

Nostalgic Architecture, Memory Traces and Violent (Re)inscriptions of American Identity/-ties: Atlanta at the Turn of the Millennium

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Abstract

This paper seeks to decipher memory traces of racial American identities as inscribed in the cityscape of Atlanta, Georgia. While the investigation taps into my personal memories of the encounter with the southern US city in 2008, thus making my memories yet another trace in the larger memory network, it aims at exploring nostalgic vestiges of the Eurocentric outlook of Atlanta's white dwellers through architecture. I tentatively finger scars left by a slavery past on Atlanta's urban space by recourse to psychogeography and memory and race studies, to suggest how architecture works to preserve, enhance or impede "memory work."

Key Words

Atlanta, architecture, memory, identity, racism, psychogeography

1. Seeing through architecture, or how to glimpse city fractures

The Residence Inn by Marriott, Atlanta, 134 Peachtree St NW. Located in the nationally-registered Rhodes Haverty office building (1929) turned in the mid-1990s into a 20-storey hotel, the Residence Inn has two entrances. Its grand entrance – for registered hotel guests alone – opens onto Peachtree Street, Atlanta's historic central street (overlying the Creek Peachtree Trail, as other early Atlanta streets – Whitehall and Marietta – did with the original Indian trails), now literally shaped like a curved backbone through extensions accrued over time (Williford 4–5).¹ And here is where the backbone is at its most fractured architecture-wise. Right opposite the Residence Inn stands the Candler Building (1906; 127 Peachtree St NE), built for Asa Candler, founder of the Coca Cola empire, a nostalgic classical edifice whose sculpted entrance never failed to "translate" me back in the "Old World." Opposite left, however, rise modern skyscrapers: the pink marble half-ziggurat of Georgia Pacific Center (1982; 133 Peachtree St NE), built on the old site of Loew's Grand Theatre (1923–78), and further north the double-crown building of 191 Peachtree Tower (1991). Virtually adjacent to the hotel is Margaret Mitchell Square, with its waterfall and fountain (1986) – an overt white-enhancing *lieu de mémoire*! As I walked down Peachtree Street southwards, I realised that my hotel shared architectural space with the all-glass Equitable skyscraper (1968; 100 Peachtree St NW), built on the site of the Piedmont Hotel (1903–66), further south-east with Atlanta's oldest standing high-riser, the Chicago style Flatiron Building (1897; 84 Peachtree St NW), and with several Georgia State University

¹ See Williford (ch. 1) for a history of Peachtree Street before the Civil War, including the puzzle over the street name (*pitch*, viz. pine, or *peach* tree?) and a brief history of "Atlanta" prior to and shortly after the white settlement. Quite expectedly, Williford's is, not only through its narrow focus, a book on the white history of a not so white settlement. Neither the original inhabitants, forced to move along another trail – of tears – than their customary trade trails, nor the Africans brought in as slaves in the South, are addressed: Williford first mentions blacks only after the Emancipation and in an unflattering light (29, 39–40).

buildings, all situated within the Fairlie-Poplar Historic District. How do Atlantans feel about such intersections, alignments and juxtapositions? Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to interview any of them.

A caveat is in order here. Although my retrospective musings on Atlantan cityscape are to a large extent intellectually indebted to “Walking in the City” by Michel de Certeau,² I never enjoyed the opportunity of looking down at Atlanta the way he did at New York from the then standing World Trade Center. I did not ride the scenic glass lifts of the Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel (1976; 210 Peachtree St NW) to its Sun Dial restaurant revolving on the 73rd floor for a breathtaking panoramic view of the city. Nor the lifts of the Hyatt Regency Hotel (1967; 265 Peachtree St NE) to reach its dome-shaped restaurant, which I fondly called the “flying saucer” as soon as I spotted it among taller buildings and drifted for a better vantage point to contemplate the blue stowaway. But I took my time to look at – and take pictures of – the two hotels, even as back then I couldn’t tell the black all-glass cylinder of the Westin from a corporate building! So my view of the city is necessarily from below, from street-level and also from average passer-by level, unless I resort occasionally to the cold satellite eye – available courtesy of Google Maps – to check locations. Being engulfed within the labyrinth of street-level motion may afford no distance for transfiguration into a “voyeur-god created by this fiction” – the “panorama-city” as a “‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture” (de Certeau 93) of the sort suggested by pre-perspectival representations of the city (92). Voyeurism, however, is too strong a term for me as a visitor: I don’t crave wielding a “totalizing eye” moved – in every sense – by a “scopic drive” (de Certeau 92) which, *unacknowledged* by de Certeau, testifies rather to a masculinist *possession drive* bolstered by a “panoptic power” (95) *dissimulated* as looking from a dematerialised, disembodied, God-like vantage point situated above and disconnected from the material world (see Haraway). Contra de Certeau at this point in his analysis yet not subsequently as well (de Certeau 97ff), I would further argue that walking at street level doesn’t necessarily render the visitor “possessed” by the city, hence unable to see it transfigured “into a text that lies before one’s eyes” (92), or rather into a *speech-act* which *acts out* – *performs* (in a Butlerian sense) – the city (de Certeau 97–8).³ Besides, my “lust” (de Certeau 92) in Atlanta was more modest in both goals and means than de Certeau’s in New York: to be a low-profile “tourist,” camera in hand, who could enjoy the *flâneuse*’s full privileges in her little spare time.

