

## Locating John Dewey

### *Place Theory and Dewey's Retirement in Key West*

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Experimentalism is philosophy rooted in the interaction of the self with experience and environment. While centuries of philosophic thought has attempted to disembodied human experience and essentialize core elements (e.g., thought, emotion, logic), these efforts have been contested, particularly by twentieth-century experimentalists like John Dewey. Dewey lamented philosophers' attempts to dismember experience and environment and reduce humanity to discreet elements and schema, thinking typified by the Cartesian mind/body dualism, wherein both are distinct substances that interact. Arguing against such dichotomies, Dewey and others sought a monistic understanding of experience wherein people exist in situations and engage experiences that shape thinking and future action.

Place theory is a theoretical tool for understanding how specific locations shape and are shaped by people. The ubiquity of place makes it easy to neglect since people exist in specific places continuously. What is meant by place in this regard? Place is a broad concept that can be thought of in various dimensions, such as the physical/tangible, social/interactional, and metaphysical/educative. Each provides a unique way of framing place and understanding the interactive and subtle ways that place affects people and people affect places. Deweyan philosophy indicates a focus not only on people (monistic organism) and their interactions in the world (experience), but also on place as an integral dimension of experience. Though Dewey does not use this terminology, referring to environment and situation instead of place, he has an emergent notion of place manifest in his theory.

In this paper I apply Dewey's monistic conceptualization of experience and environment to the time he spent in Key West, Florida.<sup>1</sup> Place theory is used to frame the study, as it develops Dewey's notion of environment as an integral dimension in experimentalism. Drawing on primary source data, publications, and secondary source material, I develop connections between the place of his active retirement in Florida and his published and unpublished discourse during this time. Locating Dewey involves exploring the ordinary elements of his life in Key

West (place as location/tangible), his constructions of this place with others (place as social/interactional) and those transcendent aspects of Dewey's discourse there (place as metaphysical/educative) to examine the educative dimensions of this place.

### **Place Theory**

Clifford Geertz observes that people do not live in the world in general, but in particular places (1996, p. 259). Michel Foucault (1986) suggests that while the obsession of the nineteenth century was history, place is a concern of the new epoch, where juxtaposition, proximity, and dispersal are foci of discourse: "we do not live in a void, inside of which we could place individuals and things . . . we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites" (p. 23). Foucault argues that time and space represent a unique intersection in Western thought, as spaces are constructed as hierarchical (e.g., holy and corporeal sites), segmented (e.g., open and closed spaces, urban and rural places), and earthly domains (e.g., terrestrial places). Place, thus conceived, provides a way of organizing myriad experiences while simultaneously imbuing those happenings with value and meaning.

Place is a multidisciplinary construct that has been employed in diverse fields such as environmental science, geography, anthropology, pedagogy, and architecture that examines phenomena in specific locations. Despite an emergent interest in place theorizing, it remains of secondary interest on a broad scale. Why? David Gruenewald (2003b) suggests that the ubiquity of space makes it easy to ignore. "A fundamental paradox of place, then, is that although we can experience it everywhere, everywhere it recedes from consciousness as we become engrossed in our routines in space and time" (p. 622). The routinized quality of place may have marginalized theorizing about this concept, especially since traditional epistemologies shun the ideographic in favor of the universal and general. Postmodern discourses, in contrast, are imbued with a germ of particularistic thought that values the detail and individuality of the specific. Place theory, then, aptly fits within a postmodern intellectual milieu where the physical world is viewed less as a mere tableau on which people play out their lives, and more as a significant yet overlooked phenomenon that is interactionally constructed.

Place theory, put another way, examines how people are both in places and how places are in people. Indigenous people have long embedded place in their physical and spiritual mapping of the world, recognizing and revering the basic interactions of humans and habitats. Paul Memmott and Stephen Long (2002) document how place is conceptualized among indigenous Australians around this interactional principle. Evident among aborigines are explicit norms and mores for particular places (such as menses huts), the meshing of human development within places of limited resources, and the spiritual dimensions of social

life that is place specific. From an indigenous perspective, the interaction of place, person, and experience is fundamental to being human.

If one accepts the intertwined notions that people cannot be placeless and that places are incorporated in various ways into the self, then the pedagogical nature of place is apparent. Vincent Van Gogh's *Sower* was informed by his proximity to farming communities in Holland, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem* was inspired by the rheumatic fever brought on by his crowded, urban life of Vienna, and Aaron Copeland's score *Rodeo* was shaped by the vistas of the American plains. In a similar vein, it is impossible to imagine Henry David Thoreau's literary work without the settings of Concord and Walden Pond, or, appropriate here, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* minus the nautical backdrop of places like the Florida Keys. Though Dewey did not complete a philosophical opus while in Key West, he continued theorizing while leaving remnants of this place in his published works.

Place is used as a lens to understand how Dewey embedded the everyday in the philosophic, reworking seemingly mundane experiences into his problematic and tentative view of experience. Place, thus conceived, is (1) physical/tangible, (2) social/interactional, and (3) metaphysical/educative. Physical/tangible place refers to where things exist, or all objects and phenomenon that occupy places including the place itself. Social/interactional place suggests how a place is constructed and communicated among people who inhabit it. The metaphysical/educative invokes transcendent ideas germinated by a place. Distinctions between and among these three categories are tenuous as they are necessarily interrelated. A physical/tangible dimension of place can cause social communication about its meaning and lead to an educative notion to arise. Or, a metaphysical assertion can find validity in a place and among those who inhabit and share discourse about a place. Though these categories are not discreet, they suggest different ways of conceptualizing place.

