

# Canoncito at Apache Canyon: Coming to a Sense of Place

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## **SUMMARY**

The sense of place is a vital component of the environmental movement. One must establish a foundation from which to expand while simultaneously recognizing all aspects of that foundation. With that comes a deeper appreciation for diversity and the complex relationships on which we rely. Establishing a sense of place is not just about considering and appreciating your surroundings, but about the environment as a whole. And that appreciation leads to action.

## **KEY WORDS**

Diversity, environment, environmental movement, Santa Fe, New Mexico, sustainable development, College of Menominee Nation

Canoncito at Apache Canyon

Santa Fe, New Mexico

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Dear Friend:

Greetings from Canoncito. The pinions and junipers have finally discarded the snow of the “storm of the last half century” from their limbs, and ice on the walkways is grudgingly receding under the midday warmth of bright New Mexico skies. Canoncito is somewhat sheltered compared to other locales in North Central New Mexico, nestled against the west face of the Galisteo Mesa and ringed by the ridges of Apache Canyon. It provides a habitat to coyotes and the varmints that are their prey, wintering grounds for robins and other birds from the nearby Pecos and Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and to a scattering of humans – mostly of modest means – a home in the high desert country. I recently became a member of the last category, relocating from the Northwoods of the Upper Great Lakes to here in Canoncito, ten miles east of the City of Santa Fe.

My new home site, a small parcel of less than two acres, is fronted by the original Santa Fe Trail. The site and its surroundings are forested with juniper and pinion trees, too many now dead from attack by the invasive borer beetle, contributing excessive potential fuel in the event of fire. The understory of the forest is a mixture of grasses, cacti, and improbably, an incredible diversity of forbs and flowering plants that defy the drought and heat of August to light up the landscape. Chamisa and other bushy perennials ring every arroyo and roadway shoulder, securing the soil and providing shade and nourishment to the lizards and their cafeteria of spiders and insects, and a nuanced beauty to the otherwise subdued palette of the high desert.

At the rear of the property lies the canyon breach. Like most canyon landscapes, the passage has subsequently become a game trail, a roadway, and now a corridor for Amtrak service and Interstate Highway 25. The white noise of interstate traffic has decreased the value of real estate in Canoncito, making it more affordable in an otherwise inflated real estate market. In my mind, the low-volume undercurrent of passing vehicles is a small price to pay for the

privilege of living here. The occasional whistle of the Amtrak even evokes the sentimental and nostalgic sense of disturbed solitude that poets and lyricists have long popularized.

In short, it is a landscape layered with multiple levels of meanings and interpretations that geographers recognize as typical of landscapes we all occupy. It is habitat, to be sure, but it is also aesthetic – nature, health, history, artifact, an intricate ecological system, yes, even a problematic landscape, given climatic aridity and the compromised water quality of the entire Rio Grande watershed. Current realty prices confirm that one could also interpret it as a landscape of wealth, and the extensive National Forest Service and National Park holdings attest to its wealth as a public asset. It is also, however, a landscape of ideology and of making a place one's home. It is in respect to the latter two of these interpretations that I am most intrigued and why I have chosen to write a letter about the process of making a place one's home.

Some geographers have argued that all landscapes are ideological, reflecting implicit social philosophies, power relations, jurisdictional authorities, and other evidence of our collective consciousness. I suspect that such is the case. Further, I believe that when we come to a profound sense of place we must learn to accept that place on its own terms. In doing so, through examination and appreciation, we commit to making that place our home.

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I consider myself fortunate in this endeavor. Learning to accept this place on its own terms has introduced me to an array of personal geographies and community experiences. I can examine the ideological landscape of Santa Fe and its environs to situate my

community engagement, understand my neighbors, and identify with multiple communities of interest in Santa Fe. Perhaps a snapshot of the ideological landscape of Santa Fe will illustrate the point.

Touted as “The City Different,” Santa Fe is the core of the region. It boasts urban amenities uncharacteristic of a city of such modest size – just slightly over 65,000 residents. Over a dozen museums, and literally hundreds of galleries, have totally displaced what was formerly the downtown area. Native artisans who display and sell their jewelry in front of the Palace of the Governors, and the perhaps last dime store in the country, are all that predate the city’s 1920s conscious efforts to promote itself as an art market and visitor destination. There are high-end boutiques, purveyors of haute cuisine, and southwestern chic hotels that surround the plaza and cascade easterly to the Roundhouse, the state’s capital. The plaza and its environs are only one of the many Santa Fes that comprise this urban core. Locals may wander down to the plaza with friends, enjoy fiestas and market days that draw artists and their patrons, or relax with a Starbucks latte and people watch on a lazy Sunday morning, but it is clear that this Santa Fe is the Santa Fe for visitors.

