Why Place/Love?

A Manifesto for Care of Community and Attention to Shared Space

When I first learned of the passing of poet Mary Oliver in January of 2019, I stood from my desk and went for a walk, in her honor. The world has lost one of its greatest listeners, I thought, and so I'll try to fill her shoes, if only for a few minutes. Of course, the experience wasn't quite the same: much of Mary Oliver's work is a conversation with the natural world, with things properly un-human, like 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, the forests and marshes and beaches, 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 frequent that space, and the cultures that surround it. Place/Love shines through care and reverence for our shared physical spaces and communities, that that's what I attempt to emulate through this project. Thoughtfulness and a genuine, Oliver-esque sense of wonder need not be reserved only for wilderness. It can also help us realize that the city streets where we meet neighbors, the park 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 same intention that carried me through my wide-eyed January walk through the neighborhood, a perfect way to honor the luminary who wrote what has become a personal mantra for me: "To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work."[1]

Place/Love is a project about paying attention. The aim is to capture and celebrate, through short pieces of interview-based writing, some of the everyday ways that people show love for community, neighborhood, and shared physical space. By focusing on narratives of attentiveness, particularly among ordinary people and everyday actions, the hope is to inspire care for these environments and a renewed sense of wonder at the unassuming locations we otherwise might take for granted: the streets, parks, and shops that make up an urban milieu.

Of course, Place (capital 'P' Place) is not just the physical infrastructure of a location (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, and how we care for all of those things that make up community.

The need for attention to Place 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 always what Place can do for us as individuals, and a location appears only

[1] From Yes! No! by Mary Oliver, in *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems*. 1994. Harcourt: San Diego.

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

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 promoting care and attentiveness. 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.

Disappearing Landscapes

In no uncertain terms: corporate interests have long been the enemy of unique and interesting Place. Therefore, in a corporatocracy such as we live in, unique and interesting Place must be defended.

The Urban Displacement Project, a stunningly comprehensive and resource-rich website,[4] 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,"[5] they bring with them challenges to maintaining the neighborhoods as they existed before. Housing costs have risen at remarkable rates as landlords look to fill their apartments with higher-paying tenants. 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) stores.[6] Even industrial lots 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

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[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.

[4] www.urbandisplacement.org

[5] 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 drives gentrification. It is not, 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. Rich artistic movements such as hip-hop, street art, and reggaeton prove this to be untrue.

[6] 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

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 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.' 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, where apartments 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'.[7] In retail, business improvement districts (BIDs) and other economic development-oriented groups, often funded by the taxpayer, aim to draw higher-end retailers to their district by creating the necessary conditions, hiring private cleaning crews and security details. And city-directed policies like investor-friendly zoning, selective crime enforcement, and the planning of transit routes purposely make certain areas more attractive to gentrifiers. One could also point to 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. This might be what urban activist Jane Jacobs warned of when she wrote about a "Great Blight of Dullness."[8]

I grew up in Pittsburgh, and remember spending many high school afternoons - which, by the way, was only eight years ago - traipsing about the eclectic neighborhood of East Liberty, which surely would have scared my mother to death, had she known. After a shopping district, delicately named 'Bakery Square' and anchored with Pittsburgh's new corporate Google office, took over an abandoned factory adjacent to East Liberty in 2010, 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, is now essentially lined with just one long parking lot, Chipotle and Pure Barre and other businesses hiding somewhere behind. Hell, a hyper-trendy Ace Hotel even moved in, right across from the neighborhood's biggest landmark, the gorgeous East Liberty Presbyterian Church. This is a Place to mourn.

Surely, the young white city-bound generation has 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.[9] 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. 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 maintaining neighborhoods, the ones we love, as they are. Obviously: larger actions and organizing are needed as

