15 Strange spaces of mediated memory

The complicating influence of *Roots* on heritage tourism in The Gambia, West Africa

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Introduction

Early in the spring of 1750, in the village of Juffure, four days up-river from the coast of The Gambia, West Africa, a man-child was born to Omoro and Binta Kinte.

– Alex Haley, *Roots* (1979)

So begins *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), one of the most culturally significant literary works of the 20th century. The product of 12 years of research on three continents, *Roots* was more than a novel. For author Alex Haley, the book was a work of “faction” (Delmont, 2016), a genealogical narrative that blended documented facts with fictional details to tell the compelling story of his maternal ancestors’ multigenerational struggles with slavery and its aftermath. Much of the narrative focuses on Kunta Kinte, whose birth is recorded in the first line of *Roots* and whom Haley would identify by book’s end as his own great, great, great, great grandfather. Haley’s opening line also irrevocably bound Africa’s smallest mainland nation to the *Roots* phenomenon. By devoting the book’s first 32 chapters to a detailed depiction of young Kunta Kinte’s life in Juffure, Haley ensured that *Roots* readers had an extended imaginative encounter with an actual village in an actual West African nation. As a result, visitors to The Gambia have long been encouraged to follow in Haley’s footsteps and visit the real Juffure in order to experience first-hand the fabled land of *Roots*.

Yet the *Roots* connection is not the region’s only draw. Situated in the middle of the River Gambia’s broad estuary, within sight of Juffure, James Island has long attracted heritage tourists to explore the ruined fort that served for several centuries as a vital defensive stronghold and active trans-shipment point for the British slave trade before becoming an early bulwark against that trade after the British outlawed the practice in 1807. This multifaceted historical significance was prominently acknowledged in 2003 when UNESCO collectively inscribed James Island and six other heritage structures in the region as The Gambia’s first World Heritage Site (UNESCO, n.d.-a). Not long after, however, James Island was targeted by the Gambian

government in a plan to further entrench the *Roots* legacy in this heritage district. During a high-profile ceremony at the site in 2011, Gambian Vice President Isatou Njie-Saidy explained that the time had come to give James Island a new name, honouring a more worthy figure: “the island . . . will henceforth be called Kunta Kinteh Island,¹ to keep alive of course the memory of this great symbol of resistance, bravery and the resilient spirit of the African person” (Mendy, 2015: 22–51). This act of renaming reflected Kunta Kinte’s stature as both a favoured native son and, thanks to *Roots*, the human face of slavery for millions, making his name doubly resonant in this prominent place of Gambian heritage. UNESCO soon endorsed the name change (UNESCO, n.d.-b), and two distinct worlds became officially intertwined at these Gambian heritage sites: a UNESCO-inscribed World Heritage-scape (Di Giovine, 2008) associated with the long and difficult history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the quasi-fictional land of *Roots* made famous by Alex Haley.

The fascinating relationship between these overlapping heritage/media landscapes had captured my imagination during previous visits to The Gambia and was on my mind once more in the autumn of 2015, as I prepared to lead a dozen undergraduate students on a geography field course to the country. After learning that none of my students were familiar with *Roots*, I designed a modest and rather experimental research project to investigate the relationship between heritage and media tourism at these sites. Recruiting my students as voluntary research participants, I divided them into two nearly equal groups: “Non-Readers” were asked to refrain from reading (or watching) *Roots* ahead of our trip; “Readers”, meanwhile, were asked to work through at least the opening 250 pages of the book, covering Kunta Kinte’s first 17 years in Juffure as well as his eventual capture and transport to America. Following Haley’s lead, I framed *Roots* as a work of creative non-fiction, purposefully avoiding any mention of the numerous questions that have emerged about the book’s veracity since its release (Delmont, 2016). With this groundwork established, our group visited Kunta Kinteh Island and several heritage sites in and around Juffure during a day-long excursion near the end of the field course. Upon our return to Canada, I conducted a series of interviews to learn whether my participants considered the *Roots* narrative a prominent feature of these heritage sites and whether knowing a key component of that narrative in advance made these sites more comprehensible and resonant for Readers in comparison to Non-Readers. Ultimately, my goal was to determine whether my participants felt that the *Roots* narrative complemented or complicated the UNESCO-endorsed heritage narratives at these sites.