The Santa Fe of everyday life, the affordable shops and big box stores, the grocery and hardware stores, are strung along the old Turquoise Trail in a panoply of strip malls. Last year the city council granted a zoning waiver to Wal-Mart, approving the construction of a super-center and transforming the City Different into the City Ordinary. Further south and west of this commercial corridor, distinctive neighborhoods are easily identifiable by their tract housing, vest pocket parks, specialty markets and mercados, and neighborhood centers. Despite being densely packed along the western plain, these clearly are neighborhoods with vibrancy and energy. This is the locals’ Santa Fe and it is clear that its residents have cultivated a sense of place.

A respectable distance away, gated, up-scale housing developments are conveniently clustered adjacent to the county’s well-appointed recreational complex – a complex that includes equestrian trails, tennis courts, and a professionally designed golf course. In some respects, despite their apparent affluence, these are the most forlorn of Santa Fe neighborhoods. One senses that these are properties rather than homes. Occupied, but not lived in McMansions for the affluent

Anglo long-term transient citizenry that the new West seems to attract. To read the ideological landscape of Santa Fe is to read an ideological paradox. Lauded for its cultural diversity with nearly equivalent numbers of Hispanic, Anglo, and Native citizens, the landscape reveals how little interaction there exists between the three cultural groups.

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Santa Fe's urban American Indian population is widely dispersed and unlike many cities has no discernible "asphalt rez." The region's native population is overwhelmingly concentrated in the eight nearby pueblo communities. However, urban Indian residential preferences appear to reflect socio-economic status to a greater extent than they do tribal affiliation, location preferences, or access to community services and facilities. Santa Fe may be one of the few cities in the United States where urban Indians can live unobtrusively and free from the harassment and stigma that characterize so many of the urban Indian centers of population. This is an attractive option for retired native professors, aspirant actors, and community activists. The Institute of American Indian Art provides a touchstone community, and the community events sponsored by Institute provide an opportunity for urban Indian community interactions. While there may be little interaction among the three primary cultural groups, there is a higher level of tolerance for and appreciation of cultural diversity than in most urban areas.

Santa Fe has a small and highly dispersed African American population. This was addressed in a recent issue of the local weekly newspaper, *The Reporter*, in an article entitled, "Black Like Me." The author wrote of the cultural isolation she experienced in Santa Fe and wondered where the other 500 African American Santa Feans might

be located. That highly emotive article suggests that while tolerance is a blessing, we all need some cultural touchstone to feel connected – to find those that laugh at the same jokes, enjoy the same food or music or share comparable experiences. It's an interesting paradox – the blessing of a tolerant community can also be isolating. Who knows, perhaps the residents of the McMansions have found – if only temporarily – an enclave that enriches their lives.

The periphery of the region in Santa Fe County is in many ways as culturally and economically divided as in the city. In addition to the pueblos, some villages and hamlets are wholly comprised of a single (often extended families) cultural and economic cooperative. Driving through those communities, one feels rather than sees the eyes peering behind the curtain. In some parts of the county, lifestyle preferences are evident – the horsey crowd in one are. Gratefully, Canoncito is a much more eclectic community, and while I certainly appreciate the urban amenities that Santa Fe offers, my own landscape preference was best realized by the little home site in Canoncito. Here I have spectacular topography, privacy in the pinions, a diverse community of neighbors, and adequate elbow room. The exurb of Eldorado is easily accessible, and although I will likely be the only non-Anglo not wearing a service worker's uniform, I can utilize its small grocery store, gas station, banking facilities, and other conveniences without traveling into the city. It is here that I have determined to make my home, and I am privileged to share the experience of my diverse community with neighbors who have, like me, committed to make this place their home.

Humbled by the *long* duress of my Pueblo neighbors, I listen carefully to their stories, observations, and cosmologies. In them, I learn much of the complex sets of relationships that mark the human and ecological interactions of life on the high desert, and in that way better learn to be present in this place. The large Hispanic community of the region is another source of information and inspiration. It serves as a salient reminder of the wisdom that diversity is as enduring and valuable *within* communities as it is *among* communities. Each piece of the mosaic that is the "Hispanic" community in North Central New Mexico provides me with insights into the process of making this one's home, and I value that.