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

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

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

well. But the philosophy of this project is that 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. We know the corporate economic forces that are at play, and still often make choices that support them. A good portion of us, it's difficult to realize, probably don't care so much, moved to cities like San Francisco, Austin, and Pittsburgh for their new tech job, and actively want the nice studios, the boutiques, the creature comforts of WholeFoodsStarbucksCVSRiteAidWalgreens, to replace the grit and grime of older, more varied and interesting neighborhoods. 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 of care and attentiveness. If we're not careful, we risk making Places in our own image, instead of letting Places influence us. Sharon Zukin, in her book *The Naked City*,[10] warns of the urban hunt for 'authenticity.' The old, the unique, and the 'authentic' have become trendy, and our intense demand for these spaces actually serves the opposite purpose of drawing development and driving up real estate prices, driving out the immigrant, artist, and long-time resident communities that make authenticity in the first place. It's a sobering reminder that even good Place intentions must be checked. 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. To limit ourselves to the case of the United States for a moment, we have contended here for the last one hundred and fifty years or so with the debate over the 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, care, and attentiveness of Place/Love. On this side reside people like Mary Oliver, and historic environmental and wilderness advocates like John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Edward Abbey. These people and 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.[11] 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 necessary side effect of its extraction, destroys a Place. And all of these practices put

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

[11] 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.

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 space 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."[12] 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).[13]

It may seem hypocritical to in one breath condemn capitalist plundering of Place, and in the next praise the 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 unique and interesting, 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. In a capitalist system where each person needs to earn a living to obtain food, housing, and health, small businesses are often the necessary manifestation of people's creativity, and a kind of care or Place/Love in and of themselves.

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 unique and interesting. The owners have little interest in community beyond extraction, and instead of serving a need are able to manufacture the need and exploit it. Instead of being a by-product of capitalism, they perpetuate the system. And where interesting Place does exist, they try to monetize it, capitalize on it, take away its soul. This is why I initially labeled corporate interest the enemy.

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

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."[14] 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 somebody else 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 seems to be arguing, give us something

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

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

[14] www.nytimes.com/2020/01/31/nyregion/what-we-lose-by-hiring-someone-to-pick-up-our-avocados-for-us.html

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 it. This lineage begins with sociologist Ray Oldenburg, whose 1989 book *The Great Good Place*[15] 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),[16] 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 the American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville[17]) and a timely one (as social movements scholar Francesca Polletta shows how participatory buy-in is essential for activists in a book that has possibly my favorite title of all time, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*[18]).

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*[19]. 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,[20] but also crime rates, physical and mental health factors, the ability to recover from a

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[15] 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.

[16] Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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

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

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

[20] 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

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 do 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 we all share, can be invested in to partially correct these disparities. It's telling that Putnam singles out organizations, like the titular bowling league, but places like barbershops and hair salons, which are often social staples of communities of color, are not factored. Libraries, which in many cities provide daytime shelter for the homeless and computer access for those without, are likewise not considered. Places have the ability to create diverse and inclusive communities that organizations, too often stratified along racial, class, and gender lines, cannot. Effective social infrastructure is one concept that makes Place/Love so important: our care and attention to shared spaces can facilitate positive social capital outcomes for all.

To summarize so far: being around others and having community is really good for our socialization and our shared institutions. Public, accessible 'third spaces' like libraries, parks, cafes, barber shops, pubs, and theaters encourage this type of interaction.

But despite their importance, as explained in the previous section, it's exactly these types of spaces that are threatened by forces of gentrification. When public money is invested in the creation of parks and libraries, it is often not spent equally in poorer areas, and is often a tool to increase property values for the white and affluent.[21] Even seemingly positive recent developments in the area of new urban public spaces are increasingly subject to forces of privatization and stratification. River- and lakefronts from Buffalo to Cincinnati to San Antonio are being rethought and repurposed into walkways and shopping districts, and downtown parks like Houston's Discovery Green (opened in 2008) and New York's High Line (opened in 2009) show that cities are willing to get creative with landscape architecture in the name of creating usable recreation spaces. But 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 like One Park Place, luxury high-rise apartments,[22] 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).[23] 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

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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.

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

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

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

as similar housing just two blocks away[24]) 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, 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, himself has stated: "We were from the community. We wanted to do it for the neighborhood. Ultimately, we failed."[25] One potential answer: don't follow private investment - we already know exactly what the developers want, and it isn't to preserve and honor our communities and neighborhoods 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 streets (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. Place/Love, and a sense of genuine care 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.

