Pluralism, Place, and the Local
By Whittney Barth

"The social and cultural pluralism," writes Wendell Berry, "that some now see as a goal is a public of destroyed communities," and those "modern industrial urban centers" that are seen as "pluralistic" are such "because they are full of refugees from destroyed communities, destroyed community economies, disintegrated local cultures, and ruined local ecosystems."[1] In his 1993 essay "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," Berry, a prolific essayist, social critic, and poet, is troubled by the thought of diverse people living out their daily lives unaware of—and seemingly uninterested in—their surroundings, including fellow human beings. He sees proponents of pluralism as extending "tolerance…always to the uprooted and passive, never to the rooted and active," and pluralism as antithetical to "people locally placed."[2] Today, many local interfaith efforts name "relationship building" as a core, if not primary goal.[3] Further, many engaged in these efforts filter this commitment to relationship building through a lens of pluralism, a strategy for responding to religious diversity. What kinds of local places are these individuals and communities imagining and building? In what ways does interfaith activity that foregrounds the importance of relationships engage in a process of place-making, both imaginatively and physically? A few examples from cities across the United States are offered here as preliminary starting points for this exploration. They are presented here in conversation with select scholarship on place and place-making from perspectives within religious studies, education, and geography.[4] These examples and explorations are intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive or conclusive, and each raises a different set of questions as we consider pluralism and place at the level of the local.

Although Berry sees fragmentation as the result of a preference for pluralism, many engaged in interfaith efforts draw upon a definition of pluralism that foregrounds engagement. Diana Eck, professor at Harvard University and founder and director of the Pluralism Project conceives of pluralism, at least in a civic sense, as an "energetic engagement with diversity," coupled with an "active seeking of understanding across lines of difference," and not relativism but "an encounter of commitments" and "based on dialogue."[5] For over twenty years, Pluralism Project researchers and affiliates have made the local a large part of their focus, exploring not only how immigration has changed the physical religious landscape of cities and towns across the U.S. but also what new

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[1] Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993),169. Berry's critiques ought to be read within his broader concern over environmental degradation and his agrarian preferences. Yet, as this essay seeks to demonstrate, his linking of pluralism to a connection to place is worth exploring further.

[2] Ibid., 170.

[3] "Summary Report," *America's Interfaith Infrastructure: An Emerging Landscape*, Accessed March 2015, http://www.pluralism.org/interfaith/report#purpose.

[4] For an excellent over view of the many ways in which place as a concept has been explored in geography and across different fields of study, see Tim Cresswell's *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd Edition, 2014).

[5] Diana Eck, "What is Pluralism?" *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*, Accessed April 2015, www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism.

challenges and networks, interfaith and otherwise, have emerged in light of these changes. The Pluralism Project also aims "to discern, in light of this work, emerging meanings of religious 'pluralism,' both for religious communities and public institutions…"[6] I interpret this focus as an acknowledgement that discussions of pluralism are most generative when attention to place, especially the local, is part of the conversation.[7]

In his seminal work *Place and Placelessness*, E. Relph claims that "[t]o be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place."[8] In their anthology *Space and Place*, Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires write that "[p]lace is space to which meaning has been ascribed."[9] They continue:

How then does space becomes place? By being named: as the flows of power and negotiations of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population.[10]

Many interfaith efforts at a local level are transforming space into place in both of these ways, physically through architecture but also through the "symbolic and imaginary investments" of people, which includes framing and exploring what it means to be neighbors who notice and engage with one another. It is to a few of these examples that we now turn.

Atlanta, GA
In a volume on place-based education and globalization, David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith argue that the current assumption in public education is that "the purpose of schooling is to prepare the next generation to compete and succeed in the global economy."[11] In contrast, education that is place-conscious seeks to challenge both globalization at the expense of the local and a sense of "rootlessness."[12] One of the contributors to their volume, *Place-Based Education in a Global Age: Local Diversity*, is Mark Graham, a former high school art teacher in New York City turned professor, who echoes this concern. He writes of art classrooms as important sites for transforming students' perceptions about the world in which they live, a world where "places are owned,

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[6] "Mission," *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*. Accessed April 2015. http://www.pluralism.org/about/mission.

[7] The author acknowledges that this essay's discussion of place and individual/communal place-making focuses mostly at a local (read: city) level. This focus intersects with discussions of how America is conceived as a place, both physically and imaginatively, and also how international ties bind individuals and communities to places beyond their daily geographies. These explorations are important and warrant more discussion than we can give them here.

[8] E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (New York: Pion Limited, 1983), 1.

[9] Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, *Space and Place* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993), xii.

[10] Ibid., xii.

[11] David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith, *Place-Based Education in a Global Age: Local Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), xiv.