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The Anglo community of the canyon region is commensurately diverse, and perhaps characteristic of that of North Central New Mexico overall. It is an eccentric mix of people: residents of a decade or more who now consider themselves “old timers;” country squires with five acres of land, a manufactured home and a two horses; aspirant – and some very successful – celebrities and actors whom we Santa Feans pride ourselves on ignoring in public; condominium developers eager to market “the Enchantment” and their semi-retired boomer clientele; spiritual seekers and healers of every imaginable salvation strategy; and of course, the artists.

While we have an abundance of talented Native and Hispanic artists, it is the Anglo art community that predominates, and one garners the impression that every Anglo in the greater Santa Fe region is either a gallery owner or an artist – some even so successful that they have been able to give up their “day job.” Some, but far too few, of the Anglo community have chosen to make this place not only their residence but also their home. To the extent that they have made this commitment, their experiences offer valuable insights into that process, and I have valued those who have shared their experiences with me. That said, my observation to date is that most will remain merely residents – some only seasonally, most tied to other people in other places and unprepared to plant their two feet firmly on this high desert landscape. Many wear their rootlessness as visibly as their too-chic western gear, their readiness to move on to the next supposedly wonderful location, and their devotion to the artifices – which are as abundant as the arts – of ‘Santa Fe style.’

While there is abundant ethnic diversity and an interesting mix of human communities, ethnicity is only one dimension of the multiple and diverse perspectives that mark the greater Santa Fe community. Here on nearly every street corner is another nonprofit organization – each dedicated to some unique aspect of assuring community sustainable development. Alternative energy enthusiasts, food sovereignty workers, ecological restoration buffs, and various organizations committed to social justice, community health and wellness abound. Although the areas of interest and activity are diverse, this vital sector of community life shares one common touchstone – a commitment to this place.

Because I have made the commitment to make this place my home, I am in the mode of ‘discovery’ daily, and that is a personal delight. My initial goal was to orient myself with the cosmos. Having relocated 10 degrees closer to the equator and some 15 degrees west of my former home, I wondered how those changes in geographic location would alter my perspective of the night skies. Here on nights that are typically clear, the entire Milky Way reveals its splendor. Though I can pick out a few old friends among the constellations, I find them at different angles above the horizon, and I am tracking their locations while now making the acquaintance of other stars more visible at this lower latitude. While the fun of amateur astronomy is a newfound preoccupation aided by my \$5.00 purchase of a used copy of *Astronomy For Dummies*, the bulk of my learning occurs during the daylight hours.

The natural landscape of Canoncito is a sharp contrast to my former home in the Northwoods. Soil, air, quality of sunlight, topography, forest and land cover species are all dramatically different, inviting investigation and exploration. Aside from a crabapple tree and domesticated rose bushes planted by a former owner, the only other plant on the property with which I am familiar is the wretched locust. It has proven as intrusive and difficult to remove from the high desert as was it in the Upper Great Lakes.

Because the land and the ground cover are distinct from other ecological regions, the high desert offers habitat to distinctive avian communities, including the rare Eldorado subspecies of the Mountain Blue Bird, Red-tailed hawks, Nuthatches, and Pinyon jays. Last week I caught my first sighting of a Road Runner, the fabled State Bird of New Mexico and favorite of cartoon devotees, idly standing on a patch

of open ground where the snow had receded near my house. The size of the bird, a hen was startling, and given the striations in her coat, and the absence of a topknot comb I was unsure of what indeed I was seeing. A visiting neighbor and adherent of New Age notions informed me that it was a Road Runner, and that my sighting was an auspicious omen. When the hen had meandered away – a very unexpected gait according to my cartoon indoctrination – I went outside to examine her tracks, so that in the future I could note her visits. She had taken a few steps across the snow, the trail of her long tail incising a line directly between her foot tracks. I wondered at her presence in the midst of this unseasonably cold and snowy winter, and vowed to learn more of the nesting habits and domestic life of this symbolic neighbor.

