Kingsbury Interview 51). Every part and parcel to a story works together to create a greater whole. The same may be said of Gautreaux's commitment to place. Each smaller part of his own life, his Southern upbringing, Catholic faith, and love of machinery, work together to create a whole, stories of depth developed by a strong sense of place. This commitment to place is markedly evident in *The Clearing*.

Set in the 1920's, *The Clearing* is a story of two brothers living in a mill-town in Louisiana. Randolph, the younger of the two brothers, is sent to Louisiana by his father to run a broken-down and worn-out lumber mill. His father hopes to see the mill restored and successful but, more than that, he wants Randolph to bring his brother Byron back home to Pennsylvania. Byron, the older of the two brothers, is a World War I veteran working as the lawman in Nimbus, the mill-town to which Randolph is sent. His memories of war throw him into silence or fits of rage, and what he needs most is the love of his family. Together these brothers grapple with the challenges posed by their relationship, the mill-town and of their mutual enemy, mob boss Buzetti.

In the end, the mill-town becomes as much a part of these brothers as their own skin.

Gautreaux appears to agree with Frederick J. Hoffman and Elizabeth Madox Roberts that in the South, "there is a different rhythm of life" (Birnbaum 13). This assertion is most evident in the adjustments made by Lillian, Randolph's wife, to her new life in the South. At first, Randolph moved to the mill alone and Lillian remained in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as both hoped Randolph would return home within a few months. However, as time moved forward and Randolph continued working at the mill, Lillian decides to move to the South to be with her husband. Somewhat surprisingly, she gradually adjusts to her new surroundings. As an interim step, she moves to New Orleans and, over time, grows used to the heat and the bugs: "Lillian began to fit in with the New Orleans culture, learning to cope with the hot afternoons and palate-tingling food" (131). Once accustomed to this lifestyle, she takes a new and natural next step in moving from New Orleans to the isolated settlement of Nimbus, where once again she adjusts to her physical surroundings:

Lillian moved into the logging camp and learned to deal with the captured heat of the place, mosquitoes always floating in her vision, stinkbugs haunting her collar, love bugs flying drunk and sticking to her dress [...]. She learned the necessity of keeping a shovel on the front porch, which she used to cut the heads of snakes [...]. (161)

As Lillian lives in the camp and creates a home with Randolph, the mill workers start to hunger for a more civilized life, which is obvious in the number of marriages Randolph begins performing (131).

With new families springing up around the mill, Lillian works toward the next step of civilization – designing a building to act as a school during the week and a church on Sundays: “[e]very mill town has a school and church, Rand. It’s time you think about providing some civilization” (163). The attendance at the school and the church services grows rapidly during those first few weeks, much to Randolph’s surprise. For Lillian, the process of creating a home and community in Nimbus is straightforward and obvious, a natural part of life. Simultaneously, the mill workers and Gautreaux’s readers invest in the mill. Together, a connection is developed so that scene becomes a place, an object of attachment. This cycle of development did not occur overnight, but instead, it moved forward naturally as does the slow rhythm of the Southern environment and way of life.

Rain, wind, or sunshine is as much part of this Southern place as trees and swamps. In life, weather is a powerful influence; dark clouds create feelings of restlessness, winter snow brings on the blues, and rain causes a cancellation of plans. Gautreaux re-creates this powerful influence of weather in his books wherein “weather helps to define a pattern of behavior, makes a manner of behaving possible or necessary” (Hoffman 15). In general, Gautreaux uses weather to set up a scene – to create mood.

For example, one day Randolph joins Byron on the porch of his house and both sit watching the “veils of rain” falling from the sky (116). Because of the dark, heavy rain, no one is surprised when Byron stomps angrily into the house in response to a question posed by Randolph (116). Another time, just after Randolph kills a man for the first time, an unusual wave of heat permeates the mill: “The weather turned unseasonably warm and Randolph began to have trouble sleeping. The nights steamed like a cow’s breath, and he would wake up with the sheets sticking to his legs like wet paper” (183). This torturous weather emphasizes the heaviness and agony of Randolph’s thoughts and feelings. Killing a person was an act he always considered evil and barbaric, certainly something he never imagined doing. Like the stuffy weather, the emotional weight of the situation is suffocating. A third example occurs on the day Randolph’s son, Walter, is born. The paragraph about his birth begins: “On a warm spring afternoon [...]” (148). This kind of refreshing spring weather is so infrequent at the mill that what follows can only be a rare gift of goodness. That is exactly what Walter becomes to Randolph.

