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The Particularities of Place

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Gertrude Stein's famous line about the city of Oakland, California—that there is no "there" there—has been widely understood as a summary judgment against that city. Unfortunately, her quip is also the chief thing many people know about Oakland. Its better-off neighbor Berkeley has even created a gently witty piece of public art called "HERETHERE" that plays on Stein's words. It stands at the border of the two cities, with the word "Here" on the Berkeley side, and the word "There" on the Oakland side. As you might expect, Oaklanders don't much like it. There has even been what you might call a T-party rebellion, in which an intrepid army of knitters covered up the "T" on the Oakland side with a huge and elaborate tea-cozy. This is how they conduct cultural warfare in the Bay Area, where some people clearly have too much time on their hands.

Yet the irony of it all is that when Stein penned those words in her autobiography, they were not meant as a snappy put-down. She was thinking of something entirely different. Oakland had been extremely important to her when she lived there as a child, as a rare stable place in an unsettled and peripatetic early life. But when she discovered later in life that her childhood home there had been torn down, leaving her with nothing familiar to return to, Oakland lost its meaning for her. The blooming, buzzing confusion of the city no longer had a nucleus around which she could orient it. Saying that there was no "there" there was a poignant way to express this personal disorientation—a disorientation felt by many of

us in the modern world, particularly when the pace of change causes us to lose our grip on the places that matter most to us.

The need we all have for visible and tangible things to anchor our memories has countless ramifications. We can never predict in advance the points at which our sense of place is most vulnerable, though surely a childhood home is a very likely candidate. In any event, when one of those anchors disappears or changes, as it did for Stein, we are left alone, deserted, burdened by uprooted and disconnected memories which can no longer be linked to any visible or tangible place of reference in the world outside our heads. So the memories atrophy, and the sense of place is lost with them, like abandoned farmland slowly reclaimed by the primeval forest.

Footprints of Vanished Places

Although "place" is the most general of words, the things to which it points are very specific. "Place" as a concept is highly abstract, but places in particular are concrete, tangible, intimately meaningful. Each place is different. Each of us comes from just such a particular somewhere, and considers some place (or places) "home."

Each of us knows, too, that "a sense of place" is as much an achievement as a given condition. Although one could argue that a "place" is ultimately merely a point on some coordinate system, such a flatfooted assertion misses the inherently phenomenological character of place. Which explains why not all places are equal, and some places are more fully "places" than others. In a frenetically mobile and ever more porous and inexorably globalizing world, we stand especially powerfully in need of such stable and coherent places in our lives—to ground us and orient us, and mark off a finite arena, rich with memory, for our activity as parents and children, as friends and neighbors, and as free and productive citizens.

And we know that the sense of place is very fragile and easily lost. Stein's famous line about Oakland is testimony to that. So too is the utterly quotidian incident described in a haunting little column that Verlyn Klinkenborg wrote in 2007 for the *New York Times*. As he shows, the sense of place applies especially powerfully to the most commonplace and unremarkable things:

> A couple of weeks ago, the Korean market on the corner closed. It wasn't an especially sudden thing. There was a month of destocking—or unrestocking—that filled the store with the strange feeling of accumulating

> absence. Then there was a brief sale—half-off anything left—and finally darkness.
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> I walked past the store again last night. A window had been broken and taped over, and a woman leaned against the dark storefront and asked for spare change. I had never realized how much light that store cast upon the neighborhood, how much briskness it gave its sidewalk frontage.
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> When the market closed, I found myself thinking, "Now what do I do with this?"
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> "This" was my mental map of the place. I know just where the seltzer is in a store that no longer exists. I can walk straight to the dried pineapple, but only in the past. Some part of me had quietly made an inventory of the necessities—the analgesics and toothbrushes and small shampoos—that had migrated to the front counter, which was a drugstore in itself. There are other places to buy all these things, and not far away. But there is still a perfectly good Korean market in my head.
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> We carry with us these footprints of vanished places: apartments we moved out of years ago, dry cleaners that went out of business, restaurants that stopped serving, neighborhoods where only the street names remain the same. This is the long-gone geography of New York. I look up at the buildings and try to imagine all the lives that have passed through them.
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> I'd might as well be looking at the people on the street and imagining all the buildings that have passed through them—places we knew almost by intuition until they vanished, leaving behind only the strange sense of knowing our way around a world that can no longer be found.