Collared lizards, jackrabbits, coyotes, and some burrowing critters have made the occasional visit to the home site. A lizard, apparently lured by the interior light of an empty stoneware container, was unable to later scale the interior wall of the pot and was inadvertently held captive for a few days. Finally, I noticed his dilemma and laid the pot on its side enabling him to make an escape. In his wake, I would observe what one might delicately refer to as lizard “sign.” To paraphrase the old powwow joke, while previously “I didn’t know shit about lizards,” I now have some scant – or scat – knowledge.

While I have chosen to playfully introduce the topic of scat, in some regards its presence on the high desert is anything but amusing. Mouse scat in the high desert carries the deadly Hanta virus, and the parasites of the mice of the high desert are carriers of the Black Plague virus, annually taking a half dozen to a dozen human lives in north Central New Mexico.

I share these personal stories not only because it is in these everyday, commonplace experiences that we make a place our home, but as a reminder also, that every environment has its risks and rewards, its resources and resistances, and that these too are a part of what it means to accept a landscape on its own terms, whether or not it is a preferred landscape.

We all hold specific landscape preferences, yet few of us are fortunate enough to be able to make our homes in such favored spots, and perhaps the greater tragedy is that too few of us are able to make the genuine commitment to make any place our home. Not only is it

the most highly charged commitment one can make in that realm wherein the personal is political, but it is also an affirmation to be present in the moment. So, what does any of this have to do with sustainable development and the critical issue of diversity within the ranks of the growing movement of advocates of sustainable development?

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Simply said, sustainable development will remain merely a rhetorical construct and literacy device for under-funded academics and would-be spokespersons unless we make a commitment to make this place our home. I'm perfectly willing to accept the concept of "home" at any scale of interpretation you choose, ranging from my home site in Canoncito or yours wherever you will make that commitment. If we are genuine in our commitment to the process of sustainable development, this is a most critical step. Deciding to make this place our home will guide our decision-making, inform our institutional missions, political sensibilities, civic organizations, economies, and selection of technologies. That commitment will sharpen our acuity to and relationship with the natural environment, prompt us to better steward our territories and jurisdictions, and shape our individual human perceptions, activities, and behaviors. Without that commitment, and the political will that it implies, we will only grasp at the straws of innovations. Given, our individual commitments to make a place our home will lead to a new ideological landscape of balance between the dynamic and interactive influences of our relationship to place. We will all benefit from a well-considered and prudent balance of the economic, social, and environmental factors, and perhaps ensure a legacy of a tenable home for future generations. The first and most critical step in the pledge to

sustainable development is to attend to our own sense of place, and to make that place our home.

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The sense of place and commitment to making our home to which I'm referring is substantially more than residing at an address, camping out – however extravagantly – in some locale where employment or other opportunities exist, or enjoying a personal affinity to a specific space. Perhaps I can best describe it by borrowing a phrase from my Maori friends who express the complexity of this commitment as *turangnawaewae* “a place for one's feet to stand.” In its multiple meanings, *turangawaewae* is not only a territorial and political referent, but also a positioning of intellect and philosophy. It is a term that autochthonous (indigenous, native to a place) cultures understand inherently and exhibit often, and precisely what I refer to when I use the phrase “commitment to make a place one's home.” In that process, we must embrace the wealth of diversity and perspectives of those who have also made the same commitment to place. Autochthons and other place-based communities have long known and culturally embedded the respect for and reliance on diverse perspectives. In part, the wisdom of *turangawaewae* and comparable cultural constructs is premised on the acknowledged value of diversity of perspectives. Cultural protocols and practices bolster the understanding of that value and assure appropriate interactions and communication among diverse perspectives.

Among those autochthonous cultures there are authoritative voices in the process of sustainable development, and its dependence on the commitment to making a place one's home. The Menominee Nation, with whom I've had the privilege of working for the past decade, are universally acknowledged as a community dedicated to the tenets of sustainable development and for their stewardship of their forested

ancestral homelands over countless millennia. They provide philosophic perspectives by which we can interrogate our own sensibilities, challenge our assumptions, recognize the benefits of diversity within as well as diversity among the members of our human communities. Indigenous wisdom, place-based knowledge, democratized decision-making, and devotion to the principles of equity along with a willingness to be present in the moment are the contributions we garner from the growing diversity of the community of advocacy to sustainable development.

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Well, thanks for letting me share my perspectives in this overly long letter, and I look forward to hearing from you, as you too go about the satisfying work of making a place your home.

