Radical Place/Love

A Manifesto for Care of Community and Shared Space, or: Why Place/Love?

When I first learned of the passing of poet Mary Oliver in January of 2019, I stood from my desk and went for a long walk, in her honor. The world had lost one of its greatest listeners, and I figured I'd go outside to listen in her stead. The experience wasn't quite the same: much of Mary Oliver's work is a conversation with the natural world, with wilderness and things properly un-human, with flowers, fauna, and the sea. Instead, I traipsed about the noisy concrete streets of my neighborhood in north Manhattan, and drank in with my eyes and ears the flurry of activity around the fruit vendor's canopy tent, the comings and goings from my local bodega, the boisterous teenagers turned loose from school onto the sidewalks. Though Mary Oliver was more likely to write about woodland creatures than those that occupy the tenements and walk-ups of New York, what comes across in her poetry is a never-ending sense of wonder at the world and the spaces that she occupied. I term this affection Place/Love: a deep fondness for a certain physical locale, extending to the people and other creatures that occupy that space, and the cultures that surround it.

At the heart of the Place/Love Project is an ongoing series of blog posts, each one a short writing piece based off of interviews with an ongoing series of people. Each conversation is centered around where that person lives and the shared physical spaces that they frequent - their neighborhood, and its streets, stores, centers, and parks. The interviews are focused on two heavily interrelated topics, each with its own goal:

1. What they love about their local community; what they find important about it; what they value in it. Maybe an interviewee likes their neighborhood for the closeness they feel with their neighbors, or for its eclectic bars, or its pace of life, or its green spaces, or even because there's no neighborhood at all, and they're surrounded by trees instead. The Place/Love Project is an effort to collectively document the things that we value in a Place, in hopes of situating them at the center of our thinking on communities, public space, and infrastructure.

2. How they give back to their local community; how they contribute to it; how they build it up. This could encompass acts like volunteering with a community organization, mindful spending at local businesses, creating events, art, or food for our neighbors, and many more. The hope is to inspire this kind of care in others as well. This focus provides an essential application component to the documentation of values, as we can then think about accessible ways in which these values can be realized in our own cities and towns.

The need for intentionality around care of Place[1] is great. This is mostly because, as Susan Leigh Star reminds us, it "is by definition invisible, part of the background for other kinds of work."[2] In many ways, our shared environments have never received enough love, at least in the Western tradition. The nature of capitalism and extractive enterprise asks only what Place can do for us as individuals, and a location appears only as good as its expected profits. It is this mindset that has led to a great plundering of Place, from the systematic destruction of wilderness to the economic disregard of certain neighborhoods. Now, technology is such that it draws us away from shared space, both physically in terms of online retailers and delivery services, and mentally in that even while walking down the street we are often preoccupied with a screen. Our common spaces are more heavily surveilled, and therefore un-trusted, and more heavily stratified, and therefore neglected. And our urban communities face significant threats, as gentrification and increasing living costs drive out the cultural producers, small-business owners, and other residents that make Place something to love.

This Project aims to be part of the solution by collecting and promoting stories of ordinary people and everyday actions. Place/Love does not always ask us to dramatically adjust our lives - though surely, some answer that call as organizers, advocates, and creators. Rather, it asks for a re-orientation of our minds, a revolution of our hearts.[3] It asks us to look with kindness towards our neighbors and curiosity towards our neighborhoods. The stories contained in this Project, real lived experiences, reflect that even small acts of care can have large consequences toward protecting shared space and communities. The remainder of this essay will focus on why Place deserves our love in the first place (including expanding on many of the ills listed in the previous paragraph), and how this affection, though often manifested in small, seemingly mundane acts, can be radical, counter cultural, and important.

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[1] In these writings, Place (capital 'P' Place) refers to not only the physical infrastructure of a location (which we'll call lower-case 'p' place), but also the people and culture that occupy and surround it - or lack thereof, in the case of natural spaces and wilderness. The physical and the human are in constant conversation with one another, as spaces are constructed and curated according to need and taste, and space in turn affects routine and perception. Place/Love is therefore not simply an aesthetic exercise, judging physical merit alone. Place/Love asks where we like to *be*, in which surely people and culture are a consideration.

[2] Star, Susan Leigh. 1999. "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(3): 377-391.

[3] The full quote, which I adore: "The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us?" Dorothy Day. 1963. *Loaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Place, Roots, Home: A Spiritual Argument for Place/Love

New Orleans is my sometimes-home, or when I'm feeling more sentimental, my soul's home. It's a city that I have a lot of Place/Love for: the grimy streets of the French Quarter where I used to make a living as a bike taxi operator; the eclectic colors of the Marigny where I worked part-time in a historic building; the bars and restaurants that colored my evenings in my old neighborhood of Mid-City. It feels nourishing to return to these spaces, to remember and to memorialize all the experiences that happened there. I am reminded in these moments that my happiness, my senses of well-being, belonging, and nostalgia, are like flowers - fed by roots grown underneath. And like actual plants, these roots are grounded in earth - in physical places.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, most New Orleanians were temporarily scattered across the country until it was deemed safe for them to return. In the national discourse, a popular conversation topic went something along the lines of: is it worth rebuilding? Put another way: can the people of New Orleans and the unique culture that they've sustained survive outside of the physical place? What, after all, are those particular buildings, those particular streets - can't the humans that usually occupy them find somewhere else to live, somewhere more practical? This may have been an interesting line of thought among pundits and those who had never been to Louisiana, but to most people who actually called New Orleans home, the questions were laughable. Of course the Place, the bars and restaurants, the music clubs, the shotgun houses and Creole cottages, the peculiar little chunk of swampland held dry only through the herculean effort of levees and pumps, were all essential. Community and culture could not be divorced from Place. And so they rebuilt.

