Real Places in Fictive Spaces:
Novels as Mobile Sites of Memory in the Trans-Atlantic Context

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Sites of memory are often seen as just that, physical places, often with a plaque, monument or other physical representation of the memory that this site was built to engage with. However, in terms of wider connections with visitors and engagement of ideas, these sites of memory are often limited in their ability to get visitors to engage with the narrative that they are trying to create. Specific to a distant narrative such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, where direct survivors are not alive to tell their stories, nor was there the technology to preserve their stories the importance of using sites of memory well to create an emotional attachment is important. This is where it is important to begin to broaden the understanding of sites of memory to include literature as a means of connecting with the stories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This essay will look at the books "Uncle Tom's Cabin", "The Book of Negroes", and "The Underground Railroad" in the context of the sites of memory visited as part of the *Phantoms of the Past* research project and will analyze the importance of place, that is the setting and space in all the three books as the way in which this develops a connection with individuals more widely. Rather than analyzing strictly sites of memory, this essay will analyze literature as an extension of sites of memory and will look at the ways in which these texts allow for places of memory to exist without the creation of a physical site. This essay will ultimately demonstrate that the goal of literature in the wider context of public history is to act as mobile sites of memory to provide the space for prosthetic memory to occur within the wider context of memories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Before beginning an analysis of the literature surrounding the trans-Atlantic slave trade, there are a few terms that I will be referring to in this essay that need clarification. The first term is memory. Here I will use Pierre Nora's definition of memory:

> Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived… Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute" (Nora, 8)

This definition does a good job of capturing what memory is: it is not the academic or official state narrative that is perpetuated, but rather is the individual stories which are revived and manipulated to meet the needs of a specific time and place. For this reason, I am comfortable calling the books sites of memory, as not only do they represent places, "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora, 7) but they are physical objects which project an understanding of the past that is susceptible to changing over time[1]. The other important term that it is important to define is prosthetic memory. This term was coined by Alison Landsberg, a scholar of media culture. The term originated in the science fiction realm where people can be implanted with other peoples' memories so as to experience what they have experienced (Landsberg 28). Similar to giving someone a prosthetic arm, you give them a memory which

[1] I will get into an example of this in relation to Uncle Tom's Cabin later in the paper.

allows them to change their life in relation to this prosthetic memory. This idea was applied to the present in allowing people to experience memory at museums and memorials, specifically those to mass atrocities by exposing visitors to the grandiosity of the horrors through allowing them an emotional connection to the past (Landsberg, 81). Allowing people to access prosthetic memory goes beyond simply showing pictures of anonymous people or using, for example, a pile of shoes like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to symbolize the murder of the Jews at Auschwitz and provides a legitimate understanding of the experiences of the past rather than providing overwhelming horror or allowing a substitute for suffering. This is a better way of providing memory in that it transcends race and time and allows all people to interact with the past in a meaningful way (Landsberg, 30). It is with these definitions that I will organize my paper.

I will evaluate the various sites of memory involved in the Phantoms of the Past research project and organize them on a hierarchy of prosthetic memory to determine their effectiveness as mediums of conveying meaning to those with whom it interacts. Before looking into the place of literature in this memory, it is important to demonstrate the kinds of memorials which already exist to understand the place of this literature in the current landscape. Rather than analyzing certain memorials as examples of "representatives" as a type of memorial, I will analyze two memorials to demonstrate how damaging a lack of prosthetic memory can be, and the shortcomings of even the best uses of prosthetic memory relating to the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The first site of memory that I will use to illustrate my point is the "Sugar & Slavery" Exhibit in the *Museum of London Docklands*. The exhibit is London's first permanent exhibit on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The exhibit begins in earnest by saying on a panel, "we have tried to avoid use of terms that strip individuals of their humanity-since this was the tactic central to the imposition of slavery. The word 'slave' for example implies a thing or a commodity rather than a human being. We have used the term 'enslaved African' wherever possible". The exhibit goes on to detail the history of slavery from its inception through to its abolition in Britain. The exhibit however does not detail the exploitation of individuals and the accounts of the suffering are rather limited. One map demonstrating the triangular trade actually has North America covered up as an unimportant piece of the museum. The tales of abolition do not make the memory of the black people who contributed to abolition known, but rather deals with the official government processes which resulted from black involvement. One of the largest artifacts on display is Thomas Fowell Buxton's table[2]. There are no artifacts which are open to the public which expose visitors to the horrors of either the middle passage or slavery more generally. Overall, this exhibit does an incredibly poor job of curating any kind of memory of the slave trade for visitors, instead engaging in a kind of history. While I will accept the point that this is a museum concerned with telling mostly British visitors about the economic role of slavery, a museum which is conscious enough of itself to say 'enslaved-African' in an attempt to give some level of humanity to victims ought to allow some space to portray individual memories rather than simply portraying people as pawns in an economic system. On the whole, while the archival value of this museum is up for discussion, this exhibit does a rather poor job as a site of memory, failing to leave visitors with any meaningful experience which will define them in the future.