Strange spaces of memory and imagination

As we shall see, many of my Readers, especially, were confused and frustrated by what they saw and heard that day, suggesting that they experienced

these Gambian heritage sites as “strange spaces”: highly mediated sites that leave visitors feeling bewildered and out of place because of the “interpretive conflict” they generate (Jansson & Lagerkvist, 2009: 2). As Jansson (2002) asserts, we are increasingly immersed in mediascapes, “the multitude of mediated texts surrounding people in their everyday lives – television programmes, magazines, advertisements, postcards and so on,” which provide us with “both realistic and phantasmagorical visions of the world” (ibid: 432). These representations shape our sense of place in especially potent ways when we travel, since we are apt to consume an abundance of media about our chosen destination prior to departure. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish representation from reality, and traditional notions of authenticity rooted in the lived history of a place give way to a more relativistic “symbolic authenticity” (Wang, 1999), defined by how well the destination conforms to the tourist’s preconceived and highly mediated expectations about what they will experience during their visit (Jansson, 2002: 439; see also Chapter 17 of this volume). This muddling of reality and representation can transform travel destinations into strange spaces: “the harbours of interlaced dreams and memories – heterotopian spaces of discontinuities, disproportions and dislocations,” marked by “the *co-existence* [emphasis added] of familiar and phantasmagorical elements” (Jansson & Lagerkvist, 2009: 10).

This ability of strange spaces to simultaneously evoke memories and dreams, the familiar and the phantasmagorical, resonates with Reijnders’ (2011) analyses of media tourism: the spectrum of travel targeting real-world sites associated with popular culture (ibid: 4–5). Reijnders adapts Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* – heritage sites designed to instil and perpetuate collective memory – to assess what he calls *lieux d’imagination*: “physical locations, which serve as a symbolic anchor for the collective imagination of society” (Reijnders, 2011: 8).² Nora (1996) suggests that our collective sense of historical continuity and equilibrium has been disrupted in the modern age, resulting in a mounting quest to create and venerate “places in which memory is crystallized”. Museums, archives, monuments, cemeteries, heritage properties – such sites of memory constitute complex combinations of the material, the symbolic, and the functional, “partly official and institutional, partly affective and sentimental,” which provide a “residual sense of continuity” with the past (ibid: 1, 7, 14). As Reijnders notes, such sites of memory reflect our inherently “topophilic” disposition (Tuan, 1974), which compels us to create “places which can function as symbolic moorings in a turbulent world” for intangible yet deeply felt phenomena (Reijnders, 2011: 13).

Of course, the fictional worlds we embrace through popular media can also be linked to real-world places of the imagination, “which for certain groups within society serve as material-symbolic references to a common imaginary world” (Reijnders, 2011: 14). This geographical linking of the familiar to the phantasmagorical is a logical outgrowth of the fact that many cultural producers make overt reference to actual places in order to lend

their fictional narratives greater verisimilitude. At the same time, numerous travel destinations have eagerly promoted themselves as celebrated places of the imagination to garner tourist dollars (Reijnders, 2011: 17–18). In both cases, the blending of the imagined and the real has considerable power to attract visitors. Such sites allow some media tourists to escape into their imagination – to take a holiday within a beloved story; for others, the point of the visit is to playfully (re)construct and negotiate the boundary between the real and the imagined (Reijnders, 2011: 51, 92).

Considering Reijnders' places of the imagination as a media-driven analogue to Nora's sites of memory raises an interesting question: what differentiates collective *memory* from collective *imagination*? Collective memories – especially those that operate beyond the local scale and the realm of lived experience – may simply be another form of imagination, albeit one primarily focused on the documented past. While the imagination that animates media tourism can also look to recorded history for inspiration, it additionally encompasses fantastical realms frequently set in some alternative past, parallel, diegetic worlds of today and fictional projections into near and distant futures (Reijnders, 2011: 14). In effect, we might consider Nora's sites of memory to be a particular kind of place of the imagination, albeit one that draws on different forms of authenticating source materials, evinces different narratives concerning the meaning and significance of the site, and perhaps attracts quite different types of visitors.

But what happens when the same destination serves as both a site of memory and a place of the imagination? There are numerous heritage sites that draw on the historical record to “crystallize memory” in ways envisioned by Nora but which also function as a “material-symbolic reference” to fictional worlds embedded in our collective imagination, as discussed by Reijnders. To take one example, two recent releases in the *Star Wars* film franchise included a number of scenes shot amidst the ruins of the 7th-century monastery on the Irish island of Skellig Michael. As a result, the island has received increasing attention from media tourists, raising important concerns about ecological sustainability and cultural authenticity at this UNESCO World Heritage Site (Allen & Lennon, 2018).