What Stein's and Klinkenborg's accounts share is their depiction of an ordinary but disquieting phenomenon: the translation of *place* into *space*—the transformation of a setting charged with human meaning, a place, into one from which the meaning has departed, a mere space. We all have experienced this, some of us many times. Think of the strange emotion you feel when you are moving, and you finish clearing all your belongings out of the apartment or the house or the dorm room you have inhabited—and you look back at it one last time, to see a space that used to be the center of your world, reduced to nothing but bare walls and bare floors.

The Erosion of Place

Of course, such changes and transitions, however painful they may sometimes be, are part of a healthy and dynamic human existence. What

is different now is not that they happen, but that they have become so normative, so pervasive, reflecting a social and psychological fluidity that seems to mark our times. As we have become ever more mobile and more connected and absorbed in a dense web of electronically mediated relations, an astonishingly rich panoply of things that are not immediately present to us, our actual and tangible places seem less and less important to us, more and more transient or provisional or interchangeable or even disposable. We increasingly draw our social sustenance from (and expend our social energies on) virtual people and places rather than from the venerable, if limiting, fixity of the actual people standing before our eyes, and the specific places beneath our feet.

It has not always been thus, of course; and we forget how recently things were, as they had been from the beginning of time, almost entirely different. It was not much more than a century ago that the lives of most Americans were confined within a narrow local radius, in what historian Robert Wiebe revealingly called "island communities." The ability of these island communities, and the individuals who comprised them, to communicate across large distances was limited by the vast seas of space and time—by the distances that separated them, and the immense time it took to traverse those distances. The term "real time," to the extent it would have had any meaning at all, referred to strictly local time, measured by reference to the sun's reaching its zenith at that particular location.

Far from being a puzzle or an enigma, one's "place in the world" was a given for a great many, if not most, men and women. With rare exceptions, the person that one became and the life that one lived were inextricably linked to the geographical location where one was born and raised. Such factors remained in place even if one moved, as Americans always have, since one's origins lingered on as a structural mold of one's worldly existence, nearly as hard and fast as one's biological makeup. One could only move so far and so fast.

But a cascading array of technological and social innovations has, with astonishing speed, rendered those considerations obsolete. Rapid telecommunications and inexpensive travel have eliminated the isolation of provincial life everywhere in the world, and resulted in the unprecedented mobility of both individuals and entire populations, the blurring of national identities and porousness of boundaries, and the relentless global flow of labor, capital, and goods. All these forces erase distances and erode barriers that had formerly been considered an inescapable part

of the human condition. And the term "real time" now refers, not to local time, but to its opposite—the possibility of near-universal simultaneity, so that I can have a lively conversation "in real time" with anyone on any part of the planet.

This revolution shouldn't be a surprise to us, since it has been coming steadily ever since the invention of the telegraph. And make no mistake: there is much to celebrate in these developments. They give crucial support to one of the most powerful and fundamental, and universally appealing, of all American ideas: the idea of freedom. We embrace freedom because we believe fervently in the fullest breadth of individual human possibility, and share a deep conviction that no one's horizons in life should be dictated by the conditions of his or her birth. Nothing is more quintessentially American than that conviction. But interestingly, the word "place" rarely plays any role in this freedom narrative, and in fact, what role it plays tends to be negative. One's place of origin is seen as an impediment, something to be overcome. "Place" may even point toward notions of social hierarchy that Americans generally find anathema. Some of us are old enough to remember when the idea of "knowing your place" was favored by advocates of racial segregation and the subordination of women.

But very little of that is relevant anymore. We now have a new set of problems, born of the pathologies engendered precisely by our achievements. Something is now seriously out of balance in the way we live. All the technological wizardry and individual empowerment have unsettled many facets of life, and given rise to profound feelings of disquiet and insecurity. No one can yet reckon the human costs of such radical changes, but they may turn out to be far higher than we have imagined.

Accompanying this disquiet is a gnawing sense that something important in our fundamental human nature is being lost, abandoned or sacrificed in this headlong rush, and that this "something" remains just as vital to our full flourishing as human beings as it was in the times when we had far fewer choices on offer.

Could it be the case that the global-scale interconnectedness of things may be coming at too high a price? Could it be the case that the variety and spontaneous diversity of the world as we have known it for all the prior centuries of human history is being gradually leveled and effaced, and insensibly transformed into something standardized, artificial, rootless, pastless, and bland—a world of interchangeable airport terminals

and franchise hotels and restaurants, a world of smooth surfaces designed to facilitate perpetual movement rather than rooted flourishing? A world of space rather than place, in which there are no "theres" there?