[12] Ibid., xvi.

measured, used up, and thrown aside."[13] Through observation, painting, drawing, and photography, Graham and his students reflect upon and seek to represent their connections to the environments in which they live and share with human and other-than-human neighbors. They share with one another their personal responses to this "exercise in walking and looking and questioning."[14] Here, an attempt is made to startle individuals not out of the everyday but *into* it.

In Atlanta, Georgia, Interfaith Community Initiatives (ICI, formerly Interfaith Community Institute) host Interfaith Immersions, weekend-long opportunities for local leaders to visit several houses of worship, including a church, synagogue, mosque, and *mandir* and engage in dialogue with members and participants. The trips are intended to provide an opportunity for leaders to strengthen their own faith, cultivate appreciation for that of others, and participate in "the kind of interfaith engagement needed for the birthing of a new religious society in America."[15] The program grew out of the ICI's World Pilgrims Program, which uses international travel as an opportunity to cultivate "an atmosphere of friendship and trust" that can lead to "dialogue about areas of disagreement," foregoing conversion attempts for increased "empathy" and conflict reduction.[16] Organizers emphasize that the word "pilgrimage," was chosen intentionally to frame each trip as a "sacred journey" to places of "sacred importance" where "spiritual enrichment can take place," and they contrast pilgrimage with a "travel seminar" or a "tourist venture."[17] Interfaith Immersions was a way to provide a financially viable option for more people and to acknowledge the city of Atlanta's own increasing religious diversity and the opportunity that exists to explore and deepen relationships at home.[18]

Interfaith Immersion's development out of a sense of pilgrimage and the emphasis placed on immersion suggests a different set of possibilities for interfaith encounters than those Robert Wuthnow found most churches employ if they choose to engage individuals and communities of different religious traditions. In a 2005 study, Wuthnow found that the majority of churches that do engage with their religiously diverse neighbors tend to do so through what he calls "ceremonial forms," annual services or symbolic alliances which may "minimize the amount of interaction that actually takes place..."[19] These ceremonial forms are one of the "strategies of engagement" Wuthnow observes, in contrast to what he terms "strategies of avoidance," which some church leaders use (intentionally or unintentionally)

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[13] Mark Graham, "On the Fringe of Nirvana: Aesthetic Places and the Art Classroom," in *Place-Based Education in a Global Age: Local Diversity*, eds. David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33.

[14] Ibid., 33.

[15] "ICI Interfaith Immersions," *Interfaith Community Initiatives*, Accessed May 2015, http://www.interfaithci.org/interfaith-immersions.html.

[16] "World Pilgrims Program," *Interfaith Community Initiatives*, Accessed May 2015. http://www.interfaithci.org/world-pilgrims.html.

[17] Ibid.

[18] "ICI Interfaith Immersions," *Interfaith Community Initiatives*, Accessed May 2015, http://www.interfaithci.org/interfaith-immersions.html.

[19] Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 248.

to avoid contact with other religious communities or leaders.[20] For the latter, he uses an interview with a priest in Northern California to illustrate: When asked whether or not his parish encouraged getting to know people from different faiths, the priest responded that "there just aren't any Muslims around," despite the fact that the parish was located less than one-third of a mile from a mosque.[21]

ICI's Interfaith Immersion program, insofar as it seeks to deepen people's understanding of the local environments in which they live, may find some common ground with proponents of place-based education like Gruenewald and Smith. To put it differently, how do interfaith efforts like the Interfaith Immersion program also serve as exercises in "walking, listening, and questioning?" And how might efforts that orient around communities with physical "homes" take into their purview those religious (and secular) communities who, although present, may not have (or, in some cases, desire) a permanent brick and mortar site?

Omaha, NE
Religious studies scholar Thomas Tweed writes that "[r]eligions are confluences of organic cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries." [22] He further emphasizes that no one encounters "religion-in-general," rather we are all "situated observers encountering particular practices performed by particular people in particular contexts."[23] Each individual and community creates (and re-creates) maps of which serve to orient and to help articulate those spaces that become our places (or homes) as meaning is ascribed to them. At the same time, foregrounding "confluences" and "flows" acknowledges that this is not static but rather a dynamic process, both for individuals and communities. The boundaries of our individual and communal maps, our efforts to "make homes and cross boundaries," can collide (and subsume) just as they can coexist and promote seeing a place in a new way. Indeed, these processes are more interrelated than mutually exclusive.

In Omaha, Nebraska, forgers of the Tri-Faith Initiative are in the process of visioning and creating a place where their respective communities do not just share a zip code; they share the same property. Since 2010, Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Omaha have been planning for the co-location of a synagogue, a mosque, a church, and an interfaith center, each a separate building built on the same campus.[24] Thought to be the first of its kind in

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[20] Ibid., 244

[21] Ibid., 245.

