

## People Love Cities – but Do Cities Love Them Back?

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**ABSTRACT** | People celebrate cities through art, music, and fashion, often claiming to love them. Several artists, including but not limited to Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and Katy Perry have sung about cities in celebratory manners. However, such claims are inherently vague, and it remains unclear if these declarations hold meaning or are merely emotive. The author argues that these expressions have meaning and that cities return the love, which is why people love them in the first place, surprisingly. This article fleshes out these views, showing that the reciprocal nature of “urban love” is not empty. Instead, the feelings associated with such exchanges also bear the earmarks of typical interpersonal relationships that endure lengthy durations. The article ends by exhibiting that the line of thought explored here does not only reveal insights into human-urban relations, but it gestures toward novel ways of examining how cities can better serve residents.

**KEYWORDS** | Urban Love; Cities; Philosophy of the City

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## **1 Introduction**

Numerous people love cities, and there are good reasons to believe that their cities love them back. This paper fleshes out these notions, focusing heavily on the latter because it sounds doubtful. I begin by showing the methodology necessary to situate the claims above to make this case. Next, it examines a range of proclamations regarding “urban love” in the arts. They show how metropolitan environments invoke people to make announcements about loving the city and other sentiments which resemble customary, interpersonal relationships. After establishing this view, the attention turns toward revealing what it means for a city to love people in a way that makes sense, offering further insights into contemporary urban life. This study concludes by suggesting a few additional areas of study that require investigation.

## **2 Methodology**

Unpacking the views above requires undertaking a methodological enterprise that wildly deviates from conventional approaches in mainstream philosophy. However, the goal remains consistent with the pursuit and love of wisdom. The aim is to interrogate the ordinary to uncover something extraordinary about the human and, to a greater extent, urban conditions. These relations shape the contours of how cities make people feel over lengthy periods. The point is to pay attention to the elements that residents and municipalities can influence that get lost in the daily complexities of city life. Specifically, we can think about social-material arrangements in cities – including but not limited to infrastructure, architecture, laws, policies, codes, zones, commercial districts, business operations, and cultural centers as forms of expressions and actions – that result in urban dwellers feeling specific ways about the city and life in it.

Moreover, it is also not only an interdisciplinary enterprise wherein I rely on research from neighboring disciplines such as psychology or sociology that would ordinarily provide a plethora of insights regarding how the city affects people. This notion does not suggest that I go to extremes to avoid their contributions to metropolitan places. It is the case that my pursuits do require perspectives that fall outside of their respective orientations. Similarly, this research does not seek surveys to uncover how existing people feel to achieve a consensus, a social science endeavor. That kind of exploration would merely reveal what people thought in a particular location at a specific moment, which is also outside of my area of study.

Instead, the philosophical interrogation that follows calls upon the auditorial testimony of artists who, in several ways, love, hate, and or encounter numerous emotions while engaging with the city in a variety of capacities. While these instances lack a scholarly grounding, they illustrate how transdisciplinary measures can inform the academy, philosophy included. Holding the view that such sources are inherently problematic due to their emotive nature and lacking a disciplinary grounding asserts an arrogance that limits the rigor of philosophy. Such positions fail to acknowledge that sources regarding accurate states of affairs must bear specific characteristics to carry informative weight. In turn, perhaps inadvertently, they favor a binary wherein meaningfulness must remain an operation that exists solely within the confines of the academy – or it is stigmatically doubtful.

In reality, we can find wisdom about the city and its numerous facets in its structures and in the multiple areas of life that they touch. This point suggests that there is no good reason to wholesale reject perspectives that originate in streets, bars, and cafes. After all, a philosophy of the city should start in such places for inspiration, meaning that testimony coming from there must count as significant authorities. With the spirit of this sentiment firmly positioned to guide this work, it begins by examining overtly public declarations of love that, after closer inspection, give the impression that one who is expressing a passionate desire shows an exuberance for a specific city.