In *The Clearing*, weather also works as a metaphor regarding the kind of atmosphere and type of people to expect in Nimbus. In the beginning of the story, Jules, an investment appraiser, travels to Nimbus to evaluate the mill for potential purchase. Within minutes of his stepping onto the property, a fight breaks out on the porch of the saloon – a fight described as “a small, unexpected rain cloud” (6). As a new arrival, Jules did not get involved in the

squabble, but when he turned to find the mill manager, he “walked off toward the grinding thunder that was the mill” (7). These “thunder-storm” images help to create a place that is tense, rough, ready to break open with the gusto of uncontrollable weather. These images continue throughout the story: “Saturdays spawned fights the way a hot afternoon brewed thunderstorms” and “[there was] a storm of voices coming from the white side of the saloon [...]” (107, 122). Gautreaux’s weather images are effective in creating a place that is violent, apprehensive, and tense, but his use of humidity takes the violence a little further.

The intense humidity drives violent behavior. In *Nimbus*, as in the South in general, everything sweats: the people, material things, and the mill (33, 84, 274). Randolph immediately notices the effect of heat on the people. When first traveling from his home in Pittsburgh down to *Nimbus*, he observes the worn-out men working in the fields: “The next day further south he changed trains again and saw gaunt men standing in the fields as if sun-struck, their clothes a sagging second skin of denim and copper rivets, their tobacco crops bug-bitten and jaundiced in the heat” (12). The effects of the sun on the people of the South do not escape his notice. He is also quick to observe how his own workers droop from the intense heat. In a letter to his father, Randolph writes, “The men suffer more than our northern lumbermen because of the heat, which even now is bad, and from the dampness, which sometimes makes it hard for me to draw a breath” (44). Furthermore, Randolph expresses no surprise at the honest words of one of his employees:

“Here [*Nimbus*] is not a happy place. I sweat and my clothes stay wet all day. The waterways stink and look like dark beer” (72). The immense suffering and discouragement that Randolph observes in the South and in his men, in particular, leads them to violent acts:

As the heat gathered throughout summer, the saloon fights seemed to generate out of the humid air. Byron had to go into the quarters at night to break up husbands and wives, or husbands and their wives’ boyfriends, answering the wink of straight razors in the dark with the ring of his shovel on bone.
(152)

The fights grow louder and more violent during those summer months of heat and humidity, but in the winter the aggression cools, again reflecting the weather (143). Towards the end of the story, as the woods grow thinner, Randolph acknowledges that soon the factory will “steam away” (297). One wonders if this thought was a familiar one to Randolph – especially during the summer months of intense heat and intense fighting when violence prevailed and led to destruction.

The destructive acts of Randolph and the mill workers emphasize the wickedness of humanity – another role of place for Gautreaux. Hoffman claims that when place is destroyed in a novel, so are the human characters with all their faults, weaknesses, and sinfulness (20). *Nimbus* is somewhat unusual in that the men of the mill already cut and destroyed a large part of the forest before Randolph arrives:

[W]hen the train clattered into a clearing of a hundred stumpy acres, the settlement lay before [Randolph] like an unpainted model of a town made by a boy with a dull pocket-knife. Littered with dead treetops, wandered by three muddy streets, the place seemed not old but waterlogged, weather tortured, weed wracked. (34)

By the end of the novel, not much changed; Nimbus still stood as a worn-out land:

[B]y then [Nimbus] was just a flat tract of engine foundations and house piers, broken boards, stacks of cast-off furniture, timbers, cable, dragged-over mud, and the hollow vault of the drying kiln looming above a vast plain of stumps. (302)

Between these two sorrowful descriptions, the mill workers cut and destroyed the land. From beginning to end, the worn-out Nimbus did not escape Randolph's notice, even if it did leave him somewhat surprised.