In retrospect, Atlanta’s cityscape revealed itself to me as an amazing text – the architecturally inscribed memory canvas of clashes past and present, a four-dimensional palimpsest whose *ghostly traces* in the present (of perception/recollection) *perform(ed)* the early clashes time and again, yet at so many discursive removes. What follows is an exploration of Atlanta with the tools of *psychogeography*,⁴ yet drawing on my affective and intellective responses to the city both at the time of

² Pinder has studied “how artists and cultural practitioners [of expeditionary practices] have recently been using forms of urban exploration as a means of engaging with, and intervening in, cities ... within the wider context of critical approaches to urban space which take it seriously as a sensuous realm that is imagined, lived, performed and contested” (385), some of which take place “under the banner of ‘psychogeography’” (386), though no longer in its original situationist sense.

³ “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered” (de Certeau 97). One of its “enunciative” functions “is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language)” (98). Accordingly, “if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities” (98). Compare with Butler’s definition of gender (in conjunction with the body) as existing in and through *the performance of rules*: “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (143).

⁴ Psychogeography characteristically emphasises “an active engagement with urban space where importance is attached to the act itself,” e.g. “forms of play in the streets” or “evocations of the ghosts of place, the traces of those people that have been evicted or excluded” (Pinder 400). Just as importantly, through its walking practices, psychogeography “allow[s] encounters with apparently ‘ordinary’ and ‘unimportant’ activities in the city, against the grain of powerful discourses of the urban,” viz. urbanistic, planning and geographical discourses, always ready to dismiss any such particular experiences as insignificant or downright foolish (400–1).

my visit and in its aftermath. True to a practice made famous by the likes of Georg Simmel, Michel de Certeau and Iain Sinclair, I will try to map the city centre “according to paths, movements, desires and senses of ambience” (Pinder 389) yet also astonishment which I experienced or recollect, often enhanced by the memory of photographs. Like when, on the bus stopped at the traffic lights, I fished for my camera to take pictures of the all-glass skyscrapers from close quarters, and the buildings offered me the bonus of next-door edifices reflected, with distortions, in their mirror shell. Or when one evening a young black man teased me whether I was a professional photographer, but fled as soon as I turned my camera to photograph him. Or when on my return to the hotel I glimpsed a gender restorative graffiti on a warning sign: WO/MEN WORKING. Or when, once I stepped onto the underground escalator of the south end of the MARTA Peachtree Center Station (Ellis St entrance, Margaret Mitchell Square NW), what crossed my mind was: *descensus ad inferos*; it took me quite a while to switch on my camera and photograph my fellow inferno-heading escalator riders.

2. Of statues, people and (de-)emphasised urban memory

Four bronze statues caught my eye as I strolled through Atlanta. One is Gamba Quirino’s *Atlanta from the Ashes* (1969) in Woodruff Park⁵ at Five Points, which symbolises Atlanta’s rebirth from the ashes of the Civil War (Fig. 1). Another statue is located in the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site: Patrick Morelli’s *Behold* (1990) features Kunta Kinte, the protagonist of Alex Haley’s novel *Roots* (1976), performing a Mandinka ceremony for his new-born daughter – symbolic of a cosmic, not social, pledge of the baby (Fig. 2).

Often associated with situationist Guy Debord, who in 1955 defined psychogeography as “the study of the effects of the geographic environment on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (qtd. in Pinder 286), the term coined by the Parisian letterists was actually given prominence through their practices by the situationists (Pinder 388–9). Given the exploratory nature of practices of psychogeography past and present, there is an unmistakeable political charge which owes to exploration being coterminous with the colonial project (Pinder 388) and therefore is imbricated in relations of power/knowledge (in Foucauldian terms) in its framing of and “scripting in the production of imaginative urban geographies [as] remains evident in the colonial present” (Pinder 388; see 398).

