

on city streets—the parks, the town halls, the courthouses. It matters little if your background is rural or urban or suburban. If you have visited historical monuments, spent any time in a major city, attended a ball game, watched a parade, shopped in a mall, eaten in a fast food restaurant, or simply attended a church bazaar or school dance, you already know a good deal about how public space is organized in contemporary America, and you probably make more judgments about public spaces than you think.

To say a space is public is to suggest it belongs to everyone—a space for a community, not simply for private use. Yet more and more spaces that at first seem to be open to the public aren't at all public in the strictest sense. Malls, for example, are often credited with becoming the new "town square," but a town square is a space where people in the community have certain rights, such as the right to free speech. Malls are private property. You cannot distribute campaign literature or any other kinds of materials without the permission of mall owners, and many of those owners are very careful about letting anyone into their space who might threaten business as usual by diverting the public's attention from the stores to political or social issues. So even though a mall might invite a Senior Mall Walker's Club to come and exercise before stores open for business, that is not the same as walking out your door and taking your morning jog through the neighborhood. The mall owners can rescind the invitation at any time and bar from the property anyone they feel interferes with business. Even public streets are not so free to the public as one might imagine. In the 1990s, demonstrators at both Republican and Democratic national conventions found themselves segregated into small groups, many quite far from the convention site, as city officials attempted to control the unexpected.

What's more, the tension between public use of public space and private land ownership is a serious one, especially when it comes to wilderness land holdings. In the West, cattle ranchers fight attempts to limit their access to or increase usage fees on grazing land within national parks. The debate over whether to open the Black Hills to more gold mining is an ongoing one. The national parks system has even begun to privatize many of its services. It is a conflict not easily resolved: Americans want public spaces but value private use.

Much of what you write depends on what you have already experienced and what you already think about the topic. Take time, then, to mine your memory about public spaces. What spaces would you expect to be "public"? What space is definitely private? Who should make decisions about how public space is designed and what it is used for? What spaces do you wish would never change? Why? These are the kinds of questions you can begin to consider as you explore the subject of public space.

## THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

—Tina McElroy Ansa

Tina McElroy Ansa is a journalist, novelist, and teacher who grew up in middle Georgia in the 1950s hearing, she says, her grandfather's stories on the porch of her family home and strangers' stories downtown in her father's juke joint. Her first novel, *Baby of the Family* (2002),

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was listed by the state of Georgia as one of the twenty-five books every Georgian should read. Her articles and op-ed pieces have appeared in a number of newspapers and magazines across the country, including the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Essence*. "The Center of the Universe" (2003) is about Ansa's memories of growing up in Macon, Georgia. In it she raises the question of place and belonging—especially for African Americans growing up in the South.

**SUGGESTION** Before you read, write a brief description of what you would call small-town America in the 1950s. Think about where you get the impression of what that place should look like, what the people are like, and whether or not you believe this place really ever existed.

1 On the way home from school one day when I was seven or eight years old—a black child growing up in Macon, Georgia, in the 1950s—my father, Walter McElroy, took me to a huge fountain in a city park. At the edge of the fountain, he pointed to the water and said very seriously, "That is the exact center of Georgia."

It was a momentous revelation for me. Since that instant, I have always thought of myself being at the center of my universe, enveloped in the world around me. From that day, I have imagined myself standing at that fountain surrounded by my African American community of Pleasant Hill, in my hometown of Macon, in middle Georgia, with the muddy Ocmulgee River running nearby, with the entire state of Georgia around me, then all of the southeastern section of the continental United States, then the country, the Western Hemisphere, then the world.

The image has always made me feel safe. Sheltered by my surroundings, enveloped in the arms of "family" of one kind or another, mostly southern family. That is how I see myself, a southerner.

For some folks, my discussing my southernness makes them downright uncomfortable. I mean really, the very idea, a black person, an African American over the age of thirty-five, going on and on about the South and her place in it as if she weren't aware of the region, its past, and all it stands for.

5 Doesn't she know history? she seems to think. And she's a writer, too. It's almost embarrassing.

As if a black person does not belong in the South, to the South. In a couple of decades of moving up and down the United States' eastern seaboard, I found there was no place else I *did* belong.

Of course I know the region's history, I want to tell folks looking askance at me. I know it because I am a part of the history. My parents were part of that history. And their parents were part of it.

My father's people came from Wrightsville, in the south-central part of the state. They were farming people, like most black people at the turn of the twentieth century. At that time, black folks owned nearly twenty million acres of farmland in the United States. When my father's father, Frank, left the farm nearly one hundred years ago for the city of Macon and work on the M-D-S—the Macon-Dublin-Savannah train line, which connected those three Georgia cities—his brother Isadore (whom we called "Uncle Sunshine") and his family remained there on the farm. As a child, when my parents, two older brothers and two older sisters, and I piled into our green woodie station wagon and left the "city" for a few days in summer to visit the "country," it was to Uncle Sunshine's farm we went.

