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ST675 Engaging the Imagination

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Imagining a Better Country: Race, Place, and Identity

1. Introduction

The works of modern American writer Wendell Berry convey a distinct sense of place and the importance of humans' connection to it. Berry's writings depict idealized places, such as the fictional Port William where many of his novels are set. His characters who maintain a vital connection to their place live lives of quiet faith, hope, and love. Those who sever this connection, however, experience isolation, identity loss, and lives marked by striving rather than resting, way-making rather than dwelling. Inhabiting one's place begins to take on an eschatological tone; it becomes a foretaste of dwelling in "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb 11:16) where one enters the eternal rest of God.

And yet for all its pastoral appeal, people leave Port William. In *Hannah Coulter*, two African American women uproot to a northern city, a pattern repeated by countless African Americans in the Great Migration. Nettie Banion and Aunt Fanny have lived there entire lives in Port William in affectionate community with the Feltners for whom Nettie cooks. Hannah, the titular character, cannot understand their departure and cannot conceive of a home or hope for them that is placed elsewhere. She evidences a rare lapse in imagination, one that is emblematic of the captivity of "the white

imagination” that James Baldwin and others describe, an inability to transcend the received racial narrative of life in modern America.

Why did Nettie and Aunt Fanny leave? Did their leaving sever a place-based identity, or did their identity ever belong to Port William at all? How does race inform the eschatological vision, one’s imagination of “the heavenly country”? This paper will explore these and other questions of race, place, identity, and eschatological hope through the works of Wendell Berry, Frederick Douglass, Willie James Jennings, James Baldwin, and the Bible.

2. The white imagination in *Hannah Coulter*

For several decades, Wendell Berry spent his Sunday mornings walking his Kentucky farm and composing poems. In one such poem, he imagines a day when “the way is not a way but a place”:

There is a day
when the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place. (*A Timbered Choir* 216)

In Berry’s rooted imagination, the world’s last day is a place, an eternal Sabbath to dwell within rather than to travel to and from. But until that day, there is a tension between way and place, traveling and dwelling, estrangement and membership. Much of Berry’s speaking and writing is concerned with this tension and the modern struggle to live peaceably within it. The struggle might best be described as a loss of place, a disconnect between one’s identity and one’s place that Berry contends is, at its heart, a failure of the imagination.

In his 2012 Jefferson Lecture, Berry said, “For humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it. To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place” (“It All Turns on Affection”).

Imagination, then, is the way of place. It is the effort required not only to remain but to tend and love one’s place and all its members. It is an ongoing act of resistance against all the forces of displacement at work in a modern consumerist society. This imaginative place-keeping is exemplified in the novel *Hannah Coulter*. Hannah lives her entire adult life in idyllic Port William, a place of quiet beauty and permanence, in a “membership” of interdependence and deep affection with the other inhabitants of the town. She spends her days tending her place and the people who live and die there, and yet for all the mundanity of her life, Hannah never voices boredom or escapist fantasies. Instead, she embodies the sort of imagination that Berry advocates, and this imagination in turn cultivates her love for place.

For example, when a young Hannah walks the woods on her property in the afternoon, she imagines the stream is speaking:

The stream seems to be talking, saying any number of things as it goes along. . . . If our place has a voice, this is it. And it is not talking to you. You can’t understand a thing it is saying. You walk up and stand beside it, loving it, and you know it doesn’t care whether you love it or not. . . . The place doesn’t

care if you love it. But for your own sake you had better love it. For the sake of all else you love, you had better love it.” (85)

Hannah recognizes the indifference of her place to her presence (“it is not talking to you”), revealing a relationship to place that is not exploitative, self-serving, or transactional. Her land does not exist in order to provide her the means of obtaining consumer goods; it is not just for working, but for walking, wondering, observing. Hannah is viscerally connected to the sensory reality of her place, and as she walks it, listens to it, recognizes its voice, she is able to imagine it “illuminated by its own unique character” in the way Berry describes above.