⁵ Woodruff Park is located at the heart of the city’s financial, entertainment, and academic districts.



Fig. 1. Gamba Quirino, *Atlanta from the Ashes* (1969)



Fig. 2. Patrick Morelli, *Behold* (1990)

The Google Maps satellite image shows the two statues virtually symmetrically positioned, aligned as they are to Auburn Ave NE, the backbone street of King's home neighbourhood. Furthermore, the statues share a technical device of illustrious Greek ancestry, the *contrapposto*, to poise their protagonists lifting up their arms to the sky to present their respective offering: the phoenix by the (implicitly *white*) female persona of the city and the (*black*) baby by her enslaved African father. Mercifully, the bronze cast neutralises the black/white racial cut of the statues and obliterates the memory of the Jim Crow segregation laws.

Located in Peachtree Fountains Plaza by the entrance to Underground Atlanta, a retail and entertainment centre, and close to MARTA Five Points station, the third statue (Fig. 3) seemingly merges with the landscape. Indeed, I have been unable to locate the inconspicuous bronze artefact within Atlanta's Public Art Collection managed by Atlanta Office of Cultural Affairs (<<http://ocaatlanta.com/public-art/the-collection>>). A bronze elderly man is seated on a ledge-like bench feeding a bronze duck; a few yards away, his much younger, gregarious flesh-and-blood counterparts share the bench for a relaxed chat: they too are African American – but not homeless like him. The low-profile statue virtually shares the same breadth with the *Phoenix*: Woodruff Park at Five Points.⁶ Five Points again: when I passed it one day, it was bustling with the thundering presence of an elderly African American man, Bible under left arm, preaching hell and the apocalypse to his mostly male black fellows seated on benches right across from a Georgia State University building (Fig. 4). My American informant, a white southern male professor at a Californian university, told me that the black unemployed gathered at Five Points awaiting a temporary employment opportunity. Would the younger blacks be scavenging in the litter bins of Peachtree Center – the downtown commercial and business area concentrated around, yet spilling over the boundaries of, Peachtree Street – as I saw one doing on another occasion (Fig. 5)?



Fig. 3. Bronze statue (left) in Peachtree Fountains Plaza

⁶ From the same location yet looking into the opposite direction one can see the Georgia State Capitol (1889; 206 Washington St on Capitol Square).



Fig. 4. Woodruff Park at Five Points: African Americans



Fig. 5. African American scavenging in a Peachtree Center litter bin

The fourth bronze statue is located in the Fairlie-Poplar Historic District, itself a landmark both in architectural terms – due to its cornucopia of styles: Chicago, Renaissance Revival, Neoclassical, Commercial, Art Deco, Georgian Revival and Victorian Eclectic – and in economic terms – as the “historic central business district ... includ[ing] the largest concentrated collection of commercial and office buildings in Atlanta from the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (www.nps.gov/nr/travel/atlanta/fai.htm). *No Goal Is Too High If We Climb with Care and Confidence* (1995) is situated at the intersection of Peachtree St NE and Poplar St NW next to the Georgia State University downtown campus. Created at the GSU Sculpture Forum, the statue was donated to the city by Chic-fil-A, Inc., the

US pioneer in quick-service mall food, “to commemorate their commitment to higher education through their Scholarship Program” (<http://ocaatlanta.com/no_goal_conservation>). In the words of S. Truett Cathy – the white founder of Chick-fil-A, Inc. – etched into the statue’s plaque, “Each person’s destiny is not a matter of chance; it’s a matter of choice. It’s determined by what we say, what we do, and whom we trust.” Prophetic words indeed – for the students and staff of GSU. Yet do they also ring true for the black Atlantans who gather daily at Five Points for the promise of odd jobs, for the African American I spotted foraging in a litter bin around Peachtree Center, for the sitter of the anonymous (to me) sculpture in Peachtree Fountains Plaza?

