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# Querencia

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# Querencia

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## Abstract

*Querencia, where I am are strong from. Querencia, translated literally from Spanish to mean “beloved place”. It informs identity, it gives us a place of belonging in the world, and it roots us to a particular memory experienced through landscape. It is as broad as it is narrow, but it inextricably links us to a literal or metaphorical landscape we call home. Querencia is a place where we know exactly who we are. It is often a physical location, a landscape, but it may also be a movement of music, a perfect wooden chair, a lyrical linking of words in poetic form, or a person such as an elder. As humans we seek these places, consciously or not, as a form of grounding to feel safe.*

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**Keywords:** *environmental education, decolonization, seasons, identity, environmental racism*

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## Introduction

I first learned of *querencia* while backpacking in the North Cascades with my graduate cohort. After following the sinuous contours of the mountains with packs on our backs kicking up dust as we hiked among valleys small and wide formed by water, both frozen and flowing, miles from the nearest highway, the question of our *querencia* was posed to us as the earth spun away from the sun and this is what I wrote....

*The place in the meadows where the breezes blow golden brown;  
a hawk gracefully gliding across a blue bathed sky;  
the color of dusk looming against the silhouettes of spruce, larch, cedar, and fir trees;  
the soft delicate light of morning;  
the salt of the sea as it rolls and retreats against the sand and rock on the shore;  
the stark glacial peaks hidden beneath cloud breath;  
the cool breeze against my bare skin;  
lazy days listening to river speak;  
a driftwood seat, sand beneath my feet;  
the smell of sagebrush on a hot summer day;  
a sudden rainstorm;  
the subtle shift of seasons;  
the magic of sitting in hot springs surrounded by snow;  
the smell of wood smoke;  
the first trillium spotted on a damp trail in spring;*

*a canyon wren at dawn.*  
*Querencia.*

That particular on-the-spot-stream-of-consciousness reflection rose to the surface during a time when not much grounded me except the natural world. This broadness in scope and measure of *querencia*, of nature's myriad forms grounds me, it always has. I connect to life through place, through a landscape; it's what makes sense to me. Recently, the resurgence of the Salish Sea in my reality embodies my *querencia* as roots take hold and extend beneath and above the surface from the epicenter in the town of Bellingham out across the waters, the Skagit flats, and up into the peaks of the Cascades. I used intuition to guide me to Bellingham, to the Salish Sea fifteen years ago much the same way I found myself in Glacier National Park, then for a decade in Jackson, Wyoming. I follow landscape, not money, not a job, not a partner in search of a grounding and a connection with land. My *querencia* roots me in self and connects me to that which is larger than self.

*I invite you to close your eyes and think of your Querencia, the place where you are strong from. Picture this place or person or thing with as much detail as possible. What season is it? Is anyone else in this place? What kind of memories do you find there? Share or write.*

Thank you. I hope in identifying *querencia* for yourself, you can begin to recognize a connection to place you already have. It can be easy to overlook place because it is so ingrained in our everyday existence, it's what we see every day, it's the landscape we pass through on our way to somewhere else, it's the earth we walk upon no matter if concrete was poured over it or not. I believe this connection to place is disintegrating from our current culture overwrought with technology, busyness, and attention to economy. But I see in the expressions on kid's faces and in their body language during Mountain School when the classroom moves outside, that inherent in all of us, is a connection to nature and to place. Place is laden with layers beyond just the natural surroundings, just the physical space. The dimensions of place are abundant with complexities implicit within the history of landscape that I will be talking about today. Each accumulated layer folded and pressed against ourselves, help to explain what it means to inhabit a place. What are the forces and actions that create place? Who lives in the ecosystem? What social conditions are informed by place? How does place affect us personally? How do Indigenous cultures interact with place? And finally, what are the benefits of place-based education? These are the concepts I will be exploring and speaking about today, all of which influence our understanding of the land we call home, ultimately influencing our decisions about our relationship to the environment and community at large.

So what are the actions that create place? There are of course, the geographic aspects. The forces and weather creating the patterns and anomalies of terrain, defining what landscape looks like. How did an area form? What *will* it look like? Remember that place is always shifting. This very place we stand upon now, was once buried beneath a one

mile thick sheet of ice. Think about that for a minute. And then as the ice melted, waters began to carve through the earth eventually shaping what lies before us today. It's interesting to consider how it continues to change in subtle and more recently, not so subtle ways. Are there geographic changes you have noticed back home?