As the years pass, age and experience do not dull her imagination but deepen it, so that even when she lives alone as a widow in an empty house, she imagines herself telling the story of her place and the love it holds:

I tell it with patience, going over it again and again in order to get it right. . . . As I have told it over, the past visible again in the present, the dead living still in their absence, this dream of time seems to come rest in eternity. My mind, I think, has started to become, it is close to being, the room of love where the absent are present, the dead are alive, time is eternal, and all the creatures prosperous. The room of love is the love that holds us all, and it is not ours. It goes back before we were born. It goes all the way back. It is Heaven’s. Or it is Heaven, and we are in it only by willingness. (158-159)

So habitual has been Hannah’s imagination over her long life in Port William that the way has become a place; her imagination itself has been transformed into “the room of

love” that holds the story of Port William and its membership. And in Hannah’s imagination, the temporal place is transfigured into the eternal place, Heaven itself.

Hannah is the embodiment of Berry’s call to imaginative place-making. Through holding her place in her imagination, her love for it grows into eschatological hope. The next life is manifest in the present life, the new world is birthed from the old, and Hannah inhabits Heaven from her chair in Port William. And yet even Hannah does not fully realize Berry’s vision, and her Heaven falls short of the eschatological vision of scripture.

One glimpses a lapse in Hannah’s imaginative capacity when she struggles to make sense of the departure of Nettie Banion and Aunt Fanny, longtime African American residents of Port William. Nettie and her husband Joe work as hired help for the Feltner family, just as their ancestors had done “going back a hundred and fifty years” (95); that is, going back to the time of slavery. After Joe dies, Nettie and Aunt Fanny decide to move to Cincinnati to be near Nettie’s sister, and Hannah is heartbroken by this first disruption to the membership. Guessing at their motives, she muses, “maybe there was some charm for them in going north of the great river that had divided slavery from freedom” (94). Her inability to comprehend the appeal of the north to landless southern blacks as anything more significant than “some charm” reveals that even Hannah’s loving imagination has been imperceptibly formed by the white experience and limits her understanding. She demonstrates this limitation again when she observes, “Nettie and Aunt Fanny had too little to take with them when they left. It was too easy for them to leave. And yet when they left, they were leaving home” (95). Were they? Or were they leaving Hannah’s home? Perhaps Port William

never was the Banions' home in their own imaginations. Perhaps their experience there was too marred by the memory of slavery and segregation and landlessness, however kindly practiced, to ever be their home. When the Feltners discover the Banions ill at ease in Cincinnati, Hannah describes them with the near-biblical language of exile wandering, the same language to which the Banions' slave ancestors would have clung in hope of exodus in generations past: "they were not at home there, and not to be at home again in this world" (95).

The Banions' relationship with Port William is less settled than Hannah's by virtue of their race; this land was never theirs to inhabit or inherit, and they were never truly its members. Their desire to move to Cincinnati, to gather and restore an extended family structure that had been fragmented and scattered over generations past, echoes the eschatological vision of Israel to at last being freed, gathered, and settled in a land where justice flows like waters. And in this way, perhaps the Banions' experience and vision is closer to our own, fueled by a sense of estrangement and a holy longing for restoration and inheritance.

Reading Berry stirs both longing and futility. We all long to be included in the Port William membership, to work meaningfully in its economy, to share intertwine our lives with its members, to dwell in its heaven. And yet we all recognize with an ache that such a membership is impossible in the modern world. The old ties to land, time, and family have been fragmented and scattered. The membership has been broken and distorted. Amidst this tragedy, we must heed Berry's call to reimagine our place, to cultivate a wise and affectionate relationship to it. But this imaginative act is not ultimate because this place is not ultimate. For most of us, there is no real sense in

which our identity can any longer be tied to the physical plot of earth on which we find ourselves; we are unrooted and unstoried, people without a place or a history. And perhaps that is the point. Perhaps Port William is not to be realized but hoped for, the embodiment of eschatological hope that stirs a holy dissatisfaction in the present age. Indeed it was longing and desire that motivated the Israelites described in Hebrews 11, who like Abraham “set out, not knowing where he was going” (11:8)—that is, not motivated by a vision for their destination but driven by a holy longing and an identity of estrangement:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:13-16, ESV)