Often towards the end of the narrative, Randolph takes the time to reflect on how Nimbus had changed and how he changed as a result of Nimbus. For example, he considers light and darkness. The lumber mill sat in the middle of a vast cypress forest. In cutting down the trees, the men started from the outermost part of the forest and worked their way inward to the mill so that during the last few weeks of work, the forest begins to thin, allowing for more sun to shine on the buildings of the mill and surrounding property.

Randolph experiences a growing curiosity on the effects of light as he walks around the mill and observes the sunshine:

[Randolph] came out of his front door late one morning and started to walk the edge of the muddy lane toward the mill when something unusual in the air arrested his motion, a new quality he couldn't quite put his finger on. He looked around at the houses in the white section, at the mill itself, and decided it was the light. (297)

As light gleams upon the houses of the mill, Randolph wonders if the light changes people by shining upon them and revealing "a new quality" - the goodness of mankind. He begins entertaining the idea that perhaps the small battles and bloodshed of the mill could have been avoided had he cut down the trees from the inside-out instead of the outside-in so that the mill and the men might have basked in sunlight instead of in deep shadows:

The mill manager now felt under constant scrutiny, and he wondered if all the savagery would still have happened if he'd cut outward from the mill, if the light and a wider view would have stymied the bloodshed. (298)

Perhaps Randolph's musings are correct. Perhaps light does limit the violence and destruction of mankind and instead reveals higher qualities.

Byron offers a different solution. At one point, Randolph is busily estimating the size of trees and the

amount of possible profit to be derived from cutting them down. Byron asks, “You want every tree that walks?” When Randolph nods, Byron goes on, “A forest is good for more things than shutters and weather-board.” Then he suggests it’s good “just to look at, maybe” (244). During this brief conversation between the brothers, Byron suggests that instead of calculating which pattern of cutting the forest will create less violence among the workers, Randolph might consider not cutting it at all. Literally speaking, Byron is correct. Had Randolph not cut down the forest, the mill would not be nestled in the clearing, and the men would not be there to fight one another. Furthermore, had the mill workers not been surrounded by daily scenes of destruction, perhaps they would not be bent on destruction themselves. To go one step further, Byron may also be suggesting that if men cut one another down as Randolph cuts the trees, then men create war against one another and, in this way, destroy each other. As a World War I veteran, Byron knows this to be the truth all too well. The power of Nimbus – a land destroyed – emphasizes the violence, not only of the mill workers but also of humanity in general. Still, this message about the world does not alter the uniqueness of Nimbus.

At one time, nature played a vital role in the well-being of humanity. We relied on the earth to provide food, shelter, and even profits as we worked the land and harvested crops. We were familiar with the cycles of the earth and the blessings and curses that result. Today, with new technological and scientific advancements in society, humans no longer rely on the earth in the same way. In other words, nature,

which once gave mankind identity, is no longer important in today’s world and the disconnect leaves man alienated. Perhaps Gautreaux recognizes this dilemma as well for he deliberately creates a plot in which the place gives purpose.

Nimbus is a prime example of how place creates a distinctive “niche” for Randolph. First of all, Nimbus sits in an isolated area of the world, an area to which not many people are willing to travel. The place is hardly noticeable on a map:

Below this Louisiana mill was a spongy green area, a cypress swamp that had been explored mostly by snakes, and below that a thin picket of marsh above the pale blue waters of the Gulf. Twenty-five miles to the west of Nimbus, the map showed a town [...] called Tiger Island [...]. Some twenty miles to the east of the mill tract was Shirmer [...]. Directly north by five miles was a particle on the Southern Pacific main line named Poachum, and north of that was seventy miles of uninhabited land visited only by survey crews [...]. (10)

Still, Nimbus – the little town in a big world - seems to be just the right spot for Randolph, for there lies a mill that previous owners could not handle but which Randolph runs successfully until every last tree falls. More than running the mill, part of Randolph’s unique purpose is to love and care for his older brother as he heals from his memories of war. In fact, that was their father’s original intention for

buying the mill. During the purchase, Noah, their father, says to Randolph, “You can stay for three or four months [...]. Just to straighten things out and convince your brother to come back [...]. You’re the one who can bring him back to us. You’ve got to remember that” (11). As a consequence, Randolph travels to Nimbus to care for and love his brother. This love for Byron is so strong that many in the camp notice it, including the servant, May, who wants that same love instilled in her own children (113). Over time, progress comes. The mill provides jobs as it reaches its full-functioning potential, and Byron opens up to healing as he receives the love offered by his brother over and over again.