Place provides an anchor for our emotive and spiritual lives. Like Mary Oliver, I often feel this most acutely while immersed in nature and wilderness. Being in these spaces, whether it's as extraordinary as gazing across the Grand Canyon or as simple as hiking about in the woods near my parents' house in Western Pennsylvania, helps me to remain grounded. I feel smaller, and not in a belittling sense, but in a way that I better understand myself in relation to the rest of the earth. It's perspective that drives many of us to natural spaces, and the spaces themselves have an ability to drive us to perspective. The great nature writing texts tell us as much, as is the case with one of my favorites, *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey.[4] The essays are based largely on Abbey's experiences as a ranger at Arches National Monument in Utah, and contain brilliantly animated sketches of his slice of the Southwest, the Colorado Plateau - this work could only have been the product of deep reverence and Place/Love. What's more, though, is that Abbey utilizes his sure footing in the Utah desert to expand on treatises ranging from political to philosophical. One almost surreal essay, for example, recounts Abbey's search for a wild horse in the canyonlands, and uses that as a springboard to ponder his solitary lifestyle, and the importance, for Abbey, of choosing to be remote and alone. It's an excellent reminder that our

[4] Abbey, Edward. 1968. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

interior lives, though yes, technically separate from Places in that we can walk away and bring our thoughts with us, are rooted in them nonetheless. One needs only to enter a meaningful space to observe the effects on our awareness and our spirit.

This dynamic is especially apparent in our conceptions of home, which provides great evidence that Place is fertile ground for nostalgia. 'Home' is a tricky one, because while it references a physical location, it also implies a feeling. What makes a space a home, as opposed to merely a house or an apartment or a neighborhood, is surely subjective, but the feeling of home is something every person can relate to. Home implies a claim of ownership - not legally speaking, but spiritually. It implies an intimate knowledge, not just of trivial geographical details like street names, but a deep understanding of a Place's secrets, its culture, how its people interact. It implies a responsibility - a home is something to protect, a hill to die on, an instinct to defend even the things about it we don't necessarily like. Home implies Place/Love.

Sarah Broom's memoir, *The Yellow House*,[5] is about home. Broom was raised in the Yellow House, a building in the oft-forgotten, largely under-resourced neighborhood of New Orleans East. As the memoir progresses, the events of her life take Broom to locations across the globe: New York City, Burundi, even the French Quarter, an area that is only 10 miles from New Orleans East by distance, but seems culturally far-off. Through all of this, the Yellow House is a constant - even when Broom is not residing there, her mind at least partially is. It's a consistent place to return to in both memories and in person, a neutral ground that witnesses the comings and goings of members of the Broom family with stoic indifference. What a wonderful way to think of the duality of Home: a physical location that gets older and atrophies like all things in the world, but in our minds remains a bastion of consistency, familiarity. This is what separates place from Place: simply a locale vs. something that takes root in our imaginations. It remains even when we move on, grow, and change.

During Katrina, the Yellow House was inundated with water and afterward abandoned as blight. In the memoir, this loss stands in for the grief of an entire neighborhood and city - it is, of course, the loss of Home. After this, despite the loss of physical Yellow House, it lives on in Broom's psyche (and her writings) as a stand-in for the past and all of its associated nostalgias, both comforting and distressing. Through my evolving thoughts on this project, I often come back to contending with the traumatizing nature of loss of Place. This happens in a variety of ways, some natural (tornado), some social (gentrification), and some both (Katrina). Often, we focus most on the economic and political toll, but rarely stop to ask what a loss of Place does to a person's soul. I'm sure we can all begin to imagine that trauma simply by thinking of a Place we hold dear: this is, for me, one of the greatest motivations for the Place/Love Project.

Another memoir, coincidentally also released in 2019, brings forward themes of Place and loss: *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado.[6] This narrative, wildly different in style and scope from Sarah Broom's work, nonetheless also centers around a physical space.

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[5] Broom, Sarah M. 2019. *The Yellow House: A Memoir*. New York: Grove Press.
[6] Machado, Carmen Maria. 2019. *In the Dream House: A Memoir*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.