3. A black and white city?

It’s virtually impossible to visit Atlanta, especially as I did, on an academic tour with a religious study goal, without learning about the Hindu Temple of Atlanta (Temple of Lord Sri Venkateshwara Swamy, 1984; 5851 GA Hwy 85, Riverdale) or about the prominent mosque Al-Farooq Masjid (1980; 442 14th St NW). Or without visiting Atlanta’s first Jewish synagogue, self-styled The Temple (the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation of Atlanta, 1867; 1589 Peachtree St NE) and situated right opposite Peachtree Christian Church (1928; 1580 Peachtree St NW). Jews and Christians together donated money to get this Reform synagogue reconstructed after its 1958 racist bombing to intimidate its then rabbi, Jacob M. Rothschild, a friend of Martin Luther King, Jr and a vocal supporter of the civil rights cause (Webb).

Ironically, Atlanta’s synagogues have incurred yet another historical scar: the Leo Frank–Mary Phagan scandal of 1913. A 29-year-old Jewish magnate was accused of sexually molesting and then murdering a 14-year-old Christian girl, an employee in Atlanta’s National Pencil Factory (owned by Frank’s New York-based uncle). The inconclusive court trial which sentenced Leo Frank to death by hanging, followed by numerous denials of his lawyers’ appeals, ended up with the lynching of the defendant in 1915 close to Mary’s birthplace, right when the sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment (Pou). Williamson describes the clash leading to the murder accusation in paradigmatic structuralist terms, with a typically Christian slur on the “bestial Jew” (472). For him, this was simply the case of an innocent Southern *country* girl killed in the *city* by a rich, predatory Jewish manager of a “Yankee-owned factory” after “the South turned its anger away from the Blacks and toward those alien forces that seemed most threatening to its essential virtue” (472):

It was appropriately symbolic that the film *The Birth of a Nation* [D. W. Griffith, 1914] was shown in Atlanta during the fall of 1915 after Frank was lynched. It was even more symbolic of things to come that the “second Ku Klux Klan” was organized in Atlanta that same year, and its regeneration was celebrated by burning a huge cross on top of Stone Mountain. (Williamson 472)

Or, “the second KKK featured a hatred of Jews and Catholics that obscured its anti-Negro animus” (Williamson 472). Parenthetically speaking, so did Reverend Josiah Strong in *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885), where he vituperated against the city – elided with the threat of industrialisation and communism alike – and anything non-Protestant.

Yet, what struck me in Atlanta was not the usual American mosaic of races, ethnicities and religions, although my (camera) eye did record the bizarre juxtaposition of hotels, banks and churches. Take the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (1897; 353 Peachtree St NE). From one standing point, the nationally registered edifice of Atlanta’s only Catholic church has the Imperial Hotel (1911; 355 Peachtree St NE) in the background and the Medical Arts Building (1927; 384 Peachtree St NE) on the left, with the Bank of America Plaza (1992; 600 Peachtree St NE) visible beyond the latter. From the opposite angle, one sees the Marriott Marquis Hotel (1985; 265 Peachtree Center Ave) in the background left and SunTrust Plaza (1992; 303 Peachtree St NE) on the right.

To take another case: what can one make of the splendid architectural complex at 660 Peachtree St NE? When I first spotted it from Ponce de Leon Ave NE, I was taken aback by a breathtaking Moorish style mosque. The nearer I walked, the more I *desired* to climb up its outer stairs to *feel* the building at close quarters. Picture my astonishment, then, to take a left turn and read that the mosque, blue dome and all, was actually the Fox Theatre! I searched for the history of the edifice as soon as I returned to my hotel. Here it is (www.foxtheatre.org/foxhistory.aspx): architect P. Thornton Marye was commissioned in the 1920s by the 5,000-member Shriners organisation (founded in 1889) to design the Yaarab Temple Shrine Mosque as its headquarters. Financial issues, however, took their toll on the organisation, so the Shriners' deal with film mogul William Fox resulted in the building opening on 25 December 1929... as the Fox Theatre. Yet the Shriners weren't Muslims, as the mosque-fitted building might suggest, but a fun-and-fellowship-loving brotherhood of Masonic persuasion, Arabian inspiration, New York origins and charitable inclination (<www.shrinersinternational.org/Shriners/History/Beginnings.aspx>). No wonder opulent ballrooms and lounges grace the "mosque"-centred construction. Many people associate the nationally registered landmark building with the *re*-premiering of *Gone with the Wind* on its 50th and 70th anniversaries (1989; 2009). Retrospectively, I find it strange that the Fox should have screened *The Color Purple* in August 2008 during the Coca-Cola Summer Film Festival: Why, notwithstanding financial arrangements, the cinema should have doubly re-premiered a film based on a controversial racial story (Holland 417) and in between screened another one based on an African American novel revealing black in-group chauvinism and violence, remains a mystery for me.