The complexity of applying place theory to historical figures like Dewey is challenging. Ryan (1995) contends that Dewey "said nothing" about how the places he lived shaped him, which is an exaggeration rooted in truth (p. 44). Despite living in urban centers, rural areas, and a rich variety of international settings, Dewey offers little about how these places influenced his thinking. This is especially curious since in *Art as Experience* (1934), he argues that ordinary, lived experiences are vital bases for arts and aesthetics (see chapter 2). Some have offered sentimental portrayals of the way Dewey grew up and lived and what he thought about these places since he failed to say much about this himself (for example, Dykhuizen, 1973). While he did not generally examine his own narrative in light of these ideas, Dewey did recognize location as significant to thought.

Continuity . . . means that rational operations grow out of organic activities, without being identical from that which they emerge. Human beings in the ordinary or "natural" processes of living come to make these adjustments purposely, the purpose being limited at first to local

situations as they arise. In the course of time . . . the intent is so generalized that inquiry is freed from limitation to special circumstances. The logic in question is also naturalistic in the sense of the observability, in the ordinary sense of the word, of activities of inquiry. (*Logic*, 1938, p. 19)

Dewey lays out a means of intelligently grasping the world in *Logic* such that the data of logical inquiry is drawn from local, ordinary experiences in much the same way that arts and aesthetics are embellishments of the everyday. These local adaptations to situations become increasingly and gradually transferable to the world beyond. Does his own work and narrative, particularly that written while in Key West, illustrate this experimental premise?

## **Method**

A review of scholarly research into John Dewey's time in Key West yielded little insight, save some oblique references (see Dykhuizen, 1973, p. 314; Martin, 2002; Ratner and Altman, 1964). Seeking to understand a bit more about Dewey in this place, I began this study by visiting the Monroe County May Hill Russell Library in Key West. Tom Lambright, curator of the archives for Key West, located a variety of previously unpublished photographs depicting Dewey around Key West. Lambright explained that Dewey was viewed by locals as a seasonal traveler, or snowbird, rather than a true community member, and that while attention was paid to him as a prominent intellectual of his day, there was and remains much greater interest in the escapades of Hemingway. Lambright further explained that Dewey's arrival in Key West in the winter of 1938 was a desperate time for the city, as it was essentially a poor fishing village without much economic prospects amidst the tail end of the Great Depression. Discussions about locating a naval base in Key West, which occurred in the early 1940s, revived the otherwise isolated community and also gave rise to an increased flow of tourists. Dewey witnessed these changes and refers to them in his correspondence throughout the period.

While at the Key West archives, I conducted a content analysis of the *Key West Citizen* for the period 1938–1950. The analysis included reading the first page of the newspaper from December to May for each year, skipping six days between each. Nine specific references to Dewey and/or his family were identified in the *Key West Citizen* during the period 1946–1993, which helped to clarify how he was viewed by the local community. I conducted a title search in Key West of the Dewey family's properties. I then spent a week at the Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University collecting all correspondence sent by or mailed to John Dewey during his time in Key West. I collected data around three main questions while reading and analyzing some 2,000 pages of letters: (1) What was Dewey thinking during this time? (2) What specific ideas did he have about the place of Key West? and (3) What publications was Dewey writing

while in Key West? I also viewed Dewey's home movies from trips to south Florida and Nova Scotia in 1939.

I began reading selected works that Dewey developed while in Key West.<sup>2</sup> While all of the works specifically referred to in the correspondence were reviewed, four books served as the primary data sources for this inquiry: *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), *Freedom and Culture* (1939), *Problems of Men*<sup>3</sup> (1946), and *Knowing and the Known* (1949) (hereafter referred to as *Logic*, *Freedom*, *Problems*, and *Knowing*, respectively). The questions which were used in this analysis included: (1) What explicit connections exist between Dewey's narrative and his publications? and (2) What elements of Dewey's writing suggest reference to Key West?

### ***John Dewey in Key West***

John Dewey typically traveled to Key West in early January and remained there until April each year, often driving with a family member from his New York City home. Dewey first came to Key West, Florida in January of 1938. It seems that he first came to the southernmost point in the United States at his daughter Evelyn and son-in-law Granville M. Smith's suggestion, as she writes, "We got quite a bit of dope on Key West from the Chamber of Commerce. . . . We can talk it all over when I get there."<sup>4</sup> Much of the early correspondence about Dewey's time in Key West focuses on commonplaces such as the weather, natural environment, the town, and his rustic accommodations in this fishing village.

In 1938, Dewey rented a cottage on the southern end of the island at 1724 Flagler Avenue, about 2.5 miles from the center of town. It seems that he used this as an exploratory introduction to Key West, as his correspondence indicates searching for rental properties, and eventually, his daughter's purchase of a home. By March, 1938 Dewey lived at 408 Greene Street, the first of three primary residences in Key West. Dewey's daughter Jane purchased the home for \$900, which, as Dewey described, was the "easiest place in K W to find—between



Sloppy Joes & the entrance to Navy Yard & next door to Western Union.” This small, A-shaped house, ironically a children’s toy shop today, is reminiscent of a New England–style beach cottage: small, sturdy and functional.<sup>5</sup>

While Dewey himself never owned property in Key West, both his daughter, Jane Mary, and second wife, Roberta Grant, owned houses in which Dewey spent the majority of his time. Jane Dewey purchased 408 Greene Street in 1941, but both John and Jane lived there from 1939–1941, presumably as renters. Dewey was photographed while writing on the back porch.