On the other end of the spectrum is the exhibit at the Buxton National Historic Site. This rather unsuspecting museum set on a side road outside Chatham, Ontario has a room dedicated to

[2] The (white) Member of Parliament who helped steer the Abolition bill through the House of Commons.

the memory of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in commemoration of Buxton as a site on the underground railroad. The exhibit does a brilliant job of curating memory of individual enslaved peoples. It starts with a wall declaring, "The story of Buxton begins in Africa, the cradle of civilization and home to a vast collection of peoples, religions, cultures, and languages", with a display of African artifacts. This simple acknowledgement allows for the fact that the enslaved peoples were not a homogenous group but rather constituted a large and diverse group. Immediately behind this, in an otherwise bright room is a dark hallway which ends at the beds enslaved peoples would have had to sleep on in the middle passage. There are examples of shackles, a neck brace put on enslaved peoples who tried to flee and a whip placed beside a picture of the damage that a whip could do. These artifacts do not curate "information" so much as they curate memory. The museum is rather light on text, but still is able to connect with visitors because of the ability of the artifacts to provide prosthetic memory experiences. Seeing actual remnants of a slave ship, immediately after hearing about how the story of an entire town began with a vibrant collection of cultures of whom many people were enslaved is ultimately incredibly impactful. Seeing a whip beside an illustration of an enslaved person with whip marks entrenching his back allows visitors to not only witness but in some ways experience the horrors of slavery. However, the impact of this museum is limited by its very nature. While obviously being a community museum located in a rural setting limits its ability to interact with individuals, the fact that museum are typically used by white middle-class individuals further limits the ability of any museum to interact with and spread prosthetic memory (Hooper-Greenhill, 5; Otele, 160).

Having looked at the places that attempt to convey memory, it is now important to look at the novels that are used to convey memory. The first book is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Though the book was a political product of Harriet Beecher Stowe with the intention of acting in the pre-civil war context, it is still important to look at the literary merit of the book. The politicized nature of the book begins early when the narrator declares, "whoever visits some estates there, and witnesses the good-humoured indulgence of some masters and mistresses, and the affectionate loyalty of some slaves, might be tempted to dream of the oft-fabled poetic legend of a patriarchal institution." (Stowe, 10). Here the book perceptively reminds readers that in the context of slavery, place can often be romanticized. In the story that is about the be told, the fact that Tom will be loyal to his master no matter where he goes, and masters such as St Clare will treat Tom well, does not change the fact that Tom is not free. Therefore, the narrator is laying out early that places that have slavery cannot simply point to individual cases that lack outright brutality because all cases of slavery are inherently dehumanizing (O'Loughlin, 576). Though the book is political, this does not take away from its meaning (Levine, 75). The very fact that Stowe is intentionally portraying an idea is what most novels do, and the fact that it is contributing the political discourse is exactly what a novel ought to do.

Later in the book, the narrator tries actively question the idea of a moral barrier between the North and the South. When a trader comes from the North and purchases Lucy's child, the third person omniscient narrator notes that "the trader only regarded the mortal anguish which he saw working in those dark features, those clenched hands, and suffocating breathings as necessary incidents of the trade, and merely calculated whether she was going to scream." (Stowe, 131). This demonstrates the cruelty that is entrenched within the slave system separate from place. Despite the fact that there is a greater population of abolitionists in the north, this demonstrates that there are still individuals who do not buy into this. The infuriation that readers feel as they see this heartless act being perpetuated against Lucy who does not have a choice

illustrates the nuances of places in the enslaved person story. The fact that not every person in the north buys into abolition is an important nuance that is so often overlooked in narratives of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The prosthetic memory that is invoked in the fury that is built up in the reader helps to serve the purpose of demonstrating the fact that place is not necessarily as concrete as it is often thought to be.