To return to Atlanta's cityscape, both architecture and my personal experience of strolling in the city centre persuade me of a pervasive black and white divide. On the face of it, architecture-wise the black of modern glass-and-steel or glass-and-concrete skyscrapers contrasts with the white of *fin-de siècle* European-looking buildings – not that such juxtaposition would be peculiar to Atlanta or the US. Soft-looking stone decoration and shimmering glass reflexes suggest an *aisthetic*, not just aesthetic, opposition, between warm(th) and cold(ness), lifestyles and worldviews worlds, ages and rhythms apart. Yet deceptively so: both architectural styles belong historically together as the landmarks of the white race – hence as as many *lieux de mémoire* that "authenticate [mainstream] consensual notions of the past" (Hoelscher, Alderman 349), here by obliterating the memory of racism.⁷

Nonetheless, beyond the contrast between black-and-white *façades*, I also found nostalgia and/as the black-and-white *divide* deeply etched into urban memory in the form of two racist inscriptions which have been erased in the meantime. I passed by G. Lloyd Preacher's Beaux-Art style Medical Arts Building (1927; 384 Peachtree St NE) as I walked down Peachtree Street on 29 July 2008. The sight of a derelict brick and limestone construction (vacated after the 1995 fire) in the northernmost part of the city centre was unsettling enough for a quiet afternoon stroll, yet there was more to it. On my way back to the hotel, I chanced to spot (from the north) the twofold graffiti "crowning" the Medical Arts Building perfectly symmetrically: zooming in on the SunTrust Plaza towering the horizon, I could read "SAVE THE WHITE RACE" on the left and "WHITE POWER" on the right (original capital letters) (Fig. 6).

⁷ See Appiah for a persuasive historicising critique of the concept of race and a discussion of the social and psychological effects of racial identity ascription; see Kay Anderson for a timely critical race theory problematisation of the virulent re-emergence of race and emergence of racial science in the 19th century as symptomatic of a western *epistemic crisis* of conceiving humans as separate from nature (along the Enlightenment line).



Fig. 6. Medical Arts Building (background: SunTrust Plaza): “SAVE THE WHITE RACE” (left) and “WHITE POWER” (right)

The scar on the façade of a building of the (white) medical establishment translated a scar on the memory of some white city dwellers, likely apprehensive of the outcome of the civil rights movement (with Atlanta as its hub before Martin Luther King, Jr. moved away). In view of the image taken on 15 June 2006 by Chris P., still available online at Emporis.com (<www.emporis.com/en/il/im/?id=468845>), the terminus ad quem for *daubing* the racist graffiti is 2006. An article by Leon Stafford, “New Purposes for Atlanta’s Old Eyesores,” posted in the *Atlanta News* on 22 August 2009 (<www.ajc.com/news/atlanta/new-purposes-for-atlantas-121468.html>) features Jason Getz’s photo of the building, with the left-hand graffiti (“Save...”) seemingly whitewashed, yet the right-hand one still visible. The latter appears completely removed on an April 2010 satellite image available on Google Maps.

Has such long-due graffiti erasure healed Atlanta’s racial scar? Perhaps Elijah Anderson is right to assume that only the *concept* of racial discrimination has lost its force, but not the racial *feelings* too (12, 21–3; Amin 5). With this comes the corollary that African Americans in particular are suspected that their upward socio-professional mobility merely derives from US positive discrimination policies; consequently, they constantly need to prove they deserve their position (E. Anderson 12, 17, 20; Appiah 131). Do some whites find their professional position threatened (E. Anderson 12–13)⁸ or do

⁸ Compare the recent white discrediting of putative beneficiaries of US positive discrimination (E. Anderson 13–14; McCarthy 765) with Jedel and Kujawa’s (281–7) findings from their 1972–73 audit of the employees’ job-related

they rather fear a tipping of the US demographic balance towards “the coloured races,” as Lothrop Stoddard warned apocalyptically in *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920)? As regards the former, seven states – California (1996), Washington (1998), Florida (1999), Michigan (2006), Nebraska (2008), Arizona (2010) and New Hampshire (2011) – have already banned affirmative action programmes. The urban black “ghetto,” alongside the “feminization of poverty” (in Diane Pearce’s terms) in a racially unbalanced distribution of power and resources, gives the lie to Stoddard. Does “White Power,” the white supremacist slogan (Bolaffi 329), voice such (combined?) apprehensions – like “Save the White Race” itself – symptomatic of the “white backlash” (Jedel, Kujawa 281), or is it a reminiscence of the KKK ethos manifested in 1920s Atlanta and in Atlantan Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1926–36)?⁹ Either way, did the White Power movement itself emerge to offset the revolutionary Black Power movement (Bolaffi 31–2) or is it, like the KKK and fascism, an inherently predatory violence-monger?