Roberta Grant Dewey later commented on Dewey’s use of the Key West residences as places of solitude and reflection that prompted his writing. This claim does not square, however, with Dewey’s own narrative, as he frequently laments the blasé attitude he adopted while in Key West and his subsequent lack of productivity. Evidence does suggest, however, that he was active as a writer while there, even if it was not as productive a time period as the 1930s was for him.

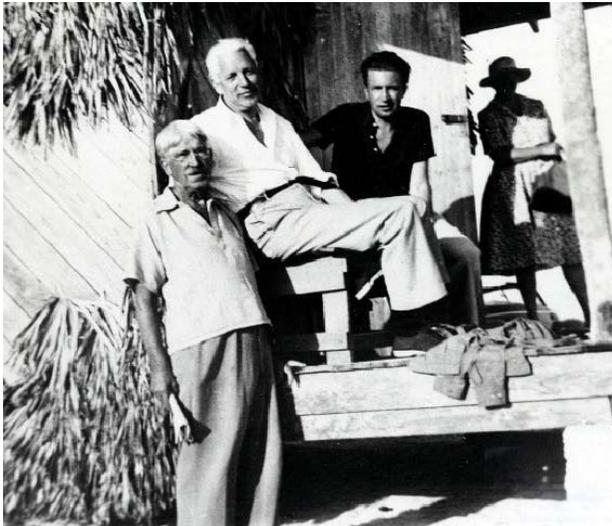
Jane Dewey purchased 630 Dey Street in April of 1941 and it remained her periodic residence until 1971. John Dewey lived at 630 Dey Street from 1942 through 1945, a property that sits less than a half mile from the 408 Greene Street location in the downtown area. The Dewey home movies depict a child’s birthday party on the front porch of this residence with Dewey sitting at a typewriter, shirtless, with children climbing on him.

Dewey’s final residence in Key West was the home of 504 South Street, owned by his second wife, Roberta Grant Dewey. He lived there from 1945 until his final winter in Key West, 1950, two years prior to his death. Roberta Grant Dewey purchased 504 South Street on 5-29-44, prior to her marriage to John in December of 1946. The couple honeymooned there in 1946. 504 South Street, which was a flop house in the 1960s and was nearly condemned by the City of Key West in 1969,<sup>6</sup> has since been converted into an upscale inn that bears

Dewey's name. 504 South Street is adjacent to the public area known as Rest Beach.



Dewey often wrote about spending time on this beach, renting Works Progress Administration cabanas available there, and entertaining associates such as Max Eastman and Alexander Barmine there.



John Dewey, Jr., John's adopted son from Nova Scotia, Canada, received the 504 South Street property through probate after Roberta's death in 1971 and immediately sold the then dilapidated house to entrepreneurs who restored the residence into a restaurant and bar.

### ***Dewey's Narrative and Publications in Key West***

Dewey was an active intellectual throughout his long life of 92 years. He continued to publish, write, and even lecture well into his 80s. Though the 1920s through 1930s are often viewed as Dewey's intellectual peak, he remained active throughout the 1940s. Rockefeller (1991) summarizes Dewey's work in this period aptly:

During the 1940s Dewey remained intellectually engaged in a wide range of social and philosophical issues, writing over fifty essays and book reviews. In addition to efforts directed at clarifying technical points in the fields of logic, metaphysics, and the theory of valuation, he is found revisiting the philosophy of William James with fresh appreciation, warning against war propaganda that denied the evil in Stalin's totalitarianism, reasserting his views on war and peace, and reaffirming his faith in social science and education. (p. 54).

Dewey also maintained a highly active correspondence with family, friends, and associates. Dewey's 20,000 or so letters include approximately 2,000 pages that were either received or mailed from Key West and/or Florida. These primary source documents serve as the basis for uncovering Dewey's narrative during the period 1938–1950. The analysis of his correspondence uncovered the following themes (the total number of references is included in parentheses):

- Relaxation and Laziness (25)
- Social Awareness (24)
- Warm Climate and Appreciation of Nature (24)
- Isolation (20)
- Health and Old Age (18)

Each of these themes will be explored using references to Dewey's correspondence, then compared to Dewey's scholarship during the period to examine the extent to which ideas percolated through his published works.

### ***Relaxation and Laziness***

Dewey's most frequent observations about his time in Key West were related to the relaxation and laziness that permeated the small fishing village. Dewey often wrote around the idea that "there isn't much to do here," but justified his laziness: "I didn't write partly because I am on a lazy vacation." It is not clear from his correspondence if he viewed the entire time spent in Key West (approximately four months a year for twelve years) as a vacation, or if he established vacation times within those periods. Given that writing was saved for blocks of time each day ("Ill try—have been trying to write forenoons—but dont seem to be overflowing with ideas."), it seems that he wanted this time to be both productive and relaxing, which speaks to Dewey's personality of being dually indus-

trious and esoteric. At one point he explained that he would like to put more time into the development of a complete metaphysics, a task he began in the 1940s but failed to complete: “The claimte here is too relaxing to be conducive to work. I have accomplished practically nothing in the way of writing since Ive vbeen here.”<sup>7</sup> He consistently writes about his failure to accomplish much of substance in Key West, claiming that “. . . the *mañana* (tomorrow) mood develops very easily here.”<sup>8</sup>