In a slightly more nuanced way, at the end of the novel, the discussion of place comes down to a very narrow focus. After Tom is beaten to death and George hears about it, George comes back to buy Tom so that he can bury him elsewhere. When he buries him, George declares, "There is no monument to mark the last resting-place of our friend. He needs none! His lord knows where he lies, and will raise him up, immortal, to appear with him when he shall appear in his glory" (Stowe, 423). After the emotional death of Tom, readers are met with Tom being buried in an unmarked grave. The fact that in this case, place is unimportant is symbolic of the fact that Tom's freedom from slavery can at last be practiced anywhere. In death, Tom is more free than he was in life. Having this scene take place immediately after Tom's death allows readers to feel connected to Tom. Despite their desire for a marked grave to remember Tom, they engage with the George's decision to leave the grave unmarked. The significance of place in this scene is in fact the irrelevance of place that made freedom so important. The ability of the novel to use this connection to place to create meaning that can be experienced by the reader demonstrates that novels are able to act as sights of memory. By being able to create a connection within the reader to the past, Uncle Tom's Cabin curates prosthetic memory in a meaningful way.

In *The Book of Negroes* through Aminata's constant travelling, place is incredibly important to characters and allows for prosthetic memory to engage with readers. Early in the book after Aminata is being marched to the coast, it is not so much Aminata that is made to seem vulnerable, but Fanta. Despite Fanta being positioned earlier in the book as a despicable character, Aminata's care resonates. After a dispute, Aminata says, "Fanta grew silent. I imagined her shame having to push out her baby while our captors watched. We were roped above the ankles, in pairs, and our neck yokes were removed so that we could lie down under the baobab tree" (Hill, 48). For the entire journey from Bayo to the coast, it is incredibly evident the suffering of Aminata, and the horrors that she will experience in the future are gripping (Nehl, 137. However, the importance of place at this point is particularly noticeable. The fact that there is not even the security of a location but rather the uncertainty of a journey makes it more noticeable. The fact that Fanta is not even among fellow slaves who have the freedom of mobility to help deliver her baby is particularly troubling. Despite being a despicable character, it is impossible to not feel connected to Fanta and this allows for a sense of emotional connection to be achieved. The importance of the lack of a solid place and the uncertainty caused in the transit in creating this narrative demonstrates the importance of place in this narrative of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to connect with people.

Specifically, with relation to portrayals of place, Aminata's experience with maps provides an experience of prosthetic memory through connections an understanding of space. Following Aminata being shown a map of Africa, she argued that the curvy lines seen on the map were not Africa and thinks of the absurdity of such images as a child sitting beside a lion saying, "This 'Mapp of Africa' was not my homeland. It was a white man's fantasy." (Hill, 300). She later reminisces in the Johnathan Swift poem, which goes "so geographers in Afric-maps, with savage-pictures fill their gaps; and o're uninhabitable downs place elephants for want of towns" observing that, "these weren't maps of Africa. In the ornate cartouches of elephants

and of women with huge breasts that rose in unlikely salute, every stroke of paint told me that the map-makers had little to say about my land" (Hill 514-515). She mentioned that if given the opportunity, "I would like to draw a map of the places I have lived. I would put Bayo on the map, and trace in red my long path to the sea. Blue lines would show the ocean voyages. Cartouches would decorate the margins. There would be no elephants for want of towns, but rather paintings of guineas made from the gold mines of Africa, a woman balancing fruit on her head…" (Hill, 656) through all of these sections on the map of Africa, the sense of disconnect that is necessary for slavery to occur becomes evident. In this situation, the ability of orientalist cartographers to bastardize the meaning of an entire continent results in a made-up culture which seems alien enough to convince people that slavery is acceptable. Aminata's desire to redraw the map, to give importance to place, is representative of her desire to restructure the laws and to give importance to enslaved people. Aminata's desire to fill in memories for want of towns rather than elephants, gives meaning to the people who do and used to live there. Seeing this through Aminata allows for it to be seen how essential it is for place to give meaning to the stories of individuals.

Interestingly, Aminata's telling of the story explicitly sets up for the nuances of place within her own experience to be understood. At one point, having committed to working for the British and being told that she no longer needed to worry because she was free, she says, "we aren't far from free, but we aren't there yet … Not until we leave the Thirteen Colonies" (Hill, 405). Here Aminata is pointing to the idea that there was a solid line between the thirteen colonies and the rest of the free world and demonstrating that for a time at least she bought into the idea. Later in the story, when Aminata is back in Sierra Leone working with the British and she is having dinner with two officers, she recalls that,

"Armstrong gave Falconbridge some sherry.