These accounts represent expansive views of love for the city. They describe how urban environments can inspire artists to capture the intensity of emotions that cities can evoke, providing shared space for relations and celebratory engagement for people who hold similar experiences and or appreciations. Having shown that these examples establish a baseline for expressing love for the city, assuming that corporeal experiences have influenced their outlooks, the attention turns to works focusing on some particular ways that metropolitan places can solicit feelings beyond love in a broad sense. They reflect on the *actuality* of living in the city.

With a variety of songs that illustrate an extensive range of emotional responses in view, I provide a philosophical interrogation that reveals how socio-material arrangements in the city create feelings of love (and beyond). In turn, such configurations lead people to love and or hate the locations where they reside and work (and several emotions in between). This examination provides the stage for reflection, motivating us to look deeply at how we perform in the places we call home and how they influence our performances.

### 3 The City in Music and Music in the City

While love is the most recurring theme in popular music, songs involving cities arguably hold a second place (Cohen 2007). Their appeal endures, providing ways for songwriters to connect to specific views of urban places (Sheila 1992). Such notions exhibit how metropolitan troubadours discover timeless ways to connect with listeners who share their experiences. Many of these tracks are well-known, sung worldwide, featured in films and television, and probably hummed while trudging the roads of our happy, urban destinies.

For example, there are countless numbers dedicated to New York City. Frank Sinatra's "*Theme from New York, New York*" performance could be the most well-known (Kander and Fred 1980). More recently, Jay-Z and Alicia Keys celebrate the city with their hit "*Empire State of Mind*" (Shux et al. 2009). There is also Ryan Adam's 2001 "*New York, New York*." Old Blue Eyes was not a monogamous urban lover, lest we forget "*My Kind of Town (Chicago is)*" (Cahn and Van Heusen 1964). Yet, it is challenging to think of Sinatra without conjuring up images of Las Vegas, celebrated by Elvis Presley in "*Viva Las Vegas*," (Shuman and Doc 1964) along with a rendition by bearded troubadours, ZZ Top (Shuman and Doc 1992). Most recently, Katy Perry reminds us why people visit Sin City, along with some of the dangers of exceeding the limits of responsible alcohol consumption (Child, Carlsson, and Perry).

While the songs above focus almost entirely on being "in lust" with the city, other numbers draw more closely on experiences that reflect actual long-term relationships, paying attention to the good and bad realities of living in and loving an urban environment. Consider, for example, Randy Newman's 1983 classic hit, "*I Love L.A.*" The chorus of this track keeps an expression of admiration for the city in the highest regard. The lyrics and their tone suggest that, behind the adornment, Newman draws attention to less celebrated elements (Pell 2014). That is to say, Newman has a reputation for sarcasm, and this ditty did not escape it (Pell 2014). Despite the cheery nature of this track, he does not dismiss the unfortunate realities of Los Angeles, such as homelessness (Pell 2014). Still, aside from such conditions, Newman holds admiration for the place he calls home (Pell 2014).

Artists Hot Chelle Rae (2020) continue the duality of emotional attachment to Los Angeles with their number, "*I Hate LA.*" The video for this track begins with band members complaining about the city's parking enforcement, followed by an intermittent chorus about the local stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) and its well-known traffic congestion (Hot Chelle Rae 2020). Throughout the first part of the song, they lament urban life in this sunny paradise (Hot Chelle Rae 2020). In the latter half, they are, despite the associated hardships, celebrating the city

and its many delights (Hot Chelle Rae 2020).

While the songs covered by Sinatra and others focus exclusively on the positive feelings associated with particular cities, Newman and Hot Chelle Rae move toward views showing balanced realities wherein the city is loved, but they also discuss negative aspects. These songs bring us closer to the realities of our everyday relationships. That is, yes, we love our significant others, but living with them can often test the limits of our love. However, when considering the totality of interactions with our loved ones, the good typically outweighs the bad. If the contrary is true, separation or divorce can occur in most cases for spouses and cities.