Dewey seemed to be both attracted to and dismayed by the lax, subtropical atmosphere of the Keys. He frequently invited family and friends to come and stay with him, suggesting activities such as sunbathing, fishing, and swimming. He appeared to enjoy playing the gracious host, showing off his piece of warm paradise to northerners. “I had a very enjoyable and restful time in Key West.” Yet, he frequently returns to a familiar, self-lacerating tone: “I was gathering my papers together this morning for packing & I realized again I hadn't done what I intended with your letters—I have never spent 3 mos (nearly) before with nso nearly zero intellectual activity—Maybe when I get to a more bracing climate I shall find some stored potential energy.”<sup>9</sup> Dewey vacillates between blaming the climate, subtropical atmosphere of Key West, and himself for a perceived lack of productivity. Yet, ironically, he has since been recognized for having an extraordinarily engaged retirement. Dewey’s home movies, for example, depict him vigorously chopping wood in Nova Scotia, an activity he uses as an illustration in *Logic* (p. 408).

Dewey’s writing indirectly addresses the theme of relaxation and inactivity in this period in a similarly ambivalent way. In *Logic*, Dewey discerns three processes of social inquiry (hypotheses, observation, revision), each step requiring directed action of the inquirer. Dewey refers to an auto mechanic who fails to situate his inquiry about how parts of the engine should work without understanding their social significance: “work together . . . assembl[ing] without being understood” (p. 511). Interestingly, Dewey wrote in his correspondence about his son Sabino’s (whom he affectionately called Bino) car trouble and Jane’s undertaking home repairs at 408 Greene Street. Dewey is self-critical of his lack of ability and interest in this type of work, but simultaneously writes about its necessity in social inquiry. In more general terms, significant attention is given to a discussion of economics, labor, and democratic governance in *Freedom*. He suggested that there is a quest for certainty about how humans are in a natural and enduring sense and that these formulations are too often presented as deterministic and finished (i.e., man is self-interested and acts according to this impulse). Such assertions fail to recognize “the function of culture in determining what elements of human nature are dominant . . .”, which he later developed as the need for social connection that transcends self interest (*Freedom*, p. 21).

Throughout Dewey’s Key West narrative, he struggled with his perceived laziness, and was consistently perplexed by an inability to generate ideas and complete manuscripts. Beyond his self-doubt, which echoes an inwardly lacerat-

ing personality perhaps caused in part by his Congregational upbringing (see Ryan, 1995), he struggled with the nature of people (i.e., avoiding work, favoring play) and the social requisites of a democratic society (i.e., engaging work as play; see *Democracy and Education*, 1916, Chapter 19, “Labor and Leisure,” for an earlier elaboration of this idea). He later responds to this tension in *Freedom*, arguing that human impulses are significant for the consequences they produce in varied settings, not in their absolute characterization as *good* or *bad* (see Chapter 6, “Democracy and Human Nature”).

In *Freedom*, he refers to dangers posed to democracy when people are habitualized into thinking superficially about complex matters, such that they lack the “initiative and vigor” sufficient to sustain democratic life (p. 45). Democracy is hard and sustained intellectual work, an assertion he examined throughout his life. Might there be an element of self-critique in this argument, as he sees himself adrift from the democratic project in the detached and relaxing retreat of Key West? The tenor of this book is one of recommitment to the hard-work associated with developing strong democracies, rather than defaulting to a market-driven society of ease and convenience. Perhaps the self-doubt about his own work ethic and how it was being deadened by the social atmosphere of Key West created a sense of concern that Dewey was witnessing a slackening of effort and a capricious attitude about the challenging project of nurturing democratic life.

### **Social Awareness**

Dewey remained a socially engaged philosopher throughout his days, with the apex of his activity coming as he chaired the Leon Trotsky Trials in Mexico City in 1937. Dewey attempted to ground his theory in the realm of politics and action, evidenced by his involvement in high profile political events, activity with labor unions, and participation in public debates of his day. His time in Key West marks a continuation on this pattern, with a few variations worth noting. He wrote about World War II, both its beginnings in Europe and eventually the involvement of the United States, reaffirming his earlier opposition to U. S. involvement in what he viewed as a European war:

Both the international and the domestic situation are so hateful I th avoid thinking about them as much as possible—it has got so I dislike almost to pick up a paper. What I am afraid of is that if there is a European war we shall be drawn in again; in spite of the disillusionment of about the last war, it looks as if might be drawn in again to war against autocracy and for humanity or whatever.

He attempted to understand the war, however, from a local perspective, with frequent reference to the U. S. Naval Base. “The Navy here is here in large nos; the sailors off the ships get drunk, those who are heare all the time are well behaved. They dont make as much noise as last year, even when drunk; as they

have been warned,” Dewey stated that the Navy made life difficult for retirees like him. He also commented on how the Navy’s arrival impacted property values (“gamble here is because of the towns dependence upon army and navy plans and difficulty of telling how much the “war” is influencing things just now—some persons are getting—or trying to get Miami prices for rentals<sup>10</sup>). Echoes of a lifetime of pacifist leanings are evident in his lamenting the military’s presence.

The naval base also attracted significant attention from Presidents Roosevelt and Truman, the latter of whom spent significant time in Key West, residing in *The Little White House* or presidential quarters on the base. Dewey witnessed the comings and goings of these leaders, periodically noting these events in his letters. “You may or may not know that Roosevelt was here saturday on his way to the war game—terrible name—As he went right by the house on his way to the Naval Station, we had a good view of him from our upper porch—” and later writes about listening to Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech on January 6th, 1941. He remained critical of the Democratic Party and its leadership, which Dewey generally viewed as too moderate and beholden to capitalist interests.

