

Elsie R.

St. Helena, California

Snow Day

Alma Mater

Oil paint on canvas

Watercolor kits, pens, and sketchbooks were a major part of my upbringing. My dad, a professional artist, encouraged me to draw alongside him before I could read. Even now, he always keeps a space for me in the corner of his studio. I made my first oil painting there – a fox in the snow. The challenge of painting orange and black fur in that creamy yet uncontrollable medium excited me and ignited my love-hate (but mostly love) relationship with oils. I took all the painting classes at my boarding school and doubled up one year to fit in an extra class on figurative drawing. For my fall semester at Oxbow, I am working in multiple mediums, including many I've never tried.

My inspiration for my paintings stemmed from my experiences in two different places, a boarding school in New England and the slopes of Lake Tahoe. I wanted the paintings to portray the emotions I associate with home and belonging and absence. The need to process feelings sometimes prompts me to paint because art helps me put emotions on paper.

My creative process helps me grasp hold of my mental landscape and express those thoughts in an image that makes sense personally. Once I have my idea, I waste no time staring at the blank canvas. I immediately start sketching with paint and then block in shapes with color. Refinement comes later; in this stage it's just my mind and the canvas. After I have established value and perspective I obsess over the details of the piece until I like the work as a whole. At this point it is finished and I have to get the painting out of my sight so I don't overdo it.

Alienation and Belonging



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A crisscross of vineyards lined the floor and foothills of the valley. Fog rose off this patchwork and was burned away by the hot afternoon sun. St. Helena sunk into the heart of those

vines. The town was the ideal retirement community- picturesque houses with picket fences and pools in the backyard. Main Street served as this town's vena cava with its shops and acclaimed restaurants that attracted hordes of tourists. Five minutes away, down a long winding road, my house perched on a hill. I lived there many years yet each time I came back from boarding school it felt less like home. I like the place, with its blue paint and chimney choked by ivy, but I don't feel attached to it. During my sophomore year, when COVID-19 hit and I was stuck inside, I threw myself into reclaiming my room. I covered my walls with posters and flags, bought pillows, and strung up lights. A year later, very few of those posters remained. All my clothes had migrated with me to one place or another until my closet was empty. My trace slowly disappeared from my room, my house, and I didn't particularly care one way or another. I suppose the same could be said for the people in the town. The parents of the children I went to school with for twelve years barely recognize me anymore. The friends whom I grew up with, I have mostly lost contact with. I still see my closest friends from time to time but we are all busy growing up and going to school, moving away to college. I feel misplaced.

On the other side of the country the Berkshire mountain range was blanketed in forests with leaves that flame gold and red before falling and decomposing under frost and ice. Northfield Mount Hermon was situated in those hills, near the Connecticut river. It was prettiest in the fall and happiest in the spring. In the winter the flat grey pane of the sky let in little direct sunlight and my skin responded by turning a ghastly white that accentuated the purple shadows under my eyes. I was a New England vampire. Going outside required many layers if I wanted even a modicum of comfort so I stayed in. This bleak atmosphere exhausted me. Boarding school social dynamics change with each passing year, even each term when people switch sports. In this changing state I lost touch with people and began to feel alienated.

In both these homes I have felt a sense of belonging and deep loneliness. This causes me to propose the question of what is home and why do we as humans crave belonging? In this essay I will look at the psychology of home and the root of alienation.

Belonging and alienation are difficult to study because they are highly subjective to the individual. I will share my own take and experience with the topic and include information from scientific studies to back my claims. For the purpose of this essay, alienation is defined as “a powerful feeling of isolation and loneliness” (“Alienation”) that is expressed individually. “Some [people] become withdrawn and lethargic; others may react with hostility and violence; still others may become disoriented, rejecting traditional values and behavior by adopting an outlandish appearance and erratic behavior patterns” (“Alienation”). On the other hand belonging is “the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group” (“Sense of belonging”).