[22] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54. Citing Tweed's working definition of religions is intended not as an endorsement of his definition above others or to suggest that this definition and others exist in isolation; they do not. I draw upon Tweed here because I find his emphasis on the spatial to be generative for, to use Tweed's terms, "prompting new sightings and crossings" (p. 47) for considering the role of religion in orienting humans toward each other and the worlds they share.

[23] Ibid., 55.

[24] The extent to which a perceived common theological ground between Jews, Christians, and Muslims facilitates efforts like the Tri-Faith Initiative is worth exploring further. See Kate McCarthy's analysis of the "politics of dialogue" as interfaith coalitions consider who may be invited to the table and as responses to the invitation may vary depending, in part, by who is perceived to already be at the table (*Interfaith Encounters in America* [New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007], 84-91).

the United States, the initiative is a partnership between Temple Israel, a reform Jewish congregation; the American Muslim Institute, formerly known as the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture; and Countryside Community Church, a member of the United Church of Christ denomination which took over the partnership from the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska in 2015. Tri-Faith is an intentional effort on behalf of the founding communities "to be in relationship together as neighbors on one campus, committed to practicing respect, acceptance and trust."[25] Further adding to the significance of this undertaking, the property is the site of a former country club formed for and by the Jewish community of Omaha in 1924, an era when Jews were barred from other local options.[26]

At the time of this writing, member communities and leaders of the Tri-Faith Initiative are fundraising and, accordingly, each of the buildings is at different phases of construction. Challenges to this intentional co-location have extended well beyond those of a building project; some challenges have been precipitated by events well beyond the local, including the "reverberations" of violence in the Middle East.[27] What does it mean to be a "people locally placed" when Muslims, Jews, and Christians who have made a commitment to deepening their relationship in Omaha have friends and relatives on either sides of a violent conflict? The realities of these and other diverse connections invite an exploration of place as "process," to draw upon geographer Doreen Massey, that is, where places are seen as the locus of "multiple identities and histories."[28] Further, what insights does a commitment to pluralism, which according to Diana Eck, includes room for "criticism and self criticism" and asks for "participation, and attunement to the life and energies of one another," contribute to a notion of place that is rooted yet fluid? [29] And how might this understanding of pluralism encourage the seeing of a place's uniqueness as being "defined by its interactions" rather than as having "single, essential, identities?"[30]

Cincinnati, OH; Oak Creek, WI; Milford, MA
Doreen Massey's argument for understanding place as "global" and "progressive" comes in response to critics who argue that attempts to create a "sense of place" in our interconnected and highly mobile world only result in inward-looking and "reactionary" senses of place which feed into—and are fed by—feelings of "uncertainty and anxiety" over the potential loss of one's place.[31] Relatedly, Tim Cresswell articulates how usage of the term "place" in everyday language links geography with social "arrangement" where some people are deemed by others as "out of place" based on who they are (or who they are

[25] "About," *The Tri-Faith Initiative*, Accessed May 2015, https://trifaith.org/about/.
[26] "Precisely this Patch of Earth," *One Nation Indivisible*, August 2013, Accessed May 2015, http://www.onenationindivisible.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ONIstoryNo.11v6.pdf.
[27] For this example, I am indebted to the 2014 case study "Gaza Reverberates in Nebraska," developed for the Pluralism Project by the Rev. Dr. Marcia Moret Sietstra.
[28] Massey quoted in Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd Edition, 2014), 108.
[29] Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How A "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 70-71.
[30] Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," in *Space, Place, and Gender,* ed. Doreen Massey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 152.
[31] Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd Edition, 2014), 98.

not).[32] Massey, in her notion of a "global sense of place," presents a concept of place that recognizes its connections beyond itself while finding ways to "hold on to the notion of geographic difference, of uniqueness, even rootedness if people want that without being reactionary."[33]

Recently, Christians, Jews, and Sikhs in Southwestern Ohio were inspired to form a symbolic "ring" around the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati. Organizers planned this gesture of peace in light of a local controversy surrounding a public school program aimed to teach high school students about Islam as well as the feeling that, on the world stage, "extremists" get too much attention.[34] The group was inspired by a similar gesture in Oslo, Norway, where supporters surrounded a synagogue after an attack on a Jewish community in Denmark.[35] In 2012, after the deadly shooting at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin, vigils, memorials, and solidarity events took place at that location and at *gurdwaras*, churches, and public spaces around the country. One such vigil at a *gurdwara* in Milford, MA, drew hundreds of people, including members of the local Muslim community who broke their Ramadan fast with prayer on the lawn of the *gurdwara*.[36]