Dewey’s wariness of capital and its philandering with democratic governance, especially with reference to Key West, is a recurrent theme in his correspondence. Dewey commented on the weakness of the local city council and the failure of the local media to criticize public actions:

I ought to have told you there is a good newspaper job to be done by somebody in showing up politicians here as well as in Jamaica—only the paper here wouldn't dare disturb anything. The Council has just advertised for bids on parking meters! I cant imagine any reason except the prospect of rake offs, and all the reasons in the world agt it—.

He suggested that maintaining the sugar industry in the Everglades would help address unemployment and that the local fishing industry once employed two thousand people but was now monopolized.

Connections between Dewey’s social awareness during the period 1938–1950 and his scholarship are varied. Some of these connections revolve around the use of particular examples related to Key West while others suggest larger theoretical ideas. The particular examples are many. Dewey seems to refer to his experiences with Key West’s newspapers in the second chapter of this same volume: “If a glance at an editorial page of a newspaper shows what is meant by untested opinions put forth in the garb of the general principles of sound judgment, the items of the news columns illustrate what is meant by a multitude of diverse unrelated facts” (p. 42). His thinking about the ocean and fishing seem to suggest themselves throughout *Logic*, with nautical references like “Suppose that inquiry at a certain stage has determined only that in the case of a shipwreck some passengers have been saved and some lost . . .” (p.194), “clear sailing” (p. 256), and similar examples on pages 209 and 355, along with a sailing ship refer-

ence in *Problems* (p. 17). A reference to the sugar industry is used in *Logic*—“It is a sweet, white, granular, more or less gritty thing or substance, say, sugar”—though in a more abstract, theoretical manner that belies his growing awareness of its social significance in southern Florida (p. 128). Sugar is again used as an exemplar on page 253 of *Logic*.

World War II was the most significant event during this period and Dewey uses references both to the war and President Roosevelt in his writing. He refers to U.S. Presidents in *Logic*, as Dewey explains the use of categories: “To affirm that Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt is ‘included’ in the class of Presidents of the United States is only an awkward way of saying that he is one of the Presidents” (p. 306). *Problems* includes two references to World War II (see pages 24 and 157) such as: “Instead of universal peace, there occurred two wars worldwide in extent and destructive beyond anything known in all history” (p. 24). In each of these examples, Dewey seems to be drawing out of these large experiences ideas that serve his broader, theoretical ends, such as categorical thought and peace.

Connections that suggest larger concepts are also evident in his publications during this period. Dewey, for the first time in his career, addressed U.S. Presidents in his writing, perhaps as a result of his frequent though indirect encounters with them in Key West. He authored two pieces on Thomas Jefferson, *Presenting Thomas Jefferson* (1940) and *Statement on Jefferson* (1943). In the former piece, Dewey expresses great appreciation for Jefferson’s diverse intellect, agrarian orientation, and scientific affinity, all of which resonated with Dewey’s narrative. He implicitly contrasts the likes of Jefferson with Franklin Roosevelt, stating, “There were giants in those days.” Dewey longingly refers to Jefferson’s notion of *little republics*, embodied in the small town democratic experiences of town meetings. In *Freedom*, Chapter 7, “Democracy and America,” Dewey explores the vitality of town democracy, and the need for a critical press. Here again Dewey intimates a sharp distinction between what he witnessed in local politics and the failure of the local media to critically examine public policy contrasted with the moral idealism of democracy, à la Jefferson.

### ***Warm Climate and Appreciation of Nature***

Talking about weather is rather mundane, a point Dewey frequently concedes in his letters. He does, however, make consistent mention of the warm, subtropical climate that attracted him to Key West: “The weather is still the most important topic here” and “Probably I’d have done better to tear up most of the letters I’ve written instead of talking about the weather & other meaningless things.” Dewey frequently discussed the climate of Key West and the natural beauty of this location. He writes about pelicans and other water fowl, fish, tropical plants, and the beach. He often describes the weather in some detail, both the sunny days (“As to the weather here, I don’t want to tease you—but in Feb. we had 26 clear days—getting a little warm now, lower 80 practically ever day”) and the intense

rainstorms (“the only thing that has happened here is two successive midnight showers—and did it rain—the second one with heavy thundr and much lightning”<sup>11</sup>).

Dewey was also particularly interested in the diverse flora and fauna of Key West. He frequently referred to the varieties of birds, fish, and plants that he encountered. “The place is semitropical, hibiscus, bounganvillia, poinsetta, Jackaranda, besides roses—also banana tress but no fruit. Great place for fish. Yesterday we went to a pier where they bringing turtle in; the boat had over three hundred on it, two feet in daiamter and 150 lbs up.” He visited the fishing docks and surveyed the hauls, impressed by the sizes and varieties of fish found in the Keys. Dewey also noted the planting of citrus trees along with the lack of spring-time drama for flowering plants in a climate with a twelve-month growing season. In a letter to colleague Myrtle McGraw, Dewey wrote:

I dont doubt your garden is more fun than flowers here—when you get them all the time and there is no time which is spring more than any other, the dramatic element is lacking. However we have the excitement of seeing whether papaya seeds come up and that sort of thing—they are wonderful, if they once get started.

