***Environmental Autobiography***

As I mentioned in the syllabus, I would like you to write a 7-page double-spaced analysis (ASA formatting) of your environmental identity and how it has been shaped by the social and environmental context in which you have lived – its landscapes, privileges, inequalities, injustices, movements, politics, etcetera. You may use historical and social research on your hometown, discussions of local environmental politics and movements, interviews with locals and family, personal reflections, or any other resources that are pertinent. We will have opportunities to discuss these analyses of our environmental identities in class and learn from one another about the complexities and challenges of environmental inequality in our lives.

I hope you would use this as an opportunity to develop what C. Wright Mills called, “The Sociological Imagination.” He defined this, at the very least, as an ability to understand the ways that one’s own biography intersects with historical and social forces. I am hoping you will exercise your “environmental sociological imagination” for this assignment by discussing the places, spaces, and identities that shaped you and your relationships with others in your social and ecological communities.

Below are some questions, organized by subject area, which you can use for reflection. What you choose to share in your writing about you, your identity, and your family is completely up to you. *Please do not feel compelled to disclose any part of your identity you would like to keep private.* These are just meant to get you thinking and to help you bridge the gap between the personal and more sociological dimensions of this course.

Potential sources

* Natural histories of your town, city, region
* Social histories of your town, city, region
* News sources about your town, city, region
* Interviews of your family, friends
* Your own reflections
* Others…?

Questions

Space and Place, Social and Ecological

* Did you live in a suburban, urban, or rural part of your community? What defining features of your community situate it in one of these categories?
* What advantages/privileges and disadvantages/problems does this kind of community possess?
  + For instance, suburban areas often have more open space, nicer housing, sidewalks, but are also plagued by alienation due to isolation, lack of community, commercialization, aesthetic monotony, dependence on the automobile, traffic congestion…
  + Urban spaces may have many services, cultural vitality, resources, but also suffer from congestion, too little open space, pollution (noise, air…), fewer nonhuman species, health issues, overconsumption…
  + Rural spaces may have open space, connections to wilderness or pastoral beauty, connections with nonhuman species that are productive and meaningful, but also suffer from isolation (culturally, economically, politically), too few resources, agribusiness dominance, too little diversity, overly mechanized and managed landscapes, etc…
* What kinds of people live there? (Class, occupations, racial, ethnic, gender, religious… composition?)
* How has this area changed during your lifetime? The lifetimes of your parents or grandparents?
* What are assets of the community? (Businesses, infrastructure, landmarks, open space, community organizations, leadership, diversity, governmental resources…)
* What are the community’s deficits? (Social problems, environmental health issues, powerlessness…)
* What are your community’s sources of pride?
* What is the physical landscape of your community? (Its features, its attractions, its aesthetics…)
* What is the natural history of your community? (Its ecological features and value to the larger ecosystem, its evolution, its geology, its flora and fauna…)
* Aldo Leopold defined community not in social but biological terms. Today, we often ask, what is your bioregion, or the natural, ecological boundaries of the community in which you were raised?
* What kind of architecture exists there?
* What kind of environmental psychology does your community have? That is, how does walking and moving through the space affect your mood, your thinking, your emotions, your spirituality…?
* What kind of non-human species live there, and how do humans typically related to them?
* What social interests or forces were strongest in shaping your community? Which were weakest?
* What’s the largest employer or industry in your area?
* What environmental and social movements are active in your community?
* What one location in your community symbolizes what your community is to you?
* How is your community known to the larger city, state, or world? How does it fit into our broader culture or economy?

Socialization

* What was your family’s orientation towards environmental issues? (Ideological, political, religious, cultural…)
* What was your family’s orientation towards public health issues?
* What kind of focus did your family put on getting outside and experiencing the landscape through hiking, walking, running, biking…?
* Did your family travel? To where, and how did it shape your understanding of nature, environment, or landscape?
* Did your family practice recycling?
* Did your family get involved in community improvement efforts? Which ones and how?
* Did your family get involved in political, economic, or social issues? Which ones and how?
* Did your family participate in environmental organizations or projects? Which ones and why?
* How do you feel your family shaped your orientation to the natural world?
* How do you feel they shaped your orientation to issues of social inequality or injustice?
* What educational influences may have led you to think about nature, environmental issues, or social-ecological relationships?
* What news events shaped your environmental and social consciousness?
* What films, TV programming, or other media have influenced your environmental consciousness and how?

Identity and Difference

* How would you define…
  + …your race?
  + …your ethnicity?
  + …your national origin?
  + …your class
  + …your gender
  + …your sexuality
  + …your religion
  + …your abilities/disabilities
  + …or, other facets of social identity
* What are the histories of each in your family?
* Given the ways the authors of the course connect these identities to different histories and orientations towards the environment and nature, what might you say about how these identities shaped your sense of the natural world or the environment?
* What ways did these dimensions shape your sense of the social world and your role in it?
* What social relationships are embedded in the spaces of your community? What kinds of segregation of one type of people or another exist there? Why has this occurred historically?
* What kinds of inequality or injustices exist in your community?
* What is the history of native peoples in your community?
* How has your community’s history of inequality shifted over time? How has it improved or worsened, and for whom?
* Who has the power to influence decisions in your community, and who doesn’t?
* Who shapes the dominant culture of your community, and for what interests?
* Who feels excluded in your community? Who feels expendable, marginalized?
* What intersections exist between different forms of marginalization or privilege around race, class, gender, religion…?
* Who has environmental privilege in your community, and who doesn’t? How?