The songs referenced up until this point have focused on admiration for cities in grander senses, but some numbers pay attention to specific day-to-day interactions with the city. For instance, for a deeper investigation into an appreciation of odes to this city, the *Village Voice* Staff (Village Voice Staff 2014, para 1) narrowed their sixty favorite tracks on this theme, providing insight into the criteria that should accompany songs about New York City while challenging the authenticity of some of the songs listed above:

Our mission: to come up with a list of the 60 best songs ever written about our city, songs that best capture what it's like to live, love, struggle, and exist in the sprawling, unforgiving, culturally dense metropolis we pay too much to call home. We started by agreeing on the songs we shouldn't include – naked and clunky stabs at new New York anthems that fall flat and ring inauthentic, like Jay-Z's "Empire State of Mind," U2's "New York," and Taylor Swift's "Welcome to New York." Instead, we focus on tracks that are so New York, and so good, they can't be denied.

While not every song on their list deals directly with the emotional aspects of urban life, several of the tracks they discuss bring those elements into view. In turn, one gains insights into the experiences of New Yorkers and how the city impacts them in various ways. These songs reflect good and negative dimensions of urban existence that play a meaningful role in what it means to have a relationship with one's city. Such encounters easily stack up against what it is like to be in a long-term relationship with someone you love.

Consider, for instance, their take on Interpol's "NYC," noting how the inescapable need to navigate the city holds steady as an area of concern, similar to Hot Chelle Rae's sentiments on the PCH. *The Village Voice* staff (para 48) describes it as follows: "[T]here is a kind of hazy plod to Interpol's 'NYC' that does perfectly exemplify the everyday life of many a working New Yorker: those bits of your commute

where you keep your head down, downshift into autopilot, and strap on your mental and emotional armor for the battle you find daily in the rat-race capital.”

This passage exemplifies the common elements that provide shared experiences in cities, which urban dwellers can identify as playing critical roles in shaping their relationships with these places. Over time, they can arguably have a substantial effect. Along with Interpol’s song, other transportation-inspired numbers such as New York Dolls’ “Subway Train,” Tom Waits’ “Downtown Train,” Le Tigre’s “My Metrocard,” and Duke Ellington’s “Take the ‘A’ Train” also make their list (Village Voice Staff 2014). Including these tracks bolsters the view that daily experiences such as mobility influence urban residents’ relationships with cities. This point does not suggest that transportation is the only infrastructure influencing residents’ lives. Still, it is challenging to image rock songs about waste-water management or other infrastructure services.

Yet, urban relationships are more than how people experience mobility, and other songs in the *Village Voice*’s collection make that notion evident. For example, they note that Lou Reed’s “New York Telephone Conversation” shows how urban dwellers’ particular habits can also play roles in how we think about our relationships with cities. *The Village Voice* (Village Voice Staff 2014) staff maintains:

Is there any musician more New York than the late and beyond-great Lou Reed? Probably not, because no other artist could so succinctly capture the middle-of-the-night phone conversations we hear and have around the city as he did in his Transformer song “New York Telephone Conversation.” Clocking in at an insanely swift 1:31, the ditty bounces and satirizes both the gossip and desire for the gossip that New Yorkers can overhear from their windows and on the streets 24 hours a day while also partaking in it on our own.

The passage above illustrates that relationships with cities go beyond how urban technologies such as transportation systems affect our lives. Other people in the city also play roles in how the city affects urban life. This notion provides a clue as to what it means for the city to love you back, along with what it means to love one. Fully unpacking this idea means that we must turn the attention toward an account of what we love when we say that we love a city. In turn, the following section does just that. It examines the notion of a city as an object of study to understand what is meant by “the city” when proclaiming love for it and recognizing that it can love you back.

## **4 The City and Love**

While the previous section focused on how people love and relate to cities, inverting that idea provides insights into how cities can love you back – or make you feel hated, neglected, and or a variety of emotions. For instance, if it is sound to say that people love the city, it makes sense to say that the city loves them back – if we can *show* the exchange – which is the task of this section. The surprising insight here is that people who love their cities might feel this way because the city *already* “loves” them. In this sense, the city can make a person feel love through the effects of its social and physical interconnectedness. As expressed in the songs mentioned above, we can gauge this love’s extent and quality through people’s experiences.