Dewey’s publications frequently referred to the weather, plants, and animals throughout this period. In *Logic*, Dewey refers to the sun disappearing over the horizon (p. 221), which given the water that surrounds Key West, is a favorite activity of locals at sunset. He also refers to sunshine (p. 255), the sun (p. 72), warmth (p. 138), rain (p. 249), cloud formations (p. 53), and sun-bathing (p. 42). With regard to flora and fauna, Dewey again draws liberally from the environment of Key West. In *Presenting Thomas Jefferson* (1940), he asserts that Jefferson “gave the *palm*” (emphasis added) to a novelist. In *Logic*, he uses marine vertebrates to illustrate contrariety (p. 191), discusses locomotion of jellyfish and birds (p. 25), uses birds, whales, and fish as illustrations of categories (p. 295), and illustrates propositions about whales (p. 253). Throughout *Knowing*, Dewey and Bentley employ references to whales, fish, oceanic life, biology, and evolution (see chapters 4 and 5 in particular). Many of Dewey’s references to climate center around electrical storms and the harnessing of electricity for human ends: “Popular appeal to, say electricity, light, or heat, etc. . . . to explain storms attended by thunder and lightning . . .” (*Freedom*, p.114). Similar references appear in *Knowing* (p. 113) and in *Logic* (p. 222). *Problems* includes a reference to “torrid heat” (p. 306) and again on page 307.

### **Isolation**

In the period 1938–1950, Key West was considered remote, only linked by ferry and train to mainland Florida until the late 1930s, the latter being destroyed in the hurricane of 1935. Soon thereafter, the seven-mile bridge connecting Key West to Miami was completed. Dewey felt isolated living in Key West. Dewey

remarked on the construction of the bridge, perhaps foreseeing an increased sense of connection to the rest of Florida: “. . . as the ‘Southernmost town’ in the U.S. it has many unique features—and the highway over the Keys & the 6 miles bridge is advertised as the 8th wonder of the world &c—.” After the bridge opened and the naval base began flourishing in the early 1940s, Key West increasingly became a destination for tourists as well as the military and their families. Upon his return to Key West in the winter of 1945, he offered this appraisal: “Here I am back in KW & expecting to stay here through the winter months. The population has multiplied 2 or 3 times—and not altogether for the better.”<sup>12</sup>

Similar to Dewey’s correspondence with regard to laziness, he feared the isolation of the town (“The town is dead”) would sap him of his intellectual vigor (“But at present I am intellectually pretty much a vacuum. . . . Probably the intellectual isolation here is a factor”). The transition that Dewey experienced from life in the bustling, cosmopolitan city of New York and the sleepy, warm fishing village of Key West weighed heavily on his outlook. As he wrote to his second wife, Roberta, “Darling mine, you are back in the big city where things happens, the only thing that has happened here is two successive midnight showers.” Dewey was somewhat out of place in Key West. The majority of his life was spent in large cities, undoubtedly feeling as though he was in an intellectual center of the country while at Columbia University. A manifestation of this feeling was his frequent critique of the local newspaper (*The Key West Citizen*) and the *Miami Herald* for shoddy journalism and a parochial outlook. He wrote, “It [Key West] is as nearly out of the world—with Miami newspapers for news—as any place could be.”<sup>13</sup> Key West clearly decentered Dewey with respect to intellectual life and it was this sense of isolation that troubled him.

Connections between the theme of isolation and Dewey’s publications are evident. At approximately the same time that the seven mile bridge was being completed, a major engineering feat of that day, Dewey wrote this passage in *Logic*:

A bridge is to be built to span a river under given conditions, so that the bridge, as the consequence of the operations, will sustain certain loads. There are local conditions set by the state of the banks, etc. But there are general conditions of distance, weights, stresses and strains, changes of temperature, etc. These are formal conditions. As such they are demands, requirements, postulates, to be fulfilled (p. 16).

He uses a similar reference to road construction as a matter requiring local governance in *Freedom* (p. 46).

Dewey periodically makes reference to the idea of isolation in *Freedom*, critiquing current discourse about “the human problem as individualism versus socialism” (p. 72), suggesting that the social sciences have been relegated to “monastic seclusion” (p. 152), and referring to the “isolated individual” (p. 163) as a

threat to democratic life. Indeed, the notion of interdependence and recognizing the social within the person is an overarching theme of *Freedom*.

### **Health and Old Age**

Dewey was in the twilight of his career and life by 1945. Dewey's correspondence reflected that old age and health had become major concerns. Dewey's illnesses while in Key West included various infections, arthritis, flu, sinusitis, and dental problems, all addressed by local doctors whose competence pleasantly surprised Dewey. Due to his proximity to the Naval Base, Dewey was able to receive penicillin, which was not widely available to civilians during World War II. He wrote,

I went to the local hospital here for a couple of days & got a shot of penicillin—or 5 shots altogether. Came back yesterday & haven't got a report from the dr since—but he was quite sure in advance it would improve the blood—state enough to resist the white corpuscles. So I live in hope. Because of the Navy & venereal disease here, penicillin is sometimes available for civilians.<sup>14</sup>

During his lengthy correspondence with Arthur Bentley, Dewey's co-author for *Knowing*, he sometimes begs forgiveness from his colleague for a perceived lack of diligence related to illness: "I am going to the hospital tomorrow for a checkup I haven't been especially bad, but still too much pus and it does not promote either mental or physical activity—excuse the dualism."<sup>15</sup>

Dewey was also dealing with the difficulties associated with old age, beyond periodic illnesses. He was in his 80s through most of the period, and though active and engaged, felt the discomforts of age. In one of Dewey's letters written to Roberta, he tried to recall the originator of an idea, and when unable, cut and pasted "I AM GROWING OLD"<sup>16</sup> from a magazine to express his frustration with his memory lapse. Dewey's arthritis also slowed his pace and became a source of aggravation. He seemed well aware of his limitations but enjoyed the idea of working through these difficulties and continuing to be productive. Dewey recognized the tenuousness of his life and that his age had become an impediment to maintaining his correspondence and scholarship. Key West's laid-back atmosphere seemed both a comfort and annoyance to Dewey, as the warmth helped soothe the aches of old age and Key West's isolation contributed to his growing sense of intellectual deterioration.