Machado's Dream House is, literally, the residence of her ex-girlfriend in Bloomington, Indiana, and the site where their abusive relationship largely played out. Figuratively, the Dream House is any number of things - in fact, each mini-chapter of the book is entitled in the format "Dream House as Prologue," "Dream House as Time Travel," and so on. Just as a haunting relationship takes on many complex spaces in one's mind (and usually an outsized proportion of that mental energy), so too can a Place take on many forms in one's memory, influenced heavily by the events that occurred there. It is this personification of physical space as a shifting entity in our minds that is so compelling to me about the Dream House. Sometimes the physical place remains the same, but its associated Place changes forever in our mind because of an event that occurred there, be it joyful (a first kiss) or somber (a death). This, too, is a loss - maybe not an economic one in the way that physically losing a house to a natural disaster is, but a loss of something essential to our nostalgia. These are the dark implications of what happens when a physical space becomes unsafe: even when our body leaves it, our mind lingers, and so Place becomes internalized in a negative way. Where *Yellow House* makes a profound relation of Place as a source of grounded familiarity, *Dream House* takes the argument further, demonstrating that a physical location can be conflated with our memories and emotions to signify nearly anything. In each narrative, Places / Homes were ripped away from the authors, one due to floodwaters, and one via the trauma of domestic abuse. But the physical space endures in each person's consciousness, memories, and now, writings.

I believe Place/Love is important to rekindling an emotive connection to Place. It is a natural, human instinct to care for Places: they so easily conjoin inseparably with our memories. Places give us gut feelings immediately. If we're revisiting, this reaction is colored by the prior experience. If it's our first time, we take cues from things in the space that are inviting or discomforting, like the lighting, objects, and people. Places become ideas and feelings that are carried within us, so much so that we can describe a person as being 'homesick,' and commiserate with this twisty feeling in our guts - a physical ailment manifested from physical spaces not physically present. Places become metaphor, as in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*.[7] The title refers to a geographical location, the area surrounding the border between Mexico and the United States, characterized by mixed heritage and culture. But it also refers to the interior and socially-constructed borders between, for instance, woman and man, queer and straight, Latinx and not. Anzaldúa demonstrates that these too are the sites of complex spectrums and mixed heritages and cultures, and so geography becomes a spatial tool to organize our minds as well. I have discovered through my own experiences and others' that Place is closely associated with our interior lives, and with our emotional and spiritual well-being. Places, therefore, must be cared for and paid attention to - it's a grounding practice that is not only an act of love for one another, but for oneself.

[7] Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

I am writing this essay during the months of March and April 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic that has yet to fully play out. I am typing this sentence from the isolation of my bedroom, as millions of Americans, including myself, have been under stay-at-home orders for going on six weeks. Most public spaces are closed to visitors, including bars, restaurants, theaters, libraries and playgrounds. Travel is not recommended and significantly limited, so it is difficult to get a change of scenery, unless you're able to walk and can avoid interactions with other people. A great national conversation has seemed to emerge, not so different from the one surrounding post-Katrina New Orleans, about whether we will return to Place in the same way once the pandemic has subsided. The questions along these lines are seemingly endless: Is the office a thing of the past for American white-collar workers, now that so many have discovered working from home? Will restaurants continue to shy away from dine-in service, opting instead for less square-foot-intensive take-out? Will the masses readily return to sports, music, and theater venues, where they'll encounter large crowds? While I obviously can't predict the future, and which of these institutions have been altered forever or not, my inclination is this: Place is simply too nourishing to the soul for us to be able to give up entirely. While I'm sure some spaces will be re-imagined in the aftermath of COVID-19, I find it hard to believe that we'll abandon them altogether for socialization and other experiences via Zoom. Among all the terrible challenges the pandemic presents, there exists now a great crisis of Place. I am hoping (and in many ways, am already observing in real time) that the response becomes to support and defend interesting and beloved Places, including the institutions and customs that make them up, rather than to cast all of that aside. In so many ways, our well-being depends on it.

These unique circumstances offer us a chance, though, to imagine the ways in which we *do* want Places to change upon our return. I think here particularly of how to organize them in more equitable, accessible, and people-centric ways. The following sections will transition more to factors that prevent fulfilling, spiritual relationship with Place, and how to mitigate these.

Disappearing Landscapes: An Economic Argument for Place/Love

In no uncertain terms: corporate interests and crony capitalism have long been the enemy of Place. Therefore, in a corporatocracy such as we live in, Place must be defended at a community and grassroots level.

The Urban Displacement Project, a stunningly comprehensive and resource-rich website,[8] provides a disappointing snapshot of our modern urban Places. As certain groups of people (generally, younger, whiter, and wealthier) flock into cities, attracted by proximity to cultural centers and a rising 'creative class,'[9] they bring with them challenges to maintaining urban

[8] www.urbandisplacement.org

[9] I use this term with hesitation, because it is used colloquially to mean the class of young tech entrepreneurs, influencers, and creators whose demand for urban residences helps to drive contemporary gentrification. It is not,

neighborhoods as they existed before this migration. Housing costs have risen at remarkable rates as higher-paying tenants present an opportunity for landlords, who themselves face higher property taxes from local governments. New residents drive demand for different goods, and long-running small businesses are run out by high rents and lower sales, replaced by other (often swankier and more expensive) stores.[10] Old factories and warehouses are being converted to "post-industrial" lofts, storefronts, and galleries.