Conversely, people might feel as if their cities *hate* them. While hate could go too far in many instances, it seems safe to hold that cities can help produce a mixed bag of emotional responses from residents. Such feelings will increase and decrease over time, similar to other relationships that we hold dear. This view is worth entertaining because it bears a family resemblance to the realities associated with interpersonal relationships. People can love their cities while also being annoyed by specific elements, along with numerous gradations and extremes at both ends. Still, similar to loving a person over a duration, one might love the person entirely, but some attributes might cause slight mental disturbances. This notion suggests the thinking behind cities would benefit from an evaluation, hoping to discover the problematic elements that could make one feel that their city hates or dislikes them while also paying attention to the urban configurations that make them feel loved.

For example, Interpol’s “NYC” and Hot Chelle Rae’s frustration with traffic conditions should warrant planners to look for ways to mitigate the harms coming from these systems. Mobility is an isolated dimension. Numerous other elements such as green spaces also make people feel that their cities love them, which researchers have shown contribute to feelings of safety (e.g., Campagnaro et al. (2020)). Feeling safe in the city could easily qualify as a precondition for feeling that your city loves you. As socio-material arrangements, cities could create platforms for love through the amalgamation of infrastructure, art, commerce, and community – among other elements. As shown previously, musicians attest to essentially being in relationships of sorts with cities. Now, the challenging aspect is understanding how such relations are reciprocal. Establishing this position requires understanding cities’ ontological statuses, calling for closely examining the amalgamations above. The “received view of cities as technologies” brings this perspective into view (Epting 2021a).

For instance, several scholars across the academy have advanced views holding that cities are a kind of invention or technology (e.g., Jonas (1984), Guattari (2015), Swyngedouw (2006), Glaeser (2011), and Epting (2021a)). While such views differ, they collectively show how we can think of cities as technologies, hence the shorthand, “received view.” As with any technology, they are for some particular purpose, even though such reasons remain subject to debate. For the moment, we can entertain Aristotle’s idea that cities’ purposes are to promote virtue and happiness for their residents (Clayton, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> This notion holds that we create and reside in cities to help us live our best lives. It does not matter what a city has or lacks, and the point here is that it has a structure and services that help us secure desired outcomes. Listing the items of a city’s composition is an unending task, but it seems safe to assume that some of the “big-ticket” items customarily present should hold steady.

For example, cities have people and homes, which should also be on the list. Transportation, infrastructure, policies, laws, codes, government offices, buildings, parks, restaurants, and galleries likely are in the inventory. The point here is not to engage in persistent naming. Each city has a unique catalog that gives it character. Despite such differences, they have enough resemblance to provide enough shared ground for a conversation regarding how they can invoke feelings of love – along with others such as hate and indifference.

Nevertheless, we must remember that cities differ from most other technologies because it is challenging to imagine them without people. Cities without people hold a special designation: “ghost cities,” such as those dotting landscapes in China (Yu 2014). Their presences are eerie. This notion suggests that a city without residents, as a technology, amounts to any other technology abandoned across a given terrain wherein (nonhuman) nature reclaims the space. However, Edward Glaeser 2011 makes a case that cities remain humankind’s greatest inventions. Part of cities’ allure is the people who reside there, meaning that there are myriad opportunities for work, creativity, relationships, and much more (Glaeser 2011).

A city without people, then, is a ghost city. Cities must have people. This point entails that, as technologies, cities have “human components.” Ergo: when people claim to love their cities, they are claiming to love the urban dwellers who make up a city, along with elements such as buildings, bridges, ballparks, zones, laws, and sidewalks. Like how a person can love another with numerous character

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that I am not making a claim that endorses or seriously engages with Aristotle’s work on the city here in any meaningful fashion, which is why I am limiting my engagement to a passing reference from Clayton. I acknowledge that going in that direction would involve an entirely separate enterprise. This reason explains why this sentence reads “for the moment,” indicating that additional pursuits are required.



deficiencies, one can love the city while disliking unsavory elements. Recall that we are dealing with a relationship that endures. Loving a city means looking at it like a marriage: “for richer or poorer,” “in sickness and in health,” and “through good times and bad.” However, if the city treats you poorly, the logical step would be to plan an escape.