4. The persistence of racial memory

We cannot think about race without thinking about the racism that defines race, interprets it, and decrees what the personal and institutional work of race will be.

– Sharon P. Holland, “The Last Word on Racism” (405)

To recap: two racist inscriptions appeared on the cornice of the 62.84 metre-high Medical Arts Building prior to mid-2006 and were completely erased only by April 2010. At the time it was erected, the edifice virtually belonged with other, mostly white sheathed, high-risers in the white entrepreneurial city centre. Now the northernmost topographical border of Atlanta’s centre in urban mapping, after 1927 the MAB as the hub of medical practice marked the professional border between life and death. In either capacity the edifice, and with it all it has ever stood for, is a literal landmark (albeit not in the modern, “nationally registered” sense) acting out the city’s inner borders, if not the inner-city borders. The now erased racist graffiti makes the building sound out the justness of Derrida’s observation that racism as a “system of marks, outlines space in order to assign forced residence or to close off borders” (292). Atlanta’s centre, the graffiti screams out, is the region most jeopardised (“Save the White Race”!) yet most clearly marking off “*White Power*” even through its modern *black* all-glass hotels (the Westin; the Marriott Marquis) and business centres (the Equitable).

Perhaps the racist Atlantan graffiti best testifies, then, to the *persistence of racialised oppression*, albeit under new guises, in the aftermath of successful opposition to racism in the US (Amin 2; Holland 405–6; Appiah). One way to understand such persistence is provided by Stuart Hall in his Gramscian inflected argument: “As hegemonic transformations and shifts occur, system- or administrative-level changes in the State may be readily apparent, but because hegemony occupies and molds institutions and culture, within civil society there are ideological ‘trench-systems’ that remain in place where dominant groups’ habits of mind and practices remain salient” (Squires 213). Another explication (Watts 217) welds the trope of race to affects, typically resentment, via “aesthetic” (viz. sensual) values. With the advent of *postracism* – often linked in the media to Barack Obama’s presidency (Ono 228) – as not simply a “cultural condition” which “largely operates unconsciously,”

perceptions in five Atlanta-based firms, that despite the strong implementation of positive discrimination policies in employment in the early 1970s the African American employees felt racial discrimination was still in force, while their white colleagues strongly denied it perhaps as “a white backlash effect.” On covert racism see also the comparison of responses to a 1997 survey on positive discrimination (and generally racial attitudes) and in-depth interviewing of a sample of the respondents to the former, conducted respectively on four and three white US college campuses (Bonilla-Silva, Forman).

⁹ The US White Power movement, which espouses nationalistic racism, has neo-Nazi origins and a National Socialist affiliation.

but also a “political strategy” (227) of *obliteration*, it becomes apparent that the proposition of the demise of racism is more than an untenably optimistic fantasy. As Ono contends, in *disavowing history* through its (white) nostalgic return to “the good old early 1950s” and “a mental habitus of preracial consciousness,” postracism aims both “to reverse the gains of antiracist and civil rights struggles and to continue old-style racism garbed in new clothes” (227), e.g. by “minimiz[ing] the reality of racism” in the present and denying “the systemic, transhistorical, long-lasting, continuing effects of slavery” (228; see also McCarthy).