Geologic energies are also constantly pushing and pulling and lifting the land and the waters, often spanning a timeline beyond our life expectancy. Other times these forces are quick and intense and they change lives in minutes and seconds; think earthquakes, tsunamis, erupting volcanoes, or sinkholes. Large or small, these events shape the geography and geology of place, ultimately influencing whether or not an area is inhabitable by humans or otherwise. Now, of course you don't have to understand all the intricacies of geology and geography in thinking about the formation of a place, even just the basic understanding that time erodes and builds land is enough information to begin a deeper appreciation of a place. The concept of time cycles through the shapes and distortions of land, its tendrils reaching way back before us and towards the future. What were the forces that created and continue to create the place you call home?

*...think about these forces for minute or 2...*

Upon thinking about the creation of a landscape it feels natural to ask who lives in the ecosystem of place. One of the most fascinating aspects of place, to me anyways, is the ecology of place which includes the living beings, the species of the ecosystem. Some beings are quite visible like trees, plants, grasses, mammals, birds, lichens, while some are more hidden like amphibians, insects, invertebrates, mosses and liverworts, and finally others lay hidden beneath the soil such as the mycorrhizal fungi linking communication among trees. These are the tangible species of forests, lakes, mountain ranges, swamps, cities, oceans, deserts, towns, prairies, savannas, or riparian areas where we learn to understand how one species affects another and another and another. We've probably all heard the word interconnectedness to explain an ecosystem and one could say the term is even overused, but the concept has taken quite a while to sink in. Some evidence suggests it hasn't sunk in, indicates that people now know less of their surroundings than people did in the past. Scott Altran, a director of anthropology, professor of psychology, and sociology scholar, along with Douglas Medin, a professor of psychology and director of cognitive studies, conducted research about this subject in their book *The Native Mind and the Cultural Construction of Nature*. They discover that college students participating in their study have a decreased knowledge of the natural world around them based on language the students used when describing species of nearby forests. The authors use the term *devolution* to elucidate this shrinking depth of awareness about living beings in immediately surrounding environments. Students identify a tree, but cannot identify which type of tree or related attributes or tendencies of that tree (Altran & Medin, 2008). A quote that struck me as extremely relevant to issues of environmental concern as stated by Altran and Medin is "...a person who cannot distinguish one kind of bird or tree from another cannot respond appropriately to changes in the ecological balance among these living things" (p. 36). I am going to say

that again, "...a person who cannot distinguish one kind of bird or tree from another cannot respond appropriately to changes in the ecological balance among these living things". In other words, the language we use expresses our knowledge of a place and the diminishing vocabulary for the natural world impacts how we understand this world we are part of yet apart from.

A study by graduate student Megan Bang at Northwestern University found that, based on text books and personal views, white people tend to think of humans as *separate* from nature whereas the Native American's tend to view humans as *part* of nature (Bang et al., 2005). I believe this distinction, this inherent separateness from nature to be important both in terms of how we educate our children and how we live our lives in place. If we do not view ourselves as part of the ecology of the ecosystem, if we tend to refer to the Earth as "the other", our beliefs reflected in our behaviors wound and scar the Earth.

So now that I've touched on devolution, I want to talk about phenology. I think most of you are actually familiar with phenology though maybe you've not heard the term before. According to the National Phenology Network "Phenology refers to key seasonal changes in plants and animals from year to year – such as flowering, emergence of insects and migration of birds – especially their timing and relationship with weather and climate" (website). Other examples of phenology as it relates to seasonal changes are associated with planting, harvesting, weather patterns, animal behavior, abundance of certain foods, and so on. Here at NCI, graduate students study "phenology plots" to help us understand seasonal changes as they affect plant species. These plots are simply small, parceled sections of trail where we observe the same particular individuals weekly; we note the phases of the buds, flowers, and leaves. After data is recorded it's entered into the Nature's Notebook website nested in the National Phenology Network where scientists analyze the data to observe patterns and predict trends. As the climate changes, these patterns are shifting and phenology helps us track the earlier onset of spring, droughts, migration fluctuations, temperature variance, and so on. We can begin to think about what the implications are of warming or cooling trends on birds for example. Birds migrate in search of food like insects that hatch alongside certain blooms of flowers and plants. If the bloom happens a few weeks early, the birds might be in jeopardy of missing important sources of protein during mating season.