This point aside, everything in a city was a decision that a person(s) made. For instance, Robert Moses prioritizing roadways in cities is a prime example showing how such choices can drastically shape urban life (Caro 1974). His visions negatively impacted many lives (Caro 1974). Some of his projects are now textbook cases in how not to build infrastructure because of the racist outcomes that they produce (Winner 1980). Yet, he was only *one* person, and mobility is only one dimension of living in the city, despite being a vital aspect of urban dwelling. One way to think about the outcomes is that they are the efforts of numerous people, spanning centuries in some cases. These decisions cut through businesses, urban planning, arts, and architecture – along with countless other dimensions. This incredible complexity forms the circumstances that define the urban condition, influencing how we experience life on a day-to-day basis. If someone loves their city, such love could be directly associated with how the abovementioned forces make them feel. These “collective acts,” while they could be entirely unintentional, are received and experienced as a kind of love in some cases. Calling them “collective” does not entail that a Collective (i.e., group of people with purpose) made them. Instead, this term suggests that we can think about them as a collective act, considering that a collection of urban artifacts (e.g., trains, policies, platforms, sidewalks) helped produce a particular feeling such as love or comfort.

Imagine this case. After working late, being exhausted, a man enters the bus. The driver, seeing him, greets him and asks, “how are you doing, working late again?” because she knows he typically catches her earlier route. He replies with an affirmative and asks about her day. After the driver responds quickly, he takes a comfortable seat and starts scrolling through social media while he takes in the familiarity of his ride home. Even though work was grueling, the bus ride home brought him warm feelings. This social-material arrangement – the driver, bus, seat, route, roadway, and bus schedule, helped produce the outcome of feeling loved (or comforted) by the city.<sup>23</sup> In turn, the city, as an expression involving nu-

<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that I have no research interest in views concerning agency here, similar to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory. Instead, the focus remains on outcomes, which exist aside from any notions of nonhuman agency. Still, I have argued at length against such view of agency elsewhere. See, (Epting 2021b).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that cases involving bus drivers and passengers exchanging pleasantries might only be common in specific locations (e.g., select cities in The United States of America). I ap-

merous people over lengthy durations, can make you feel loved (or other states). Suppose the driver was indifferent and the bus was filthy and uncomfortable. In that case, riders could think that the city, in a small way, does not love them – or perhaps they could endure the situation as an annoying element without making them feel *completely* unloved, a high level of discomfort, or a similar feeling.

These latter points indicate that there is more at play here than simple occurrences that help produce individualized feelings in a particular moment. The totality of experiencing – formed through socio-material engagement over a considerable duration – seems more likely to deliver a more accurate perspective of how a city can generate such feelings. The point is not to analyze one bus trip or all of them. Instead, it is to investigate how all such engagements leave residents with a feeling wherein they can say with certainty that they love their city. On the contrary, they could maintain that they hate the city, feel indifferent towards it, or have lukewarm regards because it is “just ok” from their perspective.

While the points above make a strong case for love and the city, some issues require attention. For instance, the element of subjectivity requires acknowledgment. For example, each person will experience various urban interactions with different degrees of felt experiences, suggesting that coming to a consensus on whether a city loves its people is an inherently doomed affair. This challenge appears significant, but it fails to consider that reaching an agreement is a precondition for feeling love for the city, which is an act that results from the conditions wherein the city “has” love for a person.

One could argue that it takes intimate knowledge of a city to love it, holding that the majority of a city’s residents lack such information. This objection is fair. However, the counter position maintains that a person does not need to intimately know all aspects of a city to love it. They are only expressing a feeling of how the city makes them feel. This situation could always arise in interpersonal relationships wherein a person loves another, only to discover that they are a kleptomaniac, which they lacked knowledge about before falling in love with them.