Overall, these changes serve to alter the character and culture of a neighborhood - as in, they have dramatic effects on capital-P Place. The bars, restaurants, bodegas, and barbershops that make a collection of buildings into a Place are often highly threatened by the economic displacement of gentrification. And similarly, the neighborhood residents that turn street corners, front stoops, and fire escapes into a Place are driven away by the lack of affordability. The issue is somewhat demand-driven, surely, by the younger, whiter, wealthier people who want to live in cities (including, with full disclosure, me).

But gentrification is also largely capital- and supply side-driven, with the aid of local governments, who all too often sell communities out in the name of 'development.' In the housing sector, real estate investors spur high-end development projects to attract wealthier residents to cities, often taking advantage of tax breaks and discounts. The mammoth abomination Hudson Yards in New York City, a collection of sanitizing and private buildings featuring apartments that rent for at least $5,200 per month, received almost $6 billion in city tax breaks and aid to help turn the neighborhoods of Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea from 'gentrified' to 'playground-for-the-rich'.[11] In retail, business improvement districts (BIDs) and other economic development-oriented groups, often funded partially by the taxpayer, aim to draw higher-end retailers to their district at the expense of small businesses that serve lower-income communities. This is achieved by hiring private cleaning crews and security details, and curating shopping districts to reflect a high-end image.[12] And in terms of the character of a neighborhood, city-directed policies like investor-friendly zoning, selective crime enforcement, and the planning of transit routes purposely make certain areas more attractive to gentrifiers. The overall result is often something like the phenomenon of 'Disney-fication,' wherein the biggest benefactors of retail gentrification are the large corporate chains who are the only ones that can afford the increased rent, and turn once-unique shopping districts into sterile, cookie-cutter blocks of Whole Foods, Starbucks, and the interchangeable trio of CVS/RiteAid/Walgreens.

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however, a term I agree with, because to me it implies that those people who occupied these neighborhoods before the new residents were somehow *not* creative. This is patently false, as is shown most outwardly in rich artistic movements such as hip-hop, street art, and reggaeton. The term is used out of convenience, with intentional distancing from its implications.

[10] For more on retail-change gentrification, refer to this stellar article by Sharon Zukin: https://eportfolios.macaulay.cuny.edu/benediktsson2013/files/2013/04/Boutiques-and-Gentrification-in-New-York-City.pdf

[11] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/nyregion/hudson-yards-new-york-tax-breaks.html

[12] To read more about BIDs and their role in gentrification, I recommend Chapter Four of Sharon Zukin's *Naked City* (2010), which focuses on the Union Square BID in New York.

Though she's not around to witness it, this might be what urban activist Jane Jacobs warned of when she wrote about a "Great Blight of Dullness."[13]

I grew up near the city of Pittsburgh. Many afternoons in later high school, once I had a driver's license, were spent traipsing about the eclectic neighborhood of East Liberty, which surely would have scared my mother to death, had she known. East Liberty was considered by many one of the 'less developed' neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, with a population largely made up of lower-income residents and people of color. I loved it for the community's stores and restaurants, like an odd diner / performance art space that my friends and I were obsessed with, called *Waffle Shop*.

In 2010, a shopping and office development took over an abandoned factory space adjacent to East Liberty. It was delicately named 'Bakery Square,' and anchored by Pittsburgh's new corporate Google office. In the years that followed, the area changed dramatically. I drove through the neighborhood while home for the winter holidays in 2018 and didn't recognize a thing: bland, modern apartment buildings, all seemingly exactly the same, go on for blocks. Centre Avenue, the main shopping street in the area, is now essentially lined with just one long parking lot, Chipotle and Pure Barre and other chain businesses hiding somewhere behind. East Liberty houses Pittsburgh's Trader Joe's and its Whole Foods. A hyper-trendy Ace Hotel even moved in, right across from the neighborhood's most recognizable historic landmark, the gorgeous East Liberty Presbyterian Church. All neighborhood changes are not necessarily bad things, so long as the benefits (i.e. greater access to grocery stores and retail sales earnings) are realized mostly by local long-term residents. But somehow, I doubt that the new luxury housing buildings in East Liberty are earmarked for those residents, and doubt that many of the expensive new restaurants are owned by them.

Surely, the young white city-bound generation plays a significant role in this process. But gentrification is also *mandated* by city governments, at the behest of corporate interest, through zoning and incentives. Walnut Capital, the developers of Bakery Square, pay less than half the property taxes due on the land.[14] The forces of a commodity-driven culture, globalization, and corporate political influence are a danger to Place, at least as they existed before. Every once in a while this becomes readily apparent, such as when stiff community opposition rose to New York City's plan to give billions of dollars in tax breaks to Amazon for their new headquarters in the rapidly-changing neighborhood of Long Island City.[15] The brand of 'revitalization' is tempting, but it's worth it to question who benefits from these efforts: is it long-time residents and local small businesses (both of which make Place what it is), or large developers? That's why local-oriented interventions of care, like Place/Love calls for, are imperative to improving neighborhoods, while still maintaining their populations and character. Obviously: larger actions

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[13] Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage Books.

[14] https://archive.triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-allegheny/in-pittsburghs-battle-against-blight-some-neighborhoods-get-left-behind/

[15] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/nyregion/amazon-hq2-queens.html

and organizing are needed as well. But larger action starts with a shift in perspective. Daily changes to our mindset and behavior in favor of a spirit of curiosity, kindness, and care can expand from there.

