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The Loneliness of Difference

It's a busy weekday morning in a coffee shop on East 9th Street in New York City. Many different people come through, all with different focuses and intentions; some are in a rush, some are coming to meet with friends, some need a quiet place to study before classes, and some are just trying to get some caffeine in to prepare for the day ahead. No one really stands out, but they all have different experiences in this shared space. One of these customers is Olivia Laing, a british writer living in the East Village of lower Manhattan. She frequents this coffee shop, and her experience is always the same: she orders a "medium urn brew", -- which is more commonly known in America as a "regular or drip" -- the barista responds in a state of confusion asking Laing to repeat herself, and she ends up embarrassed and uncomfortable (Laing 48). This barrier between Laing's english dialect and the barista's american one subconsciously separates Laing from everyone else she encounters. Laing is stuck in a state of loneliness, despite being surrounded by many other people. Physically, she is not alone in this crowded coffee shop, however this ordinary experience talking to the barista leaves her completely ostracized.

The loneliness described in Olivia Laing's experience is unlike what most would normally think of as a "lonely" feeling. The general understanding of "loneliness" is a feeling we associate with being physically or emotionally alone (such as when a group of friends leave one behind). For most people, going to a coffee shop every morning (even if they are by themselves) does not necessarily bring a feeling of loneliness. For Laing, the loneliness comes from her form

of speech. When her communication with the barista was disrupted by the barista's inability to try to understand and empathize with Laing, she felt completely alone.

But how much do we actually think about what is going on in people's heads in a situation like this? How can five people be in the same place going through similar motions and have completely different experiences in it? Every other customer in the coffee shop is likely focused on what is happening to and within themselves, rather than how their feelings might differ from someone else's. How can we know that such an ordinary experience is making someone feel so outcast?

Because the coffee shop holds a different purpose for each person who goes there, it is considered a non-place -- somewhere you go to get from point A to point B. There is a sort of anonymity one has in these non-places. No one really knows anyone else on a level other than what they can see. In an excerpt from Marc Augé's *Non-Places*, he discusses how everyone can be in one place while going through completely different experiences.

Augé brings up an interesting idea within the concept of non-places. There are many different "frontiers" in society and in America especially. Frontiers are essentially barriers that need to be crossed in order to create a more "equal" society; "To respect frontiers is to make a pledge of peace," (Augé XIV). For Olivia Laing, a major frontier living in New York is language. What would have happened if the barista chose to try to understand what Laing was ordering rather than question her choice of phrase? Would Laing have left feeling a bit more respected and less embarrassed than in her original interaction? Because of instances like these, Laing found herself refraining from speaking as much as she could when interacting with people in public; if she feels all alone in her speech, the only way to avoid that feeling is to not speak at

all. However, does that solve the problem or just simply push it away so it doesn't need to be solved?

Laing mentions how most times, she's able to walk through the city (aka walk through different non-places) content with being "anonymous" to passersby (Laing 48-49). It didn't matter whether she was physically alone or not, she was often in a state of loneliness when she was outside of her apartment. Most of the time she was in a more peaceful state of anonymity. Still, language barriers triggered an anxious and self-deprecating state of loneliness, often in situations like that of the coffee shop. Because she was living in one of the busiest and highly populated areas of the country, she was constantly moving through different non-places. There is a sort of freeing experience in some non-places where one can feel anonymous and the moments in them don't really hold a very specific purpose. But what creates the more constricting feelings in non-places such as the feeling Olivia Laing had in the coffee shop?

As a result of her sense of loneliness in NYC, Laing turned to the story of Andy Warhol, a famous artist in the 1950s-1970s who created an image of himself for the purpose of standing out. Having spent most of his life in America, his Slovak accent often stood in the way of him "fitting in." There's a loneliness Laing and Warhol share: the loneliness of difference. Warhol, however, decided to take this difference and create a non-place for everyone and everything that was different called "The Factory" (Trebay and La Ferla). He displayed paintings of "ugly things, unwanted things, things that couldn't possibly belong in the white chamber of the gallery," and making them into art (Laing 58). His idea was that of the "glamour" of sameness; "If everybody's not a beauty, then nobody is," (Laing 59). With this, the question becomes: is this what non-places do? If so, is "sameness" really as "glamorous" as Warhol makes it out to be?

As discussed before, non-places make people more anonymous because everyone is in their own minds within them. In the 1960s, Warhol began to go out of his way to stand out; he exaggerated his physical appearance in an effort to both shelter himself from and make an impression on the world. Everything he was criticized for before, he embraced and intensified, making him immediately identifiable everywhere he went. But Warhol was still very lonely in his life; he didn't have many friends who he could confide in, or who wanted to confide in him, and he turned to machines to take the place of the missing emotional intimacy. Machines are all the same and can be replicated which comforted him (Laing 62-64). Like Laing, what made him different made him special, while also separating him from the rest of society.

When I think of non-places, I think a lot about the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met). They're used for many reasons other than just being what you walk up to get into The Met; they're an "iconic" tourist spot for fans of the television show *Gossip Girl*, they are a public space for people to sit, there are food carts all around them, people sitting and asking for money, and I even watched someone propose on them. I think about a picture of people on the steps when the museum reopened in September 2020 (Galai). The image shows people talking, walking, sitting, and standing all on or around these steps. They are all there for a different reason, and no one has any idea who anyone else is.

The wonder then becomes, how would Olivia Laing and Andy Warhol view this image? Personally, I see an inviting, bustling place to sit and eat lunch, a way to get into the museum, or somewhere you can slowly walk by and admire while walking down Fifth Ave. However, I wouldn't consider the potential issues people like Laing and Warhol might encounter if they were to go there. To them, it could be seen as a place they'd have to get through quickly to avoid having to speak to anyone for too long, or being recognized for any of their other differences. Or,

maybe they see it as a peaceful place where they are completely anonymous and no one can recognize that they are not as similar to the people around them.

There's a sort of beauty in the idea that we encounter many people we don't ever know and people who will never know us. But, most likely we have similarities, such as our ability to speak English in a dialect that is understood by each other. These similarities set people like Laing and Warhol apart, leaving them lonely in their differences. Are non-places destined to just be places we go through without stopping to understand anyone else? Or could Augé's idea of breaking down frontiers give them a deeper purpose that can reach everyone who goes there? At the end of the day, we are all human beings who feel and can be affected by other human beings' actions, so breaking down frontiers in these non-places (such as language barriers) is the key to a more accepting and equalized society.

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