'Does she drink?' He said.

'Ask her she has a mind of her own that one'

Armstrong turned to me. "A drink?'

While I considered an answer, the two men clinked glasses. Something about that reminded me of rapping chains. I fell into a moment of utter dread. Here on Bunce Island two men could do whatever they wanted with me." (Hill, 578). Here, the fact that Aminata is recognizing the limitations of freedom as a former enslaved person, not to mention a woman of colour. The fact that she is not completely free regardless of the place that she is in the world goes further to demonstrating the constraints of slavery. Moreover, the fact that this is experienced through the first person in Aminata is important in that it imbues memory upon those experiencing the book. The fact that this constraint is experienced in the first person is important in that it allows for prosthetic memory to occur, which leads to a deeper understanding of Aminata's experience. All of these experiences come together to help curate prosthetic memory to the reader in a way that static sites of memory are simply unable to do.

Lastly, in *The Underground Railroad*, as the name implies, places and movement are important throughout the book. Early on in the book, when Cora and Caesar enter the underground railways station, Caesar asks,

'How far does the tunnel extend?'

Lumbly shrugged. 'Far enough for you.'

'It must have taken years.'

'More than you know. Solving the problem of ventilation, that took a bit of time.'

(Whitehead, 68-69)

Here, the absurdity of the imagery stands as a synecdoche for the absurdity of the journey that Cora and Caesar are forced to embark on. In this situation, the talk of ventilation seems reasonable in a discussion of a runaway enslaved person. The fact that Cora and Caesar are bought and sold and treated so poorly that they are forced to escape is awful and the horrors of this treatment are demonstrated early. However rather than simply forcing the vulgarity to take the lead, the fact that the underground railroad exists literally in this story allows for a framing of the absurdity of this story to mediate the interaction with memory. In the context of prosthetic memory, the fact readers are able to experience this memory in a way that they can understand. This allows for a better passing of the story of this memory and for it to be adapted in a way that the horrors of the lives of enslaved people does not need to rely simply on showing horrible actions. The use of a train, which moves people from place to place represents the absurdity of slavery across the continent and the danger of states which refused to help.

Coming out of the station in North Carolina, the town is described by saying that, "The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments. Some of them were naked, others partially clothed, the trousers black where their bowels had emptied when their necks snapped… In what sort of hell had the train let her off?" (Whitehead, 155). The place being described is North Carolina after the fugitive slave act. The fact that this place is not a safe haven for slaves is a more accurate description of the border states following the fugitive slave act being passed. Having such a place where slaves are not actually free, essentially makes it hell for slaves. However, rather than simply relying on slave catchers coming to take the slaves away to demonstrate the fear, which the text does later, the corpses are a reminder of the eternal fear that is present regardless of place. This serves to blur the lines of North-South that are so often thought to be important. As a result of the Fugitive Slave Act, place within the United States lost meaning for enslaved peoples, and African-Americans all together as any prospect of freedom is eliminated within the country. This reminder is important in terms of prosthetic memory because it demonstrates the nuances that are able to be achieved through the fear that the book brings out. The recognition of Cora's fear by the narrator allows for this fear to be experienced by the reader and the connection between fear and place in North Carolina results in greater understanding. In both cases, the ability of the absurdist telling of the narrative to make place meaningful to readers helps to imbue prosthetic memory to the readers. This kind of connection to the individuals in the narrative and to the past and slave trade more broadly is important in that it allows not only for information to be curated but for meaning to be curated as well.

It is important that these texts be looked at both individually and as a collective. The fact that each text is able to give connection between the reader and a historical experience is important in that through all of the texts, readers are able to gain a deeper, and perhaps more holistic understanding of the past. Despite the fact that the three books were written by different authors, set in different times and places, written in three different centuries, the importance of place comes through in each book. In Uncle Tom's Cabin the political nature of the book makes place seem much more concrete, however, the book still uses space as a method of conveying memory. In The Book of Negroes, Aminata's journey is about, and recognizes place as an important way for memory to be understood. In The Underground Railroad, the nature movement and the reality of destination helps to curate memory to the readers and imbue the story with the ability to interact with readers in a meaningful way and to allow for prosthetic memory to occur. This is not to say that the physical sites of memory that were created with the intention of providing visitors with information are not valuable. It is to say however, that the purpose of novels in this system is to act as mobile sites of memory to provide the space for

prosthetic memory to occur within the wider context of memories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

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