All of this is not to let the demand-side, "creative class" gentrifiers off the hook (again, myself included). We know the corporate economic forces that are at play, and still often make choices that support them. It's difficult to realize that a good portion of us probably don't care so much - we move to cities like San Francisco, Austin, and Pittsburgh for our new tech jobs, and actively want the nice studios, the boutiques, the creature comforts of WholeFoods-StarbucksCVSRiteAidWalgreens, to replace the grit and grime of older, more varied and interesting neighborhoods. That pre-existing communities are squashed in the process unfortunately might not even occur to us. The other portion, I believe mostly from experience, are guided to their neighborhoods by a real and genuine sense of Place/Love. But that love comes with responsibility. If we're not careful, we risk making Places in our own image, instead of letting Places influence us. For instance, Sharon Zukin, in her book *The Naked City*,[16] warns of the urban hunt for 'authenticity.' The old, the unique, and the 'authentic' have become trendy - think of the zany thrift shop, the under-the-radar hole-in-the-wall ethnic restaurant, the old-school record store - and the neighborhoods that house them have blown up. Developers then take note of the increased demand in these areas, driven by adventurous urban authenticity-seekers. Soon, real estate prices go up, driving out the immigrant, artist, and long-time resident communities that create the sense of authenticity in the first place. It's a sobering reminder that even good Place intentions must be checked. Surely, support for small and local business is vital - but we have to make sure that the unintended consequences are avoided. Place/Love is about showing up for your community *as is*, and acting in ways that support the established culture and institutions that occupy that physical location.

Not to let on that our urban areas are the only Places threatened by capitalist endeavours and corporate-sponsored legislation: our natural spaces and wilderness have long been threatened by them as well. In the United States, we have debated for the last one hundred fifty years or so over the formalized preservation of wild Places. On one side, there resides arguments for the recreational, spiritual, and aesthetic value of wilderness - to view nature with the curiosity and care of Place/Love. On this side reside people like Mary Oliver, historic environmental and wilderness advocates like John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, our good friend Edward Abbey, and generations of Native American communities and activists.[17] These people and

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[16] Zukin, Sharon. 2010. *The Naked City: The Life and Death of Authentic Urban Places.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[17] There is another lineage of public lands in the United States that I have purposely left off this list: the traditional conservationists (as opposed to preservationists), led around the turn of the 20th century by Gifford Pinchot. This line of thought thinks of wilderness not as spaces to be preserved necessarily, but conserved for future use. The idea is that economic use still rules - but we must be careful when we chop down trees, lest we clear-cut all the forests now and have none for future use. Reserving for the facilitation of economic use is not the same as preserving Place for Place's sake.

others have aimed to save natural Places for future generations through mandated care and preservation in, for example, the Antiquities Act of 1906, the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the Wilderness Act of 1964, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Not coincidentally, always seated across the aisle in opposition to natural Place preservation are the moneyed industries of mining, drilling, logging, ranching, and urban expansion.[18] It's a simple equation: all of these industries require physical space and use of natural resources, whether it's a forest to clear cut for lumber, a mountaintop to remove for coal, or thousands of acres of land for cattle grazing. Each practice, as a side effect of its extraction, destroys a Place. And all of these practices put together, as climate scientists and other environmental whistleblowers have been telling us for years, existentially threaten *all* Places. And so preservation of nature takes on dual significance: as a Place worthy of care in its own right, and as a Place which in turn provides care for us all. Unfortunately, arguments for economic use of natural spaces tend to win out in our capitalist system, and industry always appears to be hungry for more - chasing what Greta Thunberg calls "fairy tales of eternal economic growth."[19] I hear this sentiment echoed in Christopher Ketcham's *This Land*, a book about the industrial exploitation of the Western U.S., where he writes, "Global capitalism is insatiable by design. The natural world is not" (377).[20]

It may seem hypocritical to in one breath condemn capitalist plundering of Place, and in the next praise restaurants, bars, shops, galleries, theaters - all for-profit businesses - as establishments that are anchors of Place. I don't see a contradiction though, and believe the primary distinctions are in size and intent. Small businesses (small enough that they can't be found elsewhere) make neighborhoods distinctive, give them flavor and character. Often, the owners are local, and the business exists to make money, yes, but hopefully also to serve a need within the community. It is the difference between a livelihood and a stock option. In a capitalist system, each person must fight for a living in order to obtain food, housing, and health. Small businesses, then, are often the necessary manifestation of people's creativity energies - they must monetize their love of cooking in a restaurant, their love of art in a gallery, their love of bringing people together in a club. Small businesses can be a kind of Place/Love in and of themselves.