References to health and old age are found periodically throughout Dewey's publications during this period. In *Freedom*, Dewey refers to "physical energies" (p. 168, emphasis in original), "health," and "panaceas" (p. 170). In *Knowing*, he refers to the confusions associated with defining terminology "not . . . a minor defect but a vital disease" (p. 178). References to medicine and health are replete in *Knowing*, especially in the latter half of the book. Dewey uses an extended example about the epidemiology of malaria in *Logic* (pp. 434–436), interesting since he employs a disease that was typically found in southern Florida during

that period. He discusses “medical science” and “competent . . . physician[s]” echoing his pleasant surprise about Key West’s physicians (p. 438). Earlier in the text, he examines the proposition that “if any thing is human, then it is mortal” in an extended discussion of mortality (p. 256). In *Problems*, he employs phrases like “a cure, a panacea, not as . . . quackery” (p. 31) with additional medical references on 264, 267, 294, and 304.

### ***Finding Dewey’s place***

Place is conceptualized in three dimensions for this study: (1) physical/tangible, (2) social/interactional, and (3) metaphysical/educative. While these categories are not mutually exclusive, they provide us with lenses to consider Dewey’s place in Key West.

#### *Physical/tangible*

The interaction of Dewey and the place of Key West is evident throughout his narrative and published discourse, as there are frequent and varied references to natural phenomena, such as plants, animals, and weather specific to Key West. Dewey shifts between blaming himself and the physical place (heat and humidity) for his lack of productivity while there. When he was productive, Dewey frequently invoked tangible elements of the Keys, particularly the flora and fauna of the natural world. Traces of the physical/tangible place of Key West evident in his writing suggest that his thinking was informed to a moderate degree by the place where he found himself, if only to concretize abstract ideas in the physical world. One could imagine Dewey writing outside of 408 Greene Street, as pictured herein, looking about for examples from the physical world to support philosophical propositions, like recollecting a visit to the nearby dock to see turtles, recalling a boat trip in the Straits of Florida, or gazing at his bougainvillea.

The evidence suggests that Dewey was drawn to the beach, perhaps because he viewed it as a place set apart from common life experiences. The photographs, home movies, moves within Key West, and correspondence with friends all point to Dewey’s desire to be near the ocean, a tendency made clearer when one considers the location of his other retirement home, Nova Scotia, Canada (see Simpson and Foley, 2004). Why is this significant? Ocean beaches as a landscape category are unique in many ways, such as the wide vistas and lulling sounds. Dewey seemed to be aware of the interactive potential of unique places to generate new thoughts. As he approached the end of his life, Dewey was concerned with developing a cohesive philosophy for the ages, a goal that always eluded him (Martin, 2002). Perhaps it was this desire coupled with a recognition of the potential of new landscapes to spur new ideas that caused him to frequently return to these places.

*Social/interactional*

Dewey was socially engaged by the goings on of Key West, periodically commenting on the naval base, influence of the war, quality of newspapers, and local politics of the community. Though his commentary on these matters was ongoing, one has a clear sense that he viewed himself as not truly part of this community, but rather, as an observer within. There is no evidence, for example, that he wrote a letter to the editor or attended a public meeting despite raising criticisms about the local news and governance though he was an avid reader of the local newspaper. Rather, Dewey seemed to view Key West as an isolated place away from his normal life in New York City despite the substantial time spent there (approximately four years of his final fourteen). Ian Falk and Jo Balatti (2002) refer to this positionality as place-identity, a cognitive substructure that inform and direct the thoughts, behavior, and experiences of individuals.

This externalized stance about the social place of Key West seems to have led Dewey towards deeper metaphysical pondering, specifically about the nature of existing within an intellectual vacuum pervaded with a lackadaisical mood not conducive to vigorous thought. Dewey's place-identity *vis-à-vis* Key West is, then, of an oppositional nature as he saw himself adversely affected by this social place. Perhaps this tension suggests a conflict for Dewey. Did he consider himself *placeless*, or having the perceived ability to abstract himself from a social place? Or, was he bound by the places he lived such that they were in him as much as he was in them? Certainly both conditions are plausible and not necessarily contradictory, though the evidence examined in this study does not definitively address either question comprehensively.

*Metaphysical/educative*

Dewey's time in Key West seemed to be educative, although generally not in the direction of fundamentally altering his philosophy. When he invokes the experience of the Keys in his writing and narrative, it is to redact new experiences into existing frameworks rather than to reshape metaphysical assertions. While he made frequent and varied references to elements of Key West in his published works, this is typically done only as an illustration of an existing idea (e.g., democracy as complex inquiry).

Dewey seems to have intended Key West to be a retreat where he could go to get away from the routine of his urban life and a place that he could work on philosophical projects. That Key West generally did not serve those ends caused him a good deal of dissatisfaction, since while it was a break in routine, it became habitualized in such a way that he felt unproductive and intellectually isolated. His time there may have circuitously taught him that he, like all people, was not transcendent but situated.