My mother's people—the Lees—were also from middle Georgia. But they were "city people," they were not farmers. They were schoolteachers and tradespeople and semiprofessionals. Everyone in town knew my great-grandfather as "Pat, the barber." All I have to do now is say that

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name to make my mother smile with nostalgia and begin telling me stories surrounding the antique red leather barbershop chair that sat on my great-aunt's back porch for decades. Patrick Lee's maiden daughter, Elizabeth, not only took over her father's barbershop when he died in the 1930s. She also taught folks in middle Georgia from the cradle to the grave. During the day, she led her own private kindergarten class. During the evenings, she taught illiterate adults to read. "All I want to do is learn to read the Bible," they would tell her. She always chuckled: "Lord, some of the most difficult words and concepts in the world are in the Bible."

10 In childhood, I always thought of her as just a stern religious old maid who didn't even drink Coca-Colas or take aspirin because they were "dope" or let you sleep in any bed in her house past sunup lest you get "the big head." I thank the Holy Spirit that she and I both lived long enough for me to see her for the extraordinary African American woman that she was. She was one of the reasons my mother loved reading and passed that love on to her children.

Today, every word I write, I write on a computer atop the old pedal-motored Singer sewing machine console that once sat in Auntie's bedroom.

It is no wonder that in my childhood family house—a big old brick two-story house with an attic and basement—there were books everywhere: in the bedrooms, the bathroom, the living room, and the kitchen. When I was a child, the joke in our family was to shove a copy of the tiny Macon telephone book under the door of the bathroom when someone hollered out for some new reading material. Whenever that happened to me, I happily sat there with my legs dangling off the toilet and amused myself by reading that phone book, looking up my friends' numbers and addresses, coming upon interesting names, making up stories about the people and streets I encountered there.

When I was growing up, I thought the entire world was made up of stories. My mother gossiping on the phone was to my ear my mother weaving stories. The tales of love and woe that I overheard from the customers at my father's juke joints and liquor store down on Broadway and Mulberry Street, as I sat at the end of the bar in my Catholic school uniform doing my homework, were to me stories. My grandfather Walter McElroy's ghost stories of cats wearing diamond rings sticking their hands into blazing campfires. My Baptist great-auntie Elizabeth Lee relating how she always wanted to go to the Holy Land but had no intention of crossing any water to get there. My mother telling me over and over as she whipped up batter for one of her light-as-air, sweet-as-mother's-love desserts how she made her first cake when she was only seven.

I draw sustenance from these stories, in the same way I draw nourishment from knowing that my father's people farmed land right up the road in Wrightsville, Georgia. In my southern mind, I can see Uncle Sunshine drawing his bony mule under the hot shade of a tall Georgia pine and wiping his brow when I gaze at the pine trees around my house. I never cross a railroad track without recalling my grandfather's years with the M-D-S line and the first time my father put me on the famed "Nancy Hanks" train for a trip to Savannah by myself. After my father handed me over to the care of the train's porters, they asked, pointing to my father's retreating back, "Who was that boy?" I replied indignantly, "That's no boy! That's my daddy!" The black men looked at each other and just beamed. Then proceeded to getting me cold Coca-Colas and sneaking me sandwiches from the whites-only dining car. For the rest of the four-hour trip, they treated me like a princess, heaping on me the loving attention usually thought of as the preserve of little white girls traveling on the southern train system. In fact, they treated me better. They treated me like family.

15 Family. As a writer, a novelist, it is all that I write about. My first novel, *Baby of the Family*, is not just about my retaining that special place of the last born in my household. It is also about the ties, the connections, the stories, the food, the rituals, the seasons, the minutiae that go into forming the family unit.

Like all of us, I carry my childhood with me.

No matter where I go or in what time zone I find myself, at eleven o'clock Eastern Standard Time Sunday mornings, I think of St. Peter Claver Church sitting at the top of Pleasant Hill and the sacrament of the Eucharist being celebrated there. Sunday morning mass in my child-

hood parish is still the quintessential Sunday morning to me. Just as that fountain in the middle of Tatnall Square Park is the primary bellwether for my place in the universe.

When I write, I still envision myself standing at that fountain surrounded by my family, my community, my hometown, my state, my country, and the world.

From time to time, my mother will wistfully remind some old friend of hers who asks about me, "Tina doesn't live in Macon anymore."

20 My Mama is right. I *don't* live in Macon anymore.

Macon lives in me.

### EXPLORATORY WRITING

At the beginning of her essay, Ansa poses a question for her readers: why would an African American love the South? After all, the history of that region should make it very difficult for any African American to want to claim it as home. Write an account of how Ansa responds to that question.

### TALKING ABOUT THE READING

With a group of your classmates, share the piece you wrote before you read this essay. What does each person in your group identify as the idealized place called "small-town America"? What are the characteristics of that place? How do the descriptions differ? What do they have in common? To what extent do individuals' experiences growing up today and in different places influence their impressions of small-town America as it has been idealized?

### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write your own account of how you do or do not carry the place or places where you grew up with you. What role do those early places in your life play in the way you think people should live or what you think towns or cities should look like? What role do the popular media play in the way most of us envision a good place (and its opposite) for living or raising children?
2. "Family," writes Ansa. "As a writer, a novelist, it is all that I write about." This essay is certainly a story about family, but it is also about place. What role does place play in the childhood that Ansa says she carries with her?
3. Most readers would say that Ansa's description of small-town Georgia in the 1950s is an idealized one. Write an essay in which you examine this essay as an extension of the media or idealized image of U.S. small towns in the 1950s. What makes Ansa's description seem idealized? What about it strikes you as real? In your essay, refer to specific films or television programs that portray that 1950s small-town America.

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