In each of these examples individuals and members of different faith communities made a decision either to show up or, in the cases of the community under attack, to open up their doors as a response to violence and tragedy. These gestures can be read as statements about the kind of places those who show up and those who welcome envision their city or town to be. To use Cresswell's framing, when neighbors show up in support, it is an affirmation to the affected community that they are, in fact, *in place*, despite any violent attempts that may seek to emphasize that Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, or others are somehow *out of place*. At the same time, these examples illustrate how someone else's place can intentionally become part of the maps of others who may not otherwise foster a connection to that particular place. How might the gesture of welcome, the opening of doors to people beyond one's own particular community lead to the ascription of additional "symbolic and imaginary investments of a population," to use Relph's terms?[37] The question is germane, too, for the religious who participate in programs like Interfaith Immersion in Atlanta, and

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[32] Ibid., 163. In his chapter "Working with Place – Anachronism," in *Place: An Introduction* (Cresswell, 2014), Tim Cresswell explores different ways in which some people are seen as "in-place" and others "out-of-place," drawing separate examples from social identity and sexuality, experiences of homelessness, and the existence of refugees.

[33] Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," in *Space, Place, and Gender,* ed. Doreen Massey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 152.

[34] "Local Muslims Host Faiths to Stand for Peace," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 3, 2015, Accessed May 2015, http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2015/05/03/interfaith-muslims-west-chester/26841019/.

[35] "Local Muslims Host Faiths to Stand for Peace," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 3, 2015, Accessed May 2015, http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2015/05/03/interfaith-muslims-west-chester/26841019/.

[36] "Framingham Man Remembers Relative Who Died Protecting Temple as Open-Hearted; Other Faiths Show Support in Milford," *The Boston Globe*, August 7, 2012, Accessed May 2015, http://www.boston.com/metrodesk/2012/08/06/framingham-man-says-relative-among-those-slain-attack-sikh-temple-wisconsin/wNpXG7OQ8YPRCPk4J5zigJ/story.html.

[37] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, xii. Further analysis is warranted here to explore the "flows of power and negotiations of social relations" (Relph) at work here, perhaps paralleling Doreen Massey's examination of the ways in which social location impacts a person or group's relationship to mobility and opportunity in an era of increased globalization.

further exploration is warranted to consider how different communities within the same city (and individuals within those communities) experience place and the process of place-making differently depending on their social location.[38]

Orientating for Next Steps
I acknowledge that by drawing from explorations of place and place-making in religious studies, education, and geography, this article attempts to cover much ground, even when the miles between Atlanta, Omaha, and Cincinnati are not taken into account. From my vantage point as a particular "situated observer," there is still much ground to cover and much that warrants further probing. For instance, what is the breadth and depth of the layers of meaning inscribed not only upon places that have been interfaith from the outset (like the Tri-Faith Initiative) but also those places that welcome pilgrims and neighbors? And, acknowledging this essay has located its discussion mostly with those affiliated with religious institutions, what kinds of "homes" and boundary crossings are brought to the fore when the focus is on individuals who may be active in interfaith efforts but not be affiliated with a particular religious community and/or who draw from many traditions?[39]

Further, what additional possibilities emerge when place and a commitment to pluralism are put into conversation? Does the latter, insofar as it is manifested in local projects of engagement, contribute to a deepened sense and awareness of place like that sought by proponents of place-based education? Efforts like Interfaith Power and Light and city-based organizations like Faith in Place in Chicago are intentional about bringing ecological awareness into the interfaith picture.[40] Could being attentive to the kinds of places other interfaith efforts are imagining and building also contribute to an ecological awareness of some kind? And what new insights emerge for considering pluralism, as a strategy for engaging religious difference, not as antithetical to a "people locally placed" but rather a contributor to it if "place-making" is seen as a process attentive to connections both global and local? Much ground left to cover indeed.

Whittney Barth currently serves as the assistant director at the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. In that capacity, she manages summer research programs, provides financial and administrative oversight, and addresses local, national, and international audiences about the work of the Pluralism Project. In 2014, Whittney was selected as member of the Summer Institute of Civic Studies at Tufts University and in 2012 participated in the LEarNing Spatially (LENS) Institute at the University of Redlands, both of which furthered her interest in civic engagement, mapping, and the study of religion and place. Whittney received her BA in comparative religion and American studies with a minor in political science from Miami University (Oxford, Ohio) in 2008. She graduated from Harvard Divinity School with a Master of Divinity in 2011.

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[38] Doreen Massey takes up this theme in "A Global Sense of Place" referring to the "power geometry," that is recognizing different groups distinct relationships to "flows and interconnections" which comprise a place (Massey [1994], 149).

[39] This question is posed bearing in mind that the "religious are migrants as well as settlers," (Tweed, 75) and that belonging to a particular group ought not be seen as simply stasis.

[40] Accessed May 2015, http://www.interfaithpowerandlight.org; http://www.faithinplace.org.