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[18] Don't worry, I'm not kidding myself. I know that equally as powerful in the argument to preserve nature is the lobbying of the ecotourism industry and companies that stake their brand on outdoor adventuring, like Patagonia, REI, and Clif Bars. Anybody who's been to a major National Park, like Yellowstone or Rocky Mountain, has likely seen the tourism industry that develops in towns right outside, like in Jackson Hole, Wyoming or Estes Park, Colorado. I'm not saying I think this is good - in fact, I would argue the kitschy motels, the horse-riding stables, and the souvenir shops contribute to a kind of Disneyfication of these wilderness spaces. But I don't find these businesses as invasive as the others mentioned in this paragraph (mining, drilling, etc.). At least the tourism and outdoor industries have a vested interest in keeping public lands in existence - after all, what would happen to REI's brand if there *were* no more places to camp because the forests had all been clear-cut? Leeching off of the popularity of nature is much better, in my opinion, than trying to destroy nature.

[19] https://www.commondreams.org/news/2019/09/23/how-dare-you-greta-thunberg-rages-fairytales-eternal-economic-growth-un-climate

[20] Ketcham, Christopher. 2019. *This Land: How Cowboys, Capitalism, and Corruption Are Ruining the American West*. New York: Viking.

Big, corporate business and industry (big enough to influence legislation, to drastically influence development, to put one of their chain stores in each town) have historically shown themselves to be the enemies of the small, distinctive, and interesting. The owners have little interest in community beyond extraction of labor and capital. Instead of serving a need, they are able to manufacture the need and exploit it. Instead of being a by-product of capitalism, they perpetuate the system. And where distinctive Place does exist, they try to monetize it, capitalize on it, take away its soul. This is why I label corporate interest and crony capitalism the enemy.

As if to prove me correct, as I was working on this piece in April of 2020, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, I watched a fiasco play out with the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). This legislation was meant to provide forgivable loans to small businesses (under 500 employees) to keep them alive through social distancing measures. The fund quickly ran out of money, and it was later revealed that many large corporations had taken advantage of a loophole in the policy: a company could qualify as a 'small business' if it had fewer than 500 employees *per location*.[21] Nationwide chains like Ruth's Chris Steak House and Shake Shack received tens of millions of dollars - and these are just the ones we know about, because they're publicly traded and had to disclose the payments in their security filings. We'll never know how many privately-owned chains helped to deplete the funds. Actual small businesses, more likely to be family- and minority-owned, the ones that really make up Place, neighborhood, and community, never stood a chance.[22]

But COVID only revealed and exacerbated dynamics that were already in existence. In 1973, E.F. Schumacher wrote in opposition to emerging trends of globalization and the discourse-defining mantra of 'bigger is better' with his classic text, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*.[23] Smallness is more sustainable and ecologically sound, Schumacher argues, echoing Ketcham's statement on the insatiable nature of global capitalism. This book was part of the beginnings of the 'loca-vore' movement, stressing that fossil fuels can be saved by seeking to consume primarily locally-produced goods. But Schumacher also reasons that there are other advantages to smallness, or as he terms it, 'enoughness' - namely that it provides people with more fulfilling and creative work and community lifestyles. The book provokes the question: instead of organizing industry around the potential of growth, why not organize around the needs of people and their communities, being satisfied with 'enough'? I would put forth a similar provocation for Place: instead of allowing our cities, towns, and public spaces to be organized around the needs of luxury housing developers, national chain retailers, extractive industrial corporations, why not organize them as if people mattered?

There are certainly large ways to make this happen, and to fight the corporate enemy and defend urban and natural Place: as lawyers, organizers, activists, protectors. But the issue also

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[21] https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/20/how-shake-shack-potbelly-and-ruths-chris-got-small-business-loans.html
[22] https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/eat-drink/article_361158fe-8275-11ea-a667-f326d191773a.html
[23] Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered.* New York: Harper & Row.

calls for everyday acts of care. Our awareness, attention, and support is critical to this fight, and this project aims to highlight that.

The Death and Life of the Third Space: A Sociological Argument for Place/Love

An article by Ginia Bellafante appeared in the New York Times in late January 2020 with the long but appropriately descriptive title: "What We Lose by Hiring Someone to Pick Up Our Avocados for Us."[24] The piece focuses on the new popularity of app- and web-based mobile ordering that has made personal trips to the coffee shop or grocery store less necessary (instead sending a low-wage worker to do it for us). The proliferation of such technology, she suggests, risks making us more isolated beings, keeping us away from the few places left where we must interact with strangers, if only for a few words, to get something we want. Coffee shops and grocery stores, Bellafante argues, give us something essential to being human: our social environment. And in exchange for expediency and convenience that tosses these places aside, we lose that social experience as well.

It may sound alarmist to suggest that pre-ordering a latte via an app is unthreading our social fabric. But social scientists have for a while been deeply serious about the importance of public and varied socialization. This lineage begins with sociologist Ray Oldenburg, whose 1989 book *The Great Good Place*[25] introduced the concept of the 'third place' - wherein home is one, work is two, and the restaurants, shops, community centers, and other social environments where we spend the rest of our time, is three. The spaces that we use just for recreation and socializing are at the heart of our communities, Oldenburg argues. Informal public life is just as important as the first two spaces, which have received significantly more academic and political attention: the family unit and the economic workplace.