Perhaps we are not the Hannahs of the story, but the Netties; we cannot inhabit Hannah’s heaven in this life. Perhaps “the heavenly country” looks not only like the Port William that is known, but the Cincinnati that is imagined, a restored family in a free city. Perhaps Port William is a signpost, not a destination, that helps us imagine and seek a homeland but is itself incomplete. And in this way, perhaps the black imagination must be allowed to correct the limits of the white imagination, whose settledness and givenness over years of privilege has dulled its eschatological vision.

3. Listening to the black imagination

Willie James Jennings' *The Christian Imagination* traces the development of race as an identity marker in the Christian West and its disastrous consequences. This new racial identity, in his view, began in the European slave trade which radically reoriented the spaces in which Europeans and Africans lived and moved and had their being. Through the violent removal of Africans from their homes by European explorers and traders, "place [was] removed as the living organizer of identity" (39). In the absence of place as "identity signifier," identity had to be reconstructed and reimagined by other means, and to white Europeans the most visible means of reconstruction was the difference in bodily appearance. Thus the vast, complex, storied identity of individuals and people groups was compressed and flattened into a single identity—slaves—whose only marker was the European-imagined construct of race. Jennings writes:

Native identities, tribal, communal, familial, and spatial, were constricted to simply their bodies, leaving behind the very ground that enables and facilitates the articulation of identity. The profound commodification of bodies that was New World slavery signifies an effect humankind has yet to reckon with fully—a distorted vision of creation. (43)

Jennings echoes Berry when he describes "a distorted vision of creation" whose grotesque consequences for humans and the land have not yet fully been imagined. And yet his diagnosis significantly broadens the scope of Berry's, whose focus is largely limited to whites' voluntary disconnect from place, the willing and often lazy abdication of place to technology, education, and dutiful consumerism. The consequences are disastrous, but they flow from an act—or countless small,

unthinking acts—of choice by the white American. But Jennings reveals the privilege inherent in this critique and expands its scope to include the involuntary, unwilling abdication of place by black Africans ripped from their place in service to precisely the white experience that Berry describes. White Europeans of privilege chose disconnect from their place in pursuit of wealth and empire, just as white Americans today choose disconnect from their place in service to American consumerism. African Americans, on the other hand, never chose their disconnect yet live under the consequences of the placeless world that whites built.

Writer James Baldwin echoes Jennings' diagnosis in his 1963 address "Talk to Teachers":

What passes for identity in American is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors. It's astounding to me, for example, that so many people really appear to believe that the country was founded by a band of heroes who wanted to be free. That happens not to be true. What happened was that some people left Europe because they couldn't stay there any longer and had to go someplace else to make it. That's all. They were hungry, they were poor, they were convicts. Those who were making it in England, for example, did not get on the Mayflower.

Baldwin, like Jennings, sees the European identity divorced from place and reconstructed by other means, in this case a falsified and triumphant revisionist history. Whites too must reconstitute an identity that has been severed from its place, but they have the visible markers of freedom, privilege, and whiteness at their disposal which allow them to deny their own history of suffering. African Americans, however, have no

such markers. Baldwin argues that in their absence, a powerful imaginative tradition is formed.

In the perseverance required to survive slavery, segregation, and persistent systematic racism, Baldwin writes that the black person “is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words” (99). This mental and spiritual effort is no less than the cultivation of imagination. The strength of this black imagination is formed in its necessity, and it must constantly be deployed as one’s only weapon against an oppressive cultural narrative. For example, Baldwin tells his nephew James, “You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *n—*” (4). For this reason, it is whites, not blacks, whom Baldwin repeatedly claim need emancipation, for their imaginations are weak, unquestioningly susceptible to the cultural narratives by which they maintain their power.