Despite such circumstances, the reality is that discovering that one’s lover is addicted to stealing does not change the fact that they made someone feel loved. Once they find out those facts, it could change the relationship entirely, or they could accept the reality that they love a shoplifter. Perhaps they love them enough to help them overcome their unsavory habit. The same conditions might hold if a person discovers that their city has a horrible past or engages in unethical practices at present. This notion, however, moves us toward another issue that

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precipitate the reviewer who pointed out this fact.

concerns how cities can love people differently. Such a concern goes beyond the initial investigation's parameters of what it means to love a city and have it love you back. In turn, the idea deserves a separate study, along with other questions that stem from this exploration. The following section moves in that direction to identify such issues, showing some of the future steps that this kind of research should undertake to reveal additional insights into how cities can play a better, more equitable role in shaping people's lives.

## **5 Areas of Future Research**

While the songs mentioned above celebrating New York show how people love the city while other ditties highlight the particular features of day-to-day life, other numbers reveal aspects missing from their testimonies. For instance, Grand Masterflash and the Furious Five's "New York New York" illustrates a horrific view of urban life in the city (Robinson et al. 1983; Village Voice Staff 2014). They juxtapose the idea of the Big Apple as portrayed on television, the one that tourists encounter, which differs drastically (Robinson et al. 1983; Village Voice Staff 2014). In turn, people will not know of the unfortunate realities tucked away from the mainstream, conditions that reflect human suffering alongside the extravagance of high-rise homes (Robinson et al. 1983; Village Voice Staff 2014). This song paints a much different picture of New York, and it is one where the city does not love the people featured in the music. This notion gestures toward a future area of research, focusing on the question: how can we change cities so that all of its residents feel loved?

This inquiry not only challenges the status quo that controls the city, but it pushes against the "status quo of thought" concerning how we think about cities. That is to say, the mere thought that a city, as a social-material technology, should make residents feel loved is bound to make many people uncomfortable. One could argue that measures such as ensuring the fair and equitable distribution of harms and benefits, along with having a meaningful voice in policy decisions (e.g., environmental justice; see (Figueroa 2006)), should suffice.

However, one significant advantage of bringing "urban love" into these discussions is that it deals with how the outcomes of social-material arrangements make people feel. On the surface, this notion might sound ridiculous—or at least weird. Although arguments about the ethical dimensions of resource distribution remain subject to debate, there is no denying how people feel. If one group feels that the city hates them due to configurations of infrastructures and structures (i.e., residential, commercial, industrial, and cultural), the problem is undeniable. Feelings

such as love are not subject to the same considerations as resource distribution which can be measured and verified. One could argue that this reality is why we should not consider feelings like being loved. Yet, that position says more about the status quo than it does for reforms that challenge it. If we want to create cities that inspire *all* residents to sing about having love for their cities, developing and engaging in this kind of research deserves significant attention.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper showed that while numerous artists have expressed love for their city, we can also say that cities can love them back. People are in relationships with cities, which is apparent when considering a cities' social and material compositions. I argued that one way to think about a city is as a social-material technology composed of people, infrastructures, structures, and much more.

Urban dwellers love their cities because their cities already love them. This "love" is the outcome of arranging the urban elements above in a manner that makes them feel any range of positive emotions. People experience this love over durations from the cumulative, day-to-day experiences of living in the city. The benefit of investigating cities by focusing on the feelings they help create is that it challenges how many people typically think what it means to assess a city.

This line of thought also signals the need for additional research on how and why some groups of people feel less loved than other communities do. This notion is unorthodox. It pushes against research norms across the academy, even philosophy, the love of wisdom. In turn, this kind of approach will likely meet resistance or scorn. Yet, the state of feeling loved shows how unconventional ideas—such as questioning whether a city makes residents feel as if their city hates them to develop new ways of thinking about cities—extend beyond what traditional methods of investigation can deliver. In turn, thinking about why people love a city and what it means for a city to love them back does more than push against conventional ways of how people feel about urban environments. It signals that creating cities centered on equality demands challenging the status quo of inquiry to deliver better urban futures.

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