*I'd like to pause here and have a little audience participation. I've written the seasons on paper in four sections of the room and I invite you to come up and write your association with the seasons. For example snowy owls in the winter, Stinging nettles in the spring, canning in the fall, weather patterns, celebrations, the night sky, and on and on. Please be specific to your area too, different events occur in different locations, of course, which illustrates the biodiversity of our earth. Please also indicate if your observation is rare, or common; is it easy to find or difficult; and even more specifically have you noticed changes in your lifetime to your observation (i.e. is it blooming later or more frequently?).*

So part of the purpose of that exercise is to show that you all know and understand the ecology of place, perhaps even more than you thought you did. What you all wrote on the board demonstrates knowledge of the natural world and it's important that you hang on to this knowledge and pass it down and around. We are rapidly losing this information you all have provided. You might see it as common knowledge but we can no longer assume that. Have you noticed any variations happening to your home or *querencia* over time?

There exists, in each of us, a personal connection to the earth, to home. This deeply intimate human relationship with the world around us that is ancient; it is a *feeling* about place that is difficult to describe, a nebulous concept that is more intuitive than scientific. It grounds us in a space, it offers a lens for self-reflection. As discussed in the article "*Place and the Promise of Conservation Psychology*" by Suzanne Bott, James Cantrill, and Olin Eugene Myers, there exists a 'spirit of place' rooting us to a locale, informing our identity. Heidegger claimed that "dwelling in the world was the ultimate existential experience" (Bott, Cantrill, and Myers, 2003, p.103). This might likely be why you feel tethered to your *querencia*. I also think about how the rain that pummels the earth with such frequency in this part of the world, affects us too. You, I am sure, can identify a feature of your place, of your home, similar to the rains of the Pacific Northwest. Humans are influenced by the land, perhaps in subliminal ways-perhaps not. Whether watery expanses pulse before you, or frequent winds blow across vast spans of wide open spaces, or desert canyons blaze orange in penetrating dry heat, or slow humid air rises from the bayou, or mountains press against the horizon, or the right angles of concrete buildings and streets fill your view as far as the eye can see, these places seep into our identities and impact our view of the world.

I recognize that certain places do have less biodiversity, particularly within urban areas. But in cities of any size people still glimpse sunrise and sunset, hear occasional birdsong, peek up at the moon, experience seasons, feel rain on their body and wind on their skin. Different issues face people living in inner cities, but these aspects of social communities are very much part of place. If we do not recognize the wind, or the nuance of birdsong echoing off the concrete jungle of a city, or the shifts in seasons, how are we going to move beyond that to see ourselves in place, as part of community living in a particular area of a city?

Extending beyond the personal are the social conditions, the communities informed by place. For under-served, oppressed people it's of utmost significance for them to identify certain agents reinforcing oppression mapped out for them by place. Who are your neighbors? What is the quality of the water, of your air? How safe do you feel in your neighborhoods? How is geography impacting the borders that surround communities? Discrepancies in the amount and the degree of contact with environmental toxins from industry between whites and non-whites is prevalent in cities. This is due, in part, to city planning which determines who is able to live where and where industries are built that are responsible for adding pollutants to surrounding neighborhoods. According to Laura Pulido in her article *Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege*

*and Urban Development in Southern California*, such inequalities “are the result of urban development in a highly racialized society over the course of 150 years” (Pulido, 2000, p. 32). Her research shows, at least in Los Angeles, CA that inherent in the intention behind spatial planning of a city is racism and white privilege. This helps to illustrate what is meant by understanding place through a social justice lens, though it weaves in and through and around issues of the land and environment. Binding together as a community, particularly to rise up against inequalities has broad implications on what it means to inhabit place in both rural and urban areas. Issues of social justice and issues of environmental destruction are not two separate issues; they are interlinked by common behaviors knitted together by the fabric of values and beliefs. What are the social currents informed by place in your home town and how are they oppressing people, if they are?