After Oldenburg, political scientist Robert Putnam coalesced some of these ideas into a theory of 'social capital.' The informal networks we build through casual socializing have measurable value, Putnam posits in *Bowling Alone* (2000),[26] and the bad news: they have been steadily declining. He links declining participation in civic and community organizations (like the titular bowling league) to an increasing distaste for the American democratic project: lower voter turnout, lower public meeting attendance, more distrust in government, more political polarization. That good democratic outcomes depend on community engagement and informal socializing is both an old idea (for instance, figuring heavily into the work of an early critic of

[24] www.nytimes.com/2020/01/31/nyregion/what-we-lose-by-hiring-someone-to-pick-up-our-avocados-for-us.html
[25] Oldenburg, Ray. 1989. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York: Paragon House.
[26] Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville[27]) and a timely one (as social movements scholar Francesca Polletta shows how participation is essential for social movement activists in a book that has possibly my favorite title of all time, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*[28]).

But Putnam fails to connect social capital to physical space. This seems like quite an omission - after all, if a group of people are going to meet and hash out their political differences and save the democratic experiment, their feet need to be *somewhere*. In comes the recent scholarship of sociologist Eric Klinenberg, particularly his 2018 book *Palaces for the People*[29]. Here, Klinenberg introduces the term 'social infrastructure,' with the fairly simple thesis that, "the built environment influences the breadth and depth of our associations" (16). As a sociologist, Klinenberg for years studied how social isolation negatively impacts any number of important factors, like interpersonal trust and civic participation,[30] but also crime rates, physical and mental health factors, the ability to recover from a natural disaster, and more. Social infrastructure, which overlaps heavily with Oldenburg's third spaces to include libraries, parks, businesses, etc., is about developing the physical, inviting, and accessible conditions for the development of social capital.

Part of what I love about Klinenberg's idea of social infrastructure is that it can answer what is, to me, a glaring question raised by Putnam's writings on social capital: where does the working-class fit in? If the strength of our social ties determines a number of positive outcomes, what about those who lack the time, money, and access to participate in civic and social organizations? The privilege implicit in even Putnam's book title, *Bowling Alone*, does not hold up well in an era of extreme income inequality: joining a bowling league feels like a great luxury for, say, a parent who works two jobs. Social infrastructure instead offers that our built environment, public centers, and small businesses, which are part of the fabric of all of our lives, can be invested in to partially correct these disparities. It's telling that Putnam singles out organizations, like the titular bowling league, but does not factor in less formal establishments like barbershops and hair salons, which are often social staples of communities of color.

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[27] de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1835. *Democracy in America - Volume One*. Accessed via Nalanda Digital Library, Project Gutenberg.

[28] Polletta, Francesca. 2002. *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[29] Klinenberg, Eric. 2018. *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life.* New York: Crown.

[30] These paragraphs treat civic and political participation as an inherent good which may not be readily apparent at first, so here is an explanation. Participation is important because, in theory, it leads to better governance and more significant accountability to those who participate - a lineage of thought that can be traced from Aristotle to Arendt to the present. I wholeheartedly agree that participation in mainstream, electoral politics (i.e. voting) often does *not* seem to lead to these outcomes, due to a number of corrupt influences (mostly money). But I am of the mind that participation need not be limited to simply mainstream, electoral methods, and that showing up for a Climate Strike, a union membership drive, or a meeting of the local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America are all equally valid forms of political engagement, to name just a few. Plus, I would argue that while extra-electoral organizing is essential to achieve political aims, voting certainly influences the context in which that organizing takes place. Anybody who has lived through the Trump presidency these past few years can't argue against that.

Libraries, which in many cities provide daytime shelter and computer access for those who lack either, are likewise not considered. Places have the ability to foster diverse and inclusive communities that organizations, too often stratified along racial, class, and gender lines, cannot.[31] Effective social infrastructure is one concept that makes Place/Love so important: our care for public and accessible spaces can facilitate positive social capital outcomes for all.

Being around others is good for our socialization, our shared institutions, and a number of other health- and safety-related outcomes. And public, accessible 'third spaces' like libraries, parks, cafes, barber shops, pubs, and theaters encourage this type of interaction. But despite their importance, it's exactly these types of spaces that are threatened by the forces of gentrification, as discussed in the previous section. When public money is invested in the creation of parks and libraries, it is usually not invested equally among wealthier and poorer areas, and can serve as a thinly-veiled tool to increase property values for white and affluent land-owners.[32] Take, for instance, the recent phenomenon of new urban public spaces, exemplified in downtown parks like Houston's Discovery Green (opened in 2008) and New York's High Line (opened in 2009) and river- and lakefronts from Buffalo to Cincinnati to San Antonio that are being rethought and repurposed into walkways and shopping districts. If the goal is more public third spaces, then this is seemingly positive development, and in some ways it is - I'm sure it reflects a legitimate desire from contemporary city governments to create usable and nourishing spaces. But these projects also seem to suffer under the forces of privatization and stratification. It begs the question: who exactly is benefitting?