What is this notion of “home”? We have also been socialized into a perception of “home” that stems from societal ideals and our core memories. In the eastern philosophies home is like an extension of self while the west states that “your psychology, and your consciousness and your subjectivity don't really depend on the place where you live (qtd. in Beck)” rather, they come from inside your brain or personality. From an evolutionary standpoint, a home was necessary as a warm place for shelter, safety, and family. (qtd. in Heitler). Similarly, the psychology of home is connected to belonging and emotional safety. The psychologist, Susan Heitler Ph.D., found that “People feel emotionally safe when they feel free of excessive criticism, free of excessive control by others, free of uncalled for blame or shaming from others, free from fears that others will turn anger on them, seen and heard when they express their thoughts, and free from concerns that others will leave them” (Heitler). This list of “freedom from” statements made perfect sense when I

compared them to my warmest and most comfortable memories. When I was curled up by the fire on Christmas Eve with my dogs and cup of hot cocoa or pattering around the shores of Lake Tahoe with my family. In those “home” memories I am surrounded by unconditional love and support of my family. After seeing the information check out I started to wonder “why do we care so much about belonging?” The answer to that question resides in our ancestral history. Natural selection rewarded our ancestors for collaboration and for forming connections with each other. Over time our brains grew and got better at recognizing what others thought and felt, and at forming and sustaining social bonds. Being social integrated itself into human biology. Because “our bodies and minds are still fundamentally the same as they were 50,000 years ago” we are still “fine tuned to being with each other” (“Loneliness”).

What causes us to feel alienated? In the US 46% of the entire population feel lonely regularly (“Loneliness”). In addition, “Two in five Americans report that they sometimes or always feel their social relationships are not meaningful, and one in five say they feel lonely or socially isolated” (“The Loneliness Epidemic”). These statistics prove that loneliness is common. 50,000 years ago humans were born into groups of 100-150 people that relied on each other to survive (“Loneliness”). Those who couldn't socialize were isolated from their group and likely died (Cacioppo 227). The biggest threat to our survival was social isolation so, through the process of natural selection, our body came up with loneliness and social pain as a human function like hunger (Cacioppo 228). Humans evolved to feel pain when they were rejected as “A sort of early warning system that would make sure you stop behavior that would isolate you. Your ancestors who experienced rejection as more painful were more likely to change their behavior when they got rejected, and thus stayed in the tribe, while those who did not get kicked out and most likely died” (“Loneliness”).

We face our present with the same brain as our cave dwelling ancestors. Our world has modernized at shocking speeds and our brain will not have the time to catch up. We move vast distances and leave our social net behind. Today we meet fewer people in person and we meet them less often than in the past ("Loneliness"). Our brain tries to find the sense of belonging because we needed to be with people to live years ago and even now it's medically important to find connection. The American Psychology Association states that "As a force in shaping our health, medical care pales in comparison with the circumstances of the communities in which we live. Few aspects of community are more powerful than the degree of connectedness and social support for individuals" ("Loneliness Epidemic"). Loneliness and social isolation can be as damaging to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day ("Loneliness Epidemic"). In addition to this "the evocation of loneliness disrupts executive functioning, increases vascular resistance, and decreases the salubrity of sleep"(Cacioppo 230). These figures prove how detrimental loneliness is to one's health. Unfortunately, there is more to the story, once loneliness persists and reoccurs-becoming chronic and then self sustaining ("Loneliness"). Social pain is the same as the physical kind, it leads to quick reactionary and defensive behavior when it's inflicted on a person ("Loneliness"). When it becomes chronic your brain goes into self-preservation mode. It starts to see danger and hostility everywhere. When you are lonely your brain is much more receptive and alert to social signals while at the same time it gets worse at interpreting them correctly" ("Loneliness").

People are often caught in a vicious cycle of loneliness, with an initial feeling of isolation that leads to feelings of tension and sadness which makes them focus selectively on negative interactions with others (Cacioppo 230). This makes one's thoughts about themselves and others more negative which then changes their behavior ("Loneliness"). The individual begins to avoid

social interaction which leads to more feelings of isolation("Loneliness"). This cycle grabs hold with a vice grip that tightens with each repetition. The world begins to be perceived as full of hostility. "In response the person becomes more self-centered to protect themselves which can make a person appear more cold, unfriendly, and socially awkward than you really are" ("Loneliness").

Fortunately there is a solution, "friendships reduce the risk of mortality or developing certain diseases and can speed recovery in those who fall ill" ("Loneliness Epidemic"). Also recognizing the vicious cycle is the first step of breaking free from it. Ways to escape alienation include reaching out to a friend or family member, talking to a therapist, and creating a place of emotional safety.

Loneliness stems from the absence of belonging and comfort- the two concepts that psychologically create a sense of "home". In my experience home is not a place but a mindset. The longing for this place of emotional safety is embedded in human biology. In recent times feelings of alienation have been on the rise. Loneliness is terrible for human well being so those statistics are concerning. Chronic loneliness can cause a cycle that can lead to depression, anxiety, and overall bad feelings. However, there are salves for the festering wound alienation causes to the human psyche. Take this paper as a sign to reach out to someone you haven't seen or talked to in a while. You are not truly alone.

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