Simply stated, 21st-century American society faces a return of its repressed past – in fact, doubly repressed through the suppression of Africans’ freedom and voice (through *enslavement*) and through the *unchronicling* of a past of profound injustice against African Americans (Booth 688; Fong 660–1; Ono 228).¹⁰ In endorsing slavery, the WASP founding fathers forged a divided American identity; its legacy to the present, alongside a denial of the systemic effects of racism (and disavowed colonialism), is polarised between “blackness ... [as] a sign of otherness” and a “whiteness [which] remains invisible to itself, shrouded in a ‘broad, collective American silence,’” on Booth’s (689) reading of Ralph Ellison. Accordingly, “[t]he forgetful presentism of American life, born of its intertwining of amnesia, partial remembrance, and misplaced innocence, makes the past invisible” (Booth 689; see McCarthy 760). Such an adroit move, however, cannot *erase* the past, as nothing else can, but only promises a “relief ... from the burdens of memory, ... always merely provisional, and therefore vulnerable especially to an unwilling resurgence of the past into its midst” (Booth 689). The current shape of this “haunting presence” (Booth 685) as pictured by the whites seems to be that of the African American who lives on welfare yet paradoxically wrests all decent job opportunities from diligent whites, now styling themselves victims of reverse discrimination – through recourse to postracial discourse – and acting accordingly against positive discrimination (Ono 229). More than showing an individual bias, though, such views structure the reshaping of the whites’ collective consciousness through reshaping of its *collective memory*,¹¹ with systemic social ramifications. How do the African Americans experience the self-same haunting past and the painfully inescapable black and white *sutured wound* (see Booth 690–1)? Amin argues that nowadays “the critical difference to the real experience of race, arbitrating the choice between accommodation and discipline of the racialized other” (4) is the interplay between *racial biopolitics*, viz. “explicit rules and practices of order based on bodily differentiation and discipline” (9), thence “the state of alert towards the raced body” (9), and “*vernacular habits* with long historical roots of reading racial and social worth from surface bodily differences” (3–4), viz. the legacies of “phenotypical racism,” or the “everyday doings of race” (7), “ingrained as a kind of historical force” (13). Segregation may have been rescinded, but racism hasn’t been and cannot be uprooted by fiat. In this clash of strands of collective memory, it appears that the

¹⁰ If we were to consider solely manifest skin colour differences that yielded to othering and exclusions, Native Americans too have experienced social injustice (Holland 405). Rogers M. Smith’s highly influential *Civic Ideals* (1997) provides in a certain sense a corrective to American amnesia, since it “document[s] the centrality of race in the nation’s self-understandings” and American political discourse (Fong 666).

¹¹ See Prager on the psychology of collective memory for an emphasis on the distinction between collective memory and history precisely in terms of the former’s *susceptibility* to “confabulation, revision, and remodelling,” hence to “instability and disruption” especially owing to the “imperatives of the present” (2224). Yet see also Wilson (332, 334) on individual memory within externalist theory’s view of memory as extended, viz. socially framed, and Megill (38) on the inappropriateness of construing history and memory in simple oppositional terms. Ironically, Prager is oblivious to the obduracy of white speech entitlement and the contested nature of the subaltern speech, viz. the kind of *social amnesia* which can explain certain attempts at presenting slavery as not so bad indeed (along the lines of *Gone with the Wind*) and the relatively minor success of African American counter-narratives of historical slavery. On Confino’s (1393–6) reading, (a decontextualised) political memory coincides with official memory (or the memory from above), which would be the opposite of – though often commingling with – collective memory (or collective mentality, or vernacular memory), itself more implied and blurred than explicit, and with a transmission and reception that range from silence to only partial visibility. Yet another pitfall in some theorisations of collective memory is an ultra-abstract approach that ultimately overrides historicity, as Knapp’s (139–44) does.

Neo-Freudian perspective on collective memory, which emphasises the traumatic past as a resource for, indeed, an intrusion into the present, is better equipped than the neo-Durkheimian one, with its blithe consensual approach to the goal of effecting social cohesion and coherence (Prager 2222–6), to explicate the two divergent positions on the past-into-the-present of US racial tensions and trauma.

Indeed, in the light of Amin's persuasive analysis of the new racial biopolitics in the wake of 9/11, the two Atlantan inscriptions may not even be so much about the historical black and white racial divide as about *othering*¹² racial/ethnic/religious/cultural difference and reading it from and into the body – the *raced body* of “threatening strangers, the new black” (Amin 9, 10).¹³ Either way – viz. whether “Save the white race” cries out against the historical black or against the “new black” as the raced “errant body” – the historic(al) racist division is still maintained¹⁴ or, worse, bolstered in the claim of a threat to the hegemonic race. Under positive discrimination “duress,” the white race clamours its prerogatives, first and foremost its *speech* (and *thinking*) *entitlement*, with its *homogenising* force honed over the centuries.¹⁵ Furthermore, the ultimate indeterminacy of the enemy from whose clutch the white race must be saved (by whom?) renders indistinct, hence “colourless,” the implicit historical enemy of “White Power,” viz. “Black Power,” and with it the homogenised condition of blackness/colour – yet another face of displacement and dispossession. Ironically, all this was being played out on a building which has been deplored for a long while by residents and the local media as the downtown *eyesore ailing* Atlanta, and whose condition is no better than urban detritus.