These projects are often privately as well as publicly funded, usually for the specific purpose of raising the area's property values and spurring high-end housing and business developments. Since Discovery Green opened just twelve years ago, for instance, developers have scrambled to throw up buildings adjacent to the park, like One Park Place (luxury high-rise apartments[33]) and a new Marriott Marquis (a luxury hotel). The High Line, meanwhile, is funded and managed by Friends of the High Line, which receives taxpayer dollars along with significant private investments, and whose Board of Directors includes familiar billionaire last names like Soros, von Furstenberg, and Lauder (of Este-Lauder).[34] The High Line has dramatically altered its surrounding Chelsea neighborhood, drawing insanely pricey condos (at an average of $6 million for an apartment adjacent to the park - *twice* as costly as similar units just two blocks away[35]) and condemning other local long-time residents and businesses. While these public space projects are not always bad, and sometimes achieve the goal of creating interesting Place,

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[31] Not to say that Places are *not* often stratified along racial, class, and gender lines. This is, of course, all too true. But I maintain that it is easier to legislate equity in terms of Place through zoning, loan, and investment ordinances than it is to legislate equity into people's personal organizations.

[32] Trounstine, Jessica. 2018. *Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[33] https://www.oneparkplacehouston.com/

[34] https://www.thehighline.org/leadership/

[35] https://ny.curbed.com/2016/8/8/12401622/high-line-real-estate-development-effect

measures must be taken so that they don't also drive gentrification and drive away the very people who could benefit most from social infrastructure. Robert Hammond, the co-founder of the High Line, speaks a lot about his intentions to create something like social infrastructure - a space for the residents of New York. He stated: "We were from the community. We wanted to do it for the neighborhood. Ultimately, we failed."[36] One potential answer for the Hammonds of the world, who want to do something for the neighborhood: be wary of private investment - we already know exactly what the developers want, and it isn't to preserve and honor our communities as they are.

Though we face some unique challenges today, the battle for accessible and truly public social infrastructure is not a new one. In fact, all of these men - Oldenburg, Putnam, Klinenberg - followed in the footsteps of the woman who truly began this lineage in the modern urban age, the activist and urban planner Jane Jacobs. Her seminal work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, still offers myriad solutions to create effective social infrastructure (and is teeming with Place/Love for her West Village community). In it, Jacobs advocates for a variety of initiatives, from creating diverse and mixed-use city blocks (i.e. a mix of commercial and residential) to maximizing sidewalk space as opposed to streets, all with the goal of creating lively, social neighborhoods that lead to the positive outcomes (crime, public health, civic action) Klinenberg writes of. In many ways, Jacobs was the first popular urban planner who argued for Place organized around the needs of *people*, instead of commercial interests, or the automobile, or convenience. Working from this lineage, the goal of Place/Love is to collectively imagine our values, and then care for spaces in a way that reflects them. This sense of genuine concern and responsibility for our local 'third spaces,' even in the face of private enterprise and technological advancement, is necessary to make Klinenberg's and Jacobs' visions of equitable, enjoyable, and healthy urban areas possible.

[36] https://www.citylab.com/solutions/2017/02/the-high-lines-next-balancing-act-fair-and-affordable-development/515391/

Conclusion: A Personal Argument for Place/Love

The Place/Love Project is about asking other people, as many as I can find, about what care for physical space means to them. But I would feel remiss if I didn't offer what it means for me, as well.

Personally, care has always had something to do with attention. And attention has always had something to do with Mary Oliver. For she had an astounding ability not only to merely notice the forests and creatures about which she wrote, but to realize and name the true, beautiful heart of her observations. Her poems are populated by the unexpected and overlooked, and often surprise us with how much there can be to learn in those things. In her piece entitled "The Moths," she writes:

> " If you notice anything,
> it leads you to notice
> more
> and more. "[37]

Oliver anticipates our skepticism toward a poem about the moth, an eminently un-noticeable and ordinary creature, and asks us instead to shirk our instincts and lean into what we might learn from careful observation. The most satisfying tasks are those in which the rewards are self-contained, unreliant on external validation - what could be more so than the wisdom gained from our own explorations? And what other practice carries promise of infinite reward? "If you notice anything, it leads you to notice more, and more," and more, to infinity.

This is how I practice Place/Love: I try to notice. I try to maintain a sense of wonder. I try to pay attention not only when it is easy, but also when it is a moth. Places, and the people that occupy them, can be just like that creature: ordinary, overlooked, easy to take for granted. I realized that a genuine, Oliver-esque reverence for the unassuming need not be reserved only for wilderness (though I'll gladly apply it there, too). The city streets where we meet neighbors, the parks benches where we go to reflect, and the cafes, libraries, and bars where we go to color our lives, can all be sacred spaces as well. It's this intention that carried me through my wide-eyed January walk through the neighborhood, a perfect way to honor the luminary who once wrote what has become a personal mantra for me: "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."[38]

The purpose of this introductory essay to the Place/Love Project has been to lay forth the reasons that the care it advocates is important and necessary. From here, the body of the Project, interview-based pieces pulled from the experiences of a variety of people, will demonstrate how it can be achieved, even in seemingly small ways. Because Place shapes and colors our everyday,

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[37] From The Moths by Mary Oliver, in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (January 1984). The Poetry Foundation.
[38] From Yes! No! by Mary Oliver, in *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems.* 1994. Harcourt: San Diego.

our everyday must be aligned to Place. For me, this Project is the proper work (I'll stop short of 'endless'). It is my labor of Love.