Raise your hand if you know the name of the Indigenous tribe or tribes that once inhabited your *querencia* or homeland. Indigenous People lived and continue to live on lands we inhabit since time immemorial, deeply embedded in relationship with the earth. Our acquisition of these lands is a story that needs to be told again and again until we understand the history and can work towards healing a people, a culture, and the land. A great disservice of our education system, communities, and institutions is this oft forgotten dimension of place that is the cultural layer, thick with history and story of being. Sometimes places, streets, or geographic features are named after past occupants of a territory, but without context, it’s just a name. For example in Whatcom and Skagit counties, names like Squalicum, Samish, Shuksan, and Skagit are used for schools, streets, beaches and so on. These are Coast Salish words. Mount Baker is the name given by the white man to Komo Kulshan the huge mountain pressing against the horizon to the northeast. This, I believe, is a large gap in our current system of education. Any education I received in the public school about local tribes was always given in the context of the past, continuing the trend of colonialism by erasing the current struggle of Native People. The Native Peoples incorporate reciprocity in their relationship to place, giving back to the ecosystem while not taking more than necessary. Ingrained in their ways is a deep, reverent relationship with nature that requires respect and responsibility which is evident in their gratitude, a thanking of the land that provides. As immigrant settlers to these lands, we could learn a lot by studying and learning from Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

*...at this time I would like to read a short passage from Resistance, a book written by Barry Lopez...in this passage he speaks to the relationship between Earth and self from the Navajo perspective. I just think it's a nice example of the connection between self, community, and the Earth.*

Gregory Cajete writes that “Indigenous may be defined as belonging to a locality or originating in a place in reference to races and species that have not been introduced from elsewhere”, but he goes on to say that “it is a way of being” (Cajete, 1999). It encompasses a deep knowing of place that gives strength to individuals and the community held together by ceremony and ritual. Aboriginals across the world know and understand

place in ways that Non-Natives cannot comprehend. In Australia, the Aboriginals have Songlines, literally singing the earth alive, singing to connect with their ancestors, to know a particular landscape.

Place is also where our ancestors came from and we here in this country have an interesting situation of ancestors not actually being from this land, this soil unless you are of Indigenous descent which some of you are. This makes me wonder about the mobility and rootlessness of our culture and how we treat the land. We come from a restless crew, a resilient stock, a rebellious people, seeking a less regulatory or oppressive existence, a sentiment that has hardly drained out of us. A nation both selfish and capable of deep compassion and empathy. Our culture is not rooted deeply in the land of this country and I believe this influences our relationship to the environment as a whole, to the Earth. But perhaps it's time to start inhabiting place in new ways, encompassing different perspectives and histories that will benefit both ourselves and the next seven generations.

Change begins with education. But our current system needs some tinkering with, needs some updating to include different perspectives, and to illuminate ways our culture is perpetuating oppression. Place-based education, in particular, the 'critical pedagogy of place' developed by David Greenwood (formerly David Gruenewald) aims to weld together the social and ecological gaps that exist in the current education system. Pedagogy is just a fancy word to mean the practice and theory of teaching. According to Greenwood, "The ecological challenge to critical pedagogy is to expand its socio-cultural analyses and agendas for transformation to include an examination of the interactions between cultures and ecosystems" (Greenwood, 2003, p. 5). Place-based education is not only concerned with matters of the natural world, but aims to examine the connections between people and how we operate in place. So much of what is taught in schools is nested under the umbrella of the white perspective, the white middle class suburban reality. Anyone else can easily feel excluded and underrepresented.

A correlation exists between our treatment of other people and the treatment of the environment and this pedagogy seeks to diminish this reality. The dimensions of place I spoke about today touch on themes incorporated into this pedagogy- teaching about the natural world, getting students out into their community to work towards common goals, speaking truths about histories, and using hands-on learning as a tool. As Greenwood explains, "In short, it means making a place for the cultural, political, economic, and ecological dynamics of places whenever we talk about the purpose and practice of learning" (Greenwood, 2003, p. 11). Together we can all shift and expand our view of the world by beginning to first examine the intricacies of place, of that which is below our feet, that which is steeped in rich history, and that which is directly in front of our eyes, so that seven generations from now they will believe we fought to preserve the one home we have.



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