(In-)Conclusive musings

In 2008, my steps traced invisible networks mostly in Atlanta's centre from south to north along Peachtree Street, with the Fox Theatre as the farthest point in the midtown, yet without the opportunity of witnessing the kinds of act(ivity)es most often scrutinised by psychogeography – apart from the usual, detached walking of business executives and employees alike down the street, into or out of cafeterias or business centres, as well as from the highly unusual (for me) whistling and greetings from black male strangers. I could not have guessed the relative proximity of the inner city west of the centre, neatly screened by architectural markers of affluence. Therefore, what I could trace tentatively is a network of *white* vestiges mostly as architectural landmarks, all turn-of-the-century (or millennium) buildings, and within it a deep black-and-white fracture: the north–south Janus-faced fracture between the Hotel District of modern (black glass) skyscrapers pointing to the cold technological future of urban living and the Historic District of (white stone or red brick) former high-risers bespeaking a WASP nostalgia for the Old World. Beneath (or beyond) it emerges the racial and class fracture of black-and-white social visibility and speech entitlement, with the “Save the White Race” graffiti scarring and defacing the coherent façade of the Medical Arts Building and its mainstream racial politics. If “control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power”

¹² Broadly, the term *othering* references a (hegemonic) group's social and discursive practices of construing difference – and identifying an out-group as profoundly alien – as entailing ethical, cultural, ideological and socio-economic inferiority often hinging on putative biological and intellectual inferiority. See Dominguez (1994) and comments thereon for a timely critique of the insidious (commodified) racialisation of otherness/difference that underpins a lot of “diversity” discursive practices (e.g. the “hyper-privileging” of “minority intellectuals” in the US academia in the early 1990s, or tokenism) which profess or genuinely intend to counter racism.

¹³ See also the 11 August 2012 online post “Alberta Town Plastered with Racist, Homophobic Graffiti” in *The Canadian Press* (<www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/story/2012/08/11/calgary-racist-graffiti-lethbridge.html>).

¹⁴ Amin demonstrates “the consistency of race as a mode of responding to difference and uncertainty” (13); nevertheless, within a constructionist frame which avers that identities are always constructed, “black” is necessarily “a shifting signifier,” as Kobena Mercer has observed (Laforest 118).

¹⁵ In eliding the threatening stranger with the historical other as “the new black” (in Amin's terms), the West performs again its “hom(m)o-sexual monopoly” (Irigaray 171); such phallogocratic logic of “sameness-unto-itself” offers the metaphysical grounding of identity (or the subject) and knowledge alike through “reduc[ing] all others to the economy of the Same” (74).

(Paul Connerton, qtd. in Hoelscher, Alderman 349), then the architecture of central Atlanta unfailingly points to *who* has had a stake in maintaining a streamlined modern cityscape of skyscrapers interspersed with a few nostalgic-looking, nationally registered buildings that in their heyday – coincidentally, before and during the Jim Crow laws’ enforcement – showcased white entrepreneurial prowess while obliterating its foundation in racism.

Yet what my own account here has unfortunately screened out is the even more invisible presence of other markers of fracture, from the gender divide to the white/non-white (yet other than black) divide,¹⁶ or from the (then unknown to me) former black female mayor of Atlanta, Shirley Franklin – perhaps a token African American (Stann 31) – to the group of unemployed black people at Five Points. The recurrent, in this account, Five Points: formerly the economic hub of Atlanta (yet still the hub of the MARTA rail system), now replaced by the Peachtree Center, Five Points had been, prior to the arrival of white settlers, the intersection of Creek Indian trails, the Peach/Pitch Tree, the Stone Mountain and the Sandtown Trails (Williford 1) – which MARTA commemorates in the name of its terminus station of the east–west Blue Line: Indian Creek. A modern terminus which eerily echoes the *white* beginnings of Atlanta in 1837 as the *terminus* (hence its early white name until 1843, when it became Marthasville) of the Western and *Atlantic* railway running southward from Chatanooga, Tennessee to Augusta, hence its present name, acquired in 1845 (Williford 2–4). And the history of the “original” white Terminus/Atlanta is virtually indistinguishable from Georgia’s stations along the “Trail of Tears” – of thousands of Cherokee and Creek Indian tears.

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¹⁶ Apart from being home to the US largest consortium of African American colleges, viz. Atlanta University Center in West End, which encompasses the historically black college campuses of Morehouse, Spelman, Morris Brown and Clark-Atlanta University, Atlanta has “sizeable Latino and Asian populations, centered on the city’s northeastern side” (Stann 29; 35).

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