In the end, the fact that Nimbus is a unique place made especially for Randolph is most evident as the mill shuts down. Randolph is so successful in this purpose of caring for the mill and for his brother that he feels as exhausted as the mill in its final days. Randolph mopes around the property on his blind horse, listens to the mournful creaking of the old machines, and tries to convince himself that all he is doing is selling lumber instead of mourning the loss of his mill (294, 301, 299). When the last tree falls to the ground, something in Randolph shuts down: “The mill manager felt as though a giant electric switch had been thrown off, stopping everything in his life” (300). Randolph, once a proud owner of a bustling mill, feels numb and empty for as Nimbus was sold off, he was losing his unique purpose. How appropriate, then, that Randolph’s last view of Nimbus – the place he loved - was over his brother’s head – the brother he loved. As the brothers propel themselves from the mill back

to town on a borrowed hand-pumped track car, Randolph glimpses the mill one last time and sees his brother pumping the handle up and down, up and down, moving them away from the desolate but beloved land. Randolph’s final view of the mill encompasses both the place and the man that once gave him purpose and meaning, the place and man that once grounded him.

This leads to the final reason for the role of place in Gautreaux’s *The Clearing*, the idea that people and place sometimes become so intertwined that one cannot stand independent from the other. To test the validity of this assertion, we need only compare Randolph’s life in Pittsburgh to his life in Nimbus. In Pittsburgh, Randolph lived a plush life. He was rich, comfortable, and successful. However, Pittsburgh never quite “got in his bones” and changed him as much as those few years in Nimbus. On one of their first trips back home, Randolph and Lillian are surprised at the change that has occurred in them – Pittsburgh no longer feels like home:

Randolph and Lillian returned to Pennsylvania for Christmas, understanding with a mild shock that they were no longer fond of snow and bland food [...]. For a week they endured [Noah’s] complaints and offers of positions in New England mills, then traveled back South to ignorance and good food, poverty and independence, and Nimbus [...]. (168)

Another trip back to Pennsylvania confirms the reality that Nimbus is now home. As he stands in his father's yard with Lillian, Randolph considers all the "adventures" Nimbus has provided him – adventures that could not have happened in Pittsburgh. And Randolph realizes just how much the land has changed him and just how much he has become united with the land:

He was quiet. Looking from hill to hill, then back to the green copper gutters of his father's house, he suddenly felt idle, that everything he belonged to was somewhere else. In Pennsylvania, he had never run a mill completely by himself, had not gone out in the dark to look for a man taken off by a reptile, had not shot a man dead, and no one here had ever carried his child. "Oh, my," he said aloud. (209)

Randolph's understanding of the effects of Nimbus on his own life is clear while on his trips to Pennsylvania. However, complete understanding comes as he is ready to leave Nimbus and is watching the blind horse. He knows the horse's thoughts: "that the human world was a temporary thing, a piece of junk that used up the earth and then was consumed itself by the world it tried to destroy" (303). Yes, Randolph "consumed" Nimbus with every fall of a tree, but by the end he knows that Nimbus, in turn, "consumed" him.

In some ways, place in *The Clearing* nearly takes on life-like characteristics, since the land changes people. Randolph wonders about the connection:

[...] if the many-fanged geography rubbed off on people, made them primal, predatory [...]. What had affected him if not the land itself that sickened and drowned his workers, land that would eat him alive, too, if given half a chance? (256).

This "many-fanged geography," as the land around Nimbus is described, is brutal, honest, and all-consuming. Still, Nimbus carries with it enough softness around the rough edges that Randolph and most readers cannot help but grow attached to it. Nimbus teaches forgiveness and allows for deep questions regarding violence and love. It might be argued that the art of creating a vivid world is fading in literature today and that, like the last tree, "beating its wings to stay aloft" (300), place is searching for its own dwelling to live and breathe and move. This, then, is a call, a call to put away our saws and, instead, climb up into the strong, leafy limbs of place and allow it to consume us.

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