As this example suggests, it is important to consider how heritage dissonance is likely to manifest at such overlapping sites of memory and imagination. As Tunbridge and Ashworth assert, heritage dissonance can take many forms, including incongruent or contradictory transmissions generated at the same site or between related sites (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996: 28). Dissonance can also stem from the presentation of heritage narratives that some visitors may find distasteful, distressing, or inflammatory, particularly those emanating from destinations associated with past conflicts, tragedies, and atrocities (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996: 29). Visiting such destinations – including numerous sites connected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade – is increasingly framed as “dark tourism”, which focuses on “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre” (Stone, 2006: 146).

Crucially, as considerable dark tourism scholarship reveals, sites associated with tragedy and death are especially likely to function as both sites of memory and places of the imagination (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005; Dann, 2005; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Seaton, 1996; Stone, 2013; Walter, 2009; Wight, 2009). After all, major tragic events often receive widespread media coverage, in some cases followed by a series of (quasi-)fictional treatments of the tragic story across a number of media platforms, including fiction and non-fiction writing, television, documentaries, feature films, popular songs, and more. As a result, sites of memory that commemorate actual tragedies can also attract media tourists for whom the fictionalized accounts of these dark events provide the predominant impetus for visiting. As Strange and Kempa (2003) have suggested in their analysis of Alcatraz Island, widespread public fascination with highly mediated sites of trauma and tragedy can pose significant interpretive challenges for “memory managers,” who often “struggle to set the record straight” when confronted with tourist expectations shaped by myriad “cultural files of sound, images and stirring plots” (Strange & Kempa, 2003: 399).

Drawing on these insights, this study constitutes a preliminary attempt to trace the contours of a particular form of heritage dissonance, which I propose arises when “darker” sites of memory (in this case, Gambian heritage sites associated with the tragic history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade) intersect with places of the imagination (in this case, a literary landscape associated with *Roots*), producing strange spaces of mediated memory. Before turning to my case study, however, I need to expand on the impact of Haley’s celebrated magnum opus, in order to better contextualize the potential risks and rewards the *Roots* narrative offers to the “memory managers” at these Gambian heritage sites.

The *Roots* phenomenon

Upon its 1976 release, *Roots* became an instant sensation, spending 22 weeks atop the *New York Times* bestseller list and winning a special Pulitzer Prize. In addition, the eight-part television mini-series adaptation became a landmark in broadcasting history upon airing in January 1977, attracting record-breaking audiences and winning nine Emmy Awards. Additional television adaptations followed in 1979, 1988, and 2016, demonstrating the remarkable staying power of the *Roots* franchise.

The success of *Roots* can be attributed to several factors. First, it offered a widely accessible and compelling narrative of perseverance and eventual triumph in the face of substantial adversity. Crucially, *Roots* also put a human face on the pernicious institution of slavery, providing enough specific details to give the story purchase while speaking to the universal traumas endured by the ancestors of millions of African Americans. The timing of *Roots* was also fortuitous: in 1976, the enduring legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of Black History programs at a number of universities, and the

national mood of commemoration surrounding the American Bicentennial all provided the fertile cultural soil in which *Roots* took root. The final, vital ingredient was that Haley had seemingly achieved the impossible: he had undone the erasures of slavery and traced his own family lineage two centuries into the past, back to a specific ancestor living in a specific village in West Africa (Athey, 1999; Delmont, 2016). At the same time, Haley's rich and detailed descriptions of Juffure provided American popular culture with some of its first positive depictions of traditional African life, fuelling the place-based imaginations of millions of readers and viewers (see Chapter 5 of this volume).

Yet a number of controversies soon began to swirl around *Roots*. Two plagiarism suits were filed soon after publication and, while one was dismissed, Haley was forced to settle the other out of court (Delmont, 2016). Soon thereafter, a pair of American genealogists cast doubt on several key details pertaining to Haley's account of his pre-Civil War family history (Mills & Mills, 1984). Meanwhile, a British journalist returned from The Gambia with serious questions concerning the credibility of the "griot" who had supplied Haley with much of his information during a 1967 research trip to Juffure. This reporting challenged the pivotal ancestral link between Haley and Kunta Kinte, even casting doubt on whether an individual by that name had actually existed in Juffure during the period in question (Ottaway, 1977). Finally, a number of scholars took issue with Haley's idyllic depiction of Juffure and his simplistic characterization of the slave trade in this region at the time of Kinte's capture, further casting doubt on the story's veracity (Blayney, 1986; Courlander, 1986; Delmont, 2016; Gamble, 2000; Wright, 2011).