Best regards,  
Holly YoungBear-Tibbetts

P.S. As letters customarily do not include footnotes, I include this postscript for those readers who would like more information on the themes discussed above. The various perspectives of ordinary landscapes are drawn from D.W. Meinig's "The Beholding Eye," in *Interpretations of Ordinary Landscapes*. Dennis Cosgrove is the geographer who has most adamantly argued that all landscapes are ideological texts, and interested readers will want to review his many articles on that subject. See especially his contributions in *Place/Culture/Representation*, edited by David Ley. A particularly deft illustration of the deployment of a landscape metaphor as an ideological symbol is Kenneth Olwig's *Nature's Ideological Landscape*.

While there is a growing and eclectic literature on sense of place, my two personal favorites remain Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* and *Topophilia*.

Printed works featuring Native cosmologies, particularly in respect to the Dine', Apache, and Pueblo communities of New Mexico, are abundant and diverse and cover a variety of topics. Many are cutesy and not very reliable, and some intrude into areas of theology that are likely inappropriate for the casual reader. The best resources for the interested reader are the publications produced by the Native nations themselves, and usually available directly from the tribal or band government. A number of Native nations in New Mexico have now produced their own annotated atlases. I have particularly benefited from the publications of *The Navajo Atlas* and *The Zuni Atlas*, both published by University of Oklahoma Press, for their designation of migration and trade trails, specific sites of early occupancy, hunting and gathering ranges, and hydrological and geological features. For an exhaustive review of the colonial forces at play and the impact on native nations of the region, the classic and most substantial text remains *Storms Brewed in Other Men's Worlds*. The 'First American Revolution' – Pope's Rebellion against the Spanish in 1680 – has at long last received treatment by native scholars from the Pueblo communities, in a new volume commemorating the 2004 installation of a sculpture of Pope – the only statue created by a native artist – as New Mexico's second statue in the Hall of States statuary exhibit in the Rotunda of the Nation's Capitol. That volume, *Pope and the First American Revolution*, is most easily obtained directly from the publisher, Clear Light Publishing, Santa Fe. For a glimpse into Pueblo cosmologies, I find the poetry of Simon Ortiz a lovely window through which to better view indigenous perspectives of this place. For an example of the continued Pueblo commitment to sustainable development, see *Toward Balanced Development* which provides a case study of the Pojaque Pueblo's development of the Poeh Center as an example of a culturally premised, environmentally sensitive, and economically sound development project. For examples of the multiplicity of "sustainable development" interests and organizations in the Santa Fe region, see *Sustainable Santa Fe*, an annual resource directory available through the Chamber of Commerce and local nongovernmental organizations.

For my understanding of *turangwaewae*, I am indebted to the many Maori iwi of Aotearoa who embraced me during my visits to their home, and to my colleagues at the Departments of Geography and Maori Studies, Waikato and Auckland Universities.

For information about community-based surface fire management and forest restoration of the bosques, juniper-pinion and ponderosa pine forests of public and tribal lands in New Mexico, contact the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program of the U.S. Forest Service, Albuquerque, NM, Office of State and Private Forestry. The reading of the ideological landscape of Santa Fe and the rant about place and making a home are of course my own perspectives, and I take full responsibility for them.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Holly YoungBear-Tibbitts** serves as Dean of External Relations at the College of Menominee Nation in Keshena, Wisconsin. Previously, she served for eight years as the Director of the Sustainable Development Institute at the College. In addition to developing its academic programs, she convened the Institute's first international conference, "Sharing Indigenous Wisdom: An International Dialogue on Sustainable Development," and was the principal architect of the College's Center for First Americans Forestlands, a collaborative project of the Institute and five divisions of the U.S. Forest Service.

She was appointed to serve on the Congressionally-mandated Biomass Research and Development Task Force of the U.S. Departments of Energy and Agriculture from 2001-04 and in 2005 was appointed by the governor of Wisconsin to the state's Bio-Industry Council. Her research interest in native lands and resources and their sustainable development are reflected in journal articles, books, and monographs. Her recent scholarship includes native land issues in North America and the Antipodes and environmental risks to women, children and native communities.

Holly YoungBear-Tibbitts received her Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has extensive professional experience in planning, program design and development in addition to her experience in higher education. She is the recipient of awards and fellowships from the Council on Institutional Cooperation, the Bush Foundation, and The John T. and Katherine D. MacArthur Foundation.

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