Place, Roots, Home

New Orleans is my sometimes-home, or when I'm feeling more sentimental, my soul's home. It's the city that I have a lot of Place/Love for: the grimy streets of the French Quarter where I made 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 physical places.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleanians were temporarily scattered across the country until it was deemed safe for most people to return. In the national discourse, a popular conversation topic went something along the lines of: is it worth the rebuild? Put another way: can the people of New Orleans and the unique culture that they've sustained survive outside the physical place? What, after all, are those particular buildings, those particular streets - can't the humans that usually occupy them find someplace else to live? 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

[24] https://ny.curbed.com/2016/8/8/12401622/high-line-real-estate-development-effect
[25] https://www.citylab.com/solutions/2017/02/the-high-lines-next-balancing-act-fair-and-affordable-development/515391/

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/Love is not just an exercise in achieving positive social and social justice outcomes, as the past two sections have focused on. Place is also important for more spiritual reasons, as it often is an anchor for our emotive and inner lives, driving our conceptions of home and roots, and providing fertile ground for nostalgia. The word 'home' in particular is a tricky one, because while it references a physical location, it implies more of 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*,[26] 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 arguments for Place/Love.

Another memoir, coincidentally also released in 2019, brings forward themes of Place and loss: *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado.[27] This narrative, wildly different in style and scope from Sarah Broom's work, nonetheless also centers around a physical space. 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

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

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. 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.

Overall, 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. 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.

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 self-imposed isolation of my bedroom, as millions of Americans, including myself, have been under stay-at-home orders for going on four weeks. Most public ‘third’ 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 willing 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. 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.

Conclusion: A Final Note on the Importance of Attention

The same year that Mary Oliver died, I was reminded again of the need "to pay attention," this time not while walking around, but stationary, seated in a movie theater. *Parasite* and *Us*, two of my favorite films of 2019, share similar themes: most obviously, class-based struggle and marginalization. But on a deeper level, they are both also about awareness, and the consequences of not having it. In each movie, the principal sin committed by the privileged group of characters, the sin that drives the plot and climax of each film, is a fundamental lack of attention.

Parasite, the Korean-language film from Bong Joon-ho, focuses on the sometimes humorous, sometimes horrifying relationship between a destitute family (the Kims) and a wealthy one (the Parks), as the Kims attempt to infiltrate the lives and house of their more-fortunate counterparts. The wealthy Parks are fundamentally ignorant to their schemes, and the Kims are able to take advantage of their gullibility and presumptions about the working class. It proves to be very easy, in a way that's both humorous and horrifying, to convince the Parks that their driver is a sexual deviant, or that their maid is infected with tuberculosis. It's not surprising that the Park family would believe these things, as they live in a walled complex in a moneyed neighborhood, ensuring that they need never witness suffering or encounter people unlike themselves - they aren't even aware that a poor person is living in their own basement. And even when they must encounter the lower classes, like to have the mother Chung-sook Kim make steak ram-don for dinner, it is suggested that they don't actually 'see' these people, focusing instead on their smell. This willful lack of attention eventually leads to disastrous consequences at the movie's end, including a very bloody birthday party.

Meanwhile, *Us*, Jordan Peele's horror movie about murderous doppelgangers, centers on an uprising of previously-suppressed science experiments, uncanny valley clones that had been forced to live underground, called the Un-Tethered. We learn from the clones' leader, Red, that their grievance, and the reason for their violence, is neglect. Fair or not, the doppelgangers blame their real-life duplicates for abandoning them to their miserable underground existence, and then refusing to pay attention to their suffering. In a moment that exposes Peele's broader intention behind the film's themes, when the father character Gabe questions the Un-Tethered with "Who are you people?", Red replies simply: "We're Americans." This quote, along with other references in the movie like the allusion to the 1986 public charity event Hands Across America, let us know that the attention to suffering and inequality in our own communities is the movie's central metaphor.

It's important to remember that paying attention is not the societal norm. Our screens often demand more focus than what's right in front of us. Media outlets, streaming services, and advertisements compete constantly for our regard, such that it's difficult to tune in to any one. And in the parlance of a late-capitalist society, our communities can often be dehumanized and trivialized to clients, networks, and those who exist outside of economic value. In the face of all of this, care, attention, and genuine curiosity become counter-cultural acts, acts that *Parasite* and *Us*, in their own satirical ways, show us are just actions not only on behalf of the neglected, but for us as well.

If the basis of Place/Love, which is maintaining attention, curiosity, and care towards our shared physical spaces and communities, is counter-cultural, then a revolution is needed to achieve it. 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 that revolution can be achieved, even in

seemingly small ways. Because Place shapes and colors our everyday, our everyday must be aligned to Place.