In response, Baldwin urges blacks toward an act of imaginative kindness, seeing the whites who oppress them as victims of an imaginative captivity of their own making: “You must accept them with love. . . . They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it” (8). Baldwin’s prescription sounds remarkably like that of Berry in his Jefferson Lecture: “As imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection. And it is in affection that we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy” (“It All Turns on Affection”). And yet Baldwin’s prescription is far costlier and even more explicitly Christian, despite his disavowal of the Christianity Berry embraces.

Baldwin's call to imagination is a call to love one's enemies and not merely one's place, and to love one's enemies toward a recovery of their own true identity.

Such a call elicits the same sense of longing and futility that Port William does. I long, like Baldwin, for blacks and whites to have their identities healed and restored in a narrative that does not falsify the past but brings it into a hopeful vision for a shared future. And I long like Jennings for nothing short of a restored creation, in which all the distortions of the slave trade are set right, and human bodies and the earth are reconciled into a nourishing, sustainable economy. The work of African American poets and essayists, novelists and theologians, is a powerful tool in pursuit of this vision, one that corrects and sharpens a white imagination that has grown numb. The scriptures are another powerful tool, as they anchor the problem in the ancient story and help us imagine its solution in the eschatological vision which we seek.

4. Imagining the biblical vision of identity and place

The entire biblical story could be viewed through a lens of place and identity. Humans were created to inhabit a place in the sort of "kind and conserving economy" that Berry describes: Adam and Eve live in an intimate garden membership with God and all creation. Adam is formed from the dirt of the place itself, and Eve is formed of Adam's own flesh; thus they belong to both one another and to the earth in the very composition of their bodies. They are given an economic life of deep purpose, charged with stewarding their place and granted the powerful imaginative task of naming its inhabitants, bestowing all things with identity and meaning.

But the fall tragically ruptures this union of identity and place. God's first question to Adam and Eve after they sin is one of place: "Where are you?" (Genesis

3:9). This question foreshadows its tragic aftermath, when Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden and sent into the world to make a place for themselves, having rejected the innate economy of the one given to them when they disobeyed its creator.

One could conceive of the entire history of humankind since then as a seeking to repair the rupture between identity with place. Indeed, the people of God live the vast majority of the biblical story estranged from their place, strangers and exiles on the way somewhere. Israel's stint in the land of their inheritance is short-lived, cut short again by their rejection of the economy God has mandated for their life there. Even in the New Testament, the people of God live as exiles in the long shadow of the empire. In a sense, we are all people ripped from our place. We all bear the displacement of Adam in our very bodies, and we long for a return to our true place, to the heavenly country that no Port William or African soil can fully satisfy. We live like Nettie Banion as "strangers and exiles on the earth," and by this life we "make it clear that [we] are seeking a homeland" (Hebrews 11:13-14).

As Berry, Baldwin, and Jennings have pointed out, imagination is critical to the reconnection of identity and place, to the healing of creation. And our imaginations must be cultivated by fullness of the biblical vision, the beauty and hope of the story of scripture. N.T. Wright claims:

The Bible gives us the framework within which we can start to imagine Christianly, not just winging it vaguely taking off in flights of fancy, but living within the great story. . . . We are to be making new people, living on the basis of God's making new all things in Christ and looking toward the making new of all things in the resurrection (3).

What does Wright mean that “we are to be making new people”? I believe he means nothing less than the restoration of true human identity, an identity once and for all reunited to the place it once was formed and has seeking ever since, the “better country” of the eschatological vision. We are now people on the way, on a road that comes and goes, but in the end Berry is right: “the way is not a way but a place.”

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:1-4)

May we all live as Nettie Banions, seeking the heavenly Cincinnati and the restoration of all things, our imaginations taught by the African American imagination, forged in struggle and fueled by scripture.

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