Could it be the case that one of the chief things neglected by this pattern of ceaseless movement is precisely the opportunity to live dignified and purposeful lives of self-government and civic engagement, the kind of lives that thinkers since the time of Aristotle have regarded as the highest expression of human flourishing? Are such lives even conceivable in a world without "theres"?

These concerns should not be confused with feelings of nostalgia, such as one finds in sentimental discourse about lost "community," often emanating from individuals who would not for a second tolerate the kind of constraints on individual liberty that "thick" communities of the past always required. For better or worse, a wholesale rejection of modernity is simply not a serious option for us. Instead, we should seek to discover how, given the American people as they are, and American economic and social life as it now exists—and not as those things can be *imagined* to be—we can find means of resisting the steady homogenization of the world, and of cultivating a strong sense of place wherever we find it.

Why Particulars Matter

In both its literal and its figurative meanings, "place" refers not only to a geographical spot but to a defined niche in the social order: one's place in the world. Thus, when we say that we have "found our place," we are speaking not only of a physical location, but of the achievement of a stable and mature personal identity within a coherent social order, so that we can provide an answer to the questions: "Who are you? Where did you come from? Where is your home? Where do you fit in the order of things?" Hence, it is not surprising that a disruption or weakening in our experience of geographical place will be reflected in similar disruptions in our sense of personal identity. The two things go together.

But any effort to affirm the importance of place brings us into tension with the same disorienting forces that are shrinking and transforming our world. A national government or a global economy always tends in the direction of consolidation and uniformity, toward the imposition of a universal standard. A stress upon the importance of "place" represents a counterforce to these huge structural tendencies. For place is always grounded in the particular, even the provincial. Such affirmation is not

mere attachment to the abstraction of "place" but to *this* place, scaled to our innate human sensibility: toward *specific* hometowns and neighborhoods and countrysides and landscapes, each having its own enveloping aura of thoughts and desires and memories: that is to say, its own history, its own customs and traditions, its own stories, its foodways and folkways, its relics, and its burial grounds.

Furthermore, what makes a "place" durable is not merely a loyalty to its past, but the vitality of its present, and the promise of its future. Far from being static, a "place" must be a node of continuous human activity: political, economic, and cultural. These are the forces that make a living "place" different from a museum. A living "place" has to offer scope for the creative energies of its people.

Does a society that has entirely lost the sense of "place" also lose the ability to forge such connections, and perhaps even lose the *desire* to forge them? Do we, in losing our "places," lose the crucial basis for healthy and resilient individual identity, and for the cultivation of public virtues? And if these dangers are real and present ones, are there ways that intelligent public policy can begin to address them constructively, by means of reasonable and democratic innovations which are likely to attract wide public support?

These are questions of the first importance, and they ought to be on our agenda. We should not imagine that the erosion of "place" is an "optional" issue, or an "aesthetic" one, the sort of concern best taken up when times are flush and there are less pressing items on the agenda. This issue goes to the most fundamental purposes of human society. Nor should we dismiss a renewed emphasis on "place" as fanciful, or backward-looking, or fetishistic, a foolish and futile attempt to resurrect something whose time has passed. Instead, it can be argued that, like it or not, we must recover a more durable and vibrant sense of place if we are to preserve the healthy dynamism of our society as it now exists, and promote the highest measure of human happiness and flourishing. Or, to put it in the words of historian William Leach, "People require a firm sense of place so they can dare to take risks. A society whose common store of memories has been beaten down or shattered is open to further disruption; for such a society cannot defend or protect itself from the stronger incursions of those who know what they want and how to get it."

A firmer sense of "place," in short, may be an essential basis of our freedom, and the necessary grounding for a great many other human

goods. Simone Weil wrote eloquently of the human need for roots; but roots cannot be summoned down from the clouds, transported over a fiber-optic network, or carried around in a suitcase. They have to find some "there" that can become an enduring "here" for them.

The abandonment of such roots in the quest to inhabit some technologically simulated stratosphere of pure fluidity, to be all things at once in all places, and thereby escape once and for all every imprisoning feature of the particularities that have been given to us, including ultimately the limitations of our bodies themselves, will carry a fearsome hidden cost. "We exist by distinction," said George Santayana, "by integration round a specific nucleus according to a particular pattern." Let that nucleus be lost—as it became lost for Gertrude Stein—and so too are we.

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