## Conclusion

Locating John Dewey in Key West is not a simple task. He leaves little in the way of narrative in general, and of that, even less specific to Florida. As Ryan (1995) notes, this is typical of Dewey, as he appears placeless throughout his writing. I have argued, however, that to literally be *placeless* is an impossibility and that those *places* are both in us as we are in them. Through laying Dewey's correspondence alongside his publications while in Key West, I have offered some recurrent themes in Dewey's narrative that resonate to a moderate degree with his writing during this period. While the absence of exegesis about this place troubles any conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis, I have a degree of confidence that the parallels identified are something more than mere happenstance.

A puzzle remains from this study: Why does Dewey's philosophy emphasize place as integral to experience and inquiry, and yet fail to explicitly apply this analytical understanding to his life? Some would argue that minimizing place is a glaring contradiction for the prophet of experimentalism. I suspect the answer lies not in the contradiction but in the larger milieu of his writing. Dewey is a transitional figure. He was a traditionally educated philosopher whose thinking presaged significant shifts in epistemology. Dewey's assertion, for example, that people do not act outside of their contexts, but through and in relation to them, is a decidedly postmodern contention that points to his transitional status. Yet, he does not reach this conclusion through what one might typically consider postmodern inquiry (e.g., critical narrative analysis or autobiographical exposition), as his only autobiographical piece was "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," published in 1930, offered more as a footnote to his career than as a means of inquiry (Giarelli, 1997). He seems to derive his thinking, however, at arms length, or from a presumed *objective* perspective, though I think this study demonstrates Dewey's situatedness.

Dewey's conception of environment/location, further, may not be interchangeable with place as theorized in contemporary scholarship. Dewey uses environment in a generic way, such that places can be thought of categorically rather than in their particularity. School as an environment, for example, is used to describe what is typically associated with this institution: teachers, students, segmented buildings, division of content areas, and organizational structure, for example. Conceptualizing school as such a place is at odds with postmodern scholarship, which typically focuses on the specific manifestation of a *place* (e.g., a particular high school) rather than a category of places, like *school*. When Dewey describes environment, he is more likely to invoke it in generic and categorical ways, rather than the particularistic manner suggested by place theory, a tendency which also suggests his philosophically transitional status.

Dewey ascribes to a transcendent notion of environment, or place. Applying a particularistic conception of place in a postmodern frame, however, demonstrates significant correspondence between Dewey's narrative and his pub-

lished works. Such analysis is fitting for a focused biographical study of Dewey, as his philosophy is circumscribed by experience and environment. Though dualistic thinking often troubled Dewey, he does seem to abide by some of its prescriptions in the way he constructs himself as a transcendent outsider within Key West—impossibly—a person without a place. Experience and environment clearly are central to Dewey’s metaphysics, even if his autobiographical analysis of place left many stones unturned and many questions unanswered.

## Notes

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2. The following works were included in this area of analysis: *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), *The Relation of Science and Philosophy as the Basis of Education* (1938), *Statement on Jefferson* (1943), *Boyd H. Bode: An Appreciation* (1948), *The Problems of Men* (1946), *Freedom and Culture* (1939), *The Case for Bertrand Russell* (1940), *Are Naturalists Materialists?* (1945), *Propositions, Warranted Assertability, and Truth* (1941), *Social Realities versus Police Court Fictions* (1941), *The Human Enterprise Book Review* (1940), *Presenting Thomas Jefferson* (1940), and *Knowing and the Known* (1949).

3. *Problems of Men* (1946) is unique among these volumes as it is a collection of selected works published elsewhere between 1935 and 1944. For the purpose of this analysis, only those published in the period 1938–1944 were analyzed, although it cannot be asserted with certainty that all of these works were developed by Dewey in Key West.

4. All correspondence for this study was taken from *The Correspondence of John Dewey*, vol. 2: 1919–1939, Larry A. Hickman (Ed.), Charlottesville, VA: IntelLex Corp., 2001. Since all of his letters have not been published but are available through the Center for Dewey Studies, I cite those with permission.

5. All photos are used with permission of Tom Lambright, archivist, May Hill Russell Library, Key West, Monroe County, Florida.

6. Key West Commission Minutes, April 3, 1968 to September 17, 1969.

7. Unpublished letter to Sidney Hook from John Dewey, 3-8?-1940 [13029] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies. I have preserved Dewey’s orthography in all citations.

8. Unpublished letter to Salmon O. Levinson from John Dewey, 3-15-1940 [03477] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.

9. Unpublished letter to Corinne Chisholm Frost from John Dewey, 3-20-1940 [09388] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.

10. Unpublished letter to Roberta Lowitz Grant Dewey from John Dewey, 1-20,22?-1941 [09718] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.

11. Unpublished letter to Joseph Ratner from John Dewey, 3-7-1945 [07132] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.
12. Unpublished letter to James T. Farrell from John Dewey, 1-20-1945 [10103] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.
13. Unpublished letter to Joseph Ratner from John Dewey, 4-4-1944 [07127] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.
14. Unpublished letter to Albert C. Barnes from John Dewey, 2-8-1945 [04506] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.
15. Unpublished letter to Arthur F. Bentley from John Dewey, 4-4-1945 [15422] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.
16. Unpublished letter to Roberta Lowitz Grant Dewey from John Dewey, 1-22-1940 [09497] used with permission of Larry Hickman, Center for Dewey Studies.

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