These controversies undoubtedly tarnished the work's standing among historians, literary critics, and certain segments of the public. Still, for many, while Haley's facts could be questioned, the overarching truth of his story remained intact. As one commentator argued, "although poor in historical accuracy, *Roots* is indeed so rich in rhetorical and symbolical power that in the 1970s it started a new dialogue about black families in the United States and created a greater and expanding curiosity about one's ancestry" (Bordin, 2014: 7–8). *Roots* indeed sparked a notable surge in genealogy (Athey, 1999; Delmont, 2016) while also prompting numerous African Americans to travel in search of their heritage, initiating a pronounced wave of "roots tourism" to sites connected to the trans-Atlantic slave trade (de Santana Pinho, 2008; Mensah, 2015; Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011).

Surprisingly, despite the story's overt connection to Juffure, The Gambia had only limited success in its early attempts to capitalize on the *Roots* phenomenon (Gijanto, 2011; Bellagamba, 2009). In 1996, the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) specifically targeted African American diaspora tourists by launching the inaugural *Roots Homecoming Festival*, which culminated in an emotional pilgrimage to Juffure and James Island (Gijanto, 2011; Bellagamba, 2009). Now known as the *International Roots Festival*, this biennial celebration has had some success in attracting roots tourists

over the last two decades. Yet, beyond these occasional festivals, the promise of a *Roots*-centred diasporic tourism industry has never fully materialized. As a result, these sites are now predominantly marketed to northern European beach holiday-goers as an enriching day trip providing escape from the familiar tourist bubble enveloping the coastal resorts.

Visiting the land of *Roots*

Our own heritage excursion came at the end of the 2015 field course, following more than a week of intensive, environmentally focused programming throughout The Gambia. To reach these sites, we travelled by boat from the south bank village of Brefet, stopping first at Kunta Kinteh Island (see Figure 15.1). After an hour-long tour of the island, we crossed to the river's north bank to explore the adjacent villages of Albreda and Juffere, home to several UNESCO-inscribed heritage sites built by the Portuguese, French, and British over a period of 300 years. Only a few of these structures remain intact, most notably the Maurel Frères Building in Juffere – a former British warehouse that the NCAC transformed into the modest but compelling Museum of the Slave Trade in 1996 (Bellagamba, 2009). We spent nearly two hours

Figure 15.1 Kunta Kinteh Island and vicinity.

Source: Map created by Jennifer Grek-Martin for author.

exploring the museum and its surroundings before re-boarding our pirogue and returning to Brefet.

After the field course was completed, I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews with each of my 12 undergraduate student participants, followed by a group interview with 8 of my participants. My participants were mostly female (10 of 12) and predominantly Canadians of European ancestry, although I did have two international students with African ancestry: one from the Caribbean and one from West Africa. None of my students had visited The Gambia previously. Most were enrolled in geography or environmental studies/science programs, while some also had a background in international development studies. They ranged in age from 19 to 32 years old, and they varied considerably in terms of travel experience – some had never left Canada prior to the field course, while others had spent extensive periods of time travelling abroad, including considerable time in developing countries. In the context of my study, five of my participants had volunteered to be Readers (assigned the first 250 pages of *Roots*, to be read prior to departure), all of whom were Canadian females between the ages of 19 and 32 years old. Six of my participants were Non-Readers, and this group consisted of two males and four females between 20 and 27 years of age, five of whom were Canadian. In addition, I interviewed one student who had elected not to take part in this excursion because, as someone with African ancestry, they had been understandably reluctant to visit a site that had a direct and tangible connection to the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade – an important reminder that not all members of the African diaspora are keen to incur the emotional toll associated with roots tourism.

To avoid influencing my students' expectations, I was careful not to discuss *Roots* or provide any details about these heritage sites prior to our visit. As a result of these precautions, and in light of the natural rapport I was able to establish with these students over the course of an eventful and intensive trip, I feel confident that my participants' responses were candid and genuinely reflected their experiences that day. However, the narrow scope and experimental nature of my project mean that caution needs to be exercised when drawing conclusions from these interviews. Indeed, it is important to note that our group did not follow the standard tourist itinerary when visiting these heritage sites, which likely affected how they were experienced. In addition, my students came from diverse backgrounds, meaning that the expectations and perceptions that each participant brought to their experiences that day were undoubtedly shaped by many factors beyond their reading (or not) of *Roots*. Moreover, my Readers were assigned *Roots* rather than selecting the book out of interest, which may have influenced how they approached both the narrative itself and its connections to these heritage sites. Ultimately, given these factors, the findings that follow are intended to be suggestive rather than conclusive.

To begin, I asked my participants whether they felt that the *Roots* narrative had featured prominently at these Gambian heritage sites. The prevailing

response was “no”, which runs counter to recent scholarship asserting that the *Roots* narrative dominates these sites, often at the expense of official heritage narratives. For example, Gijanto (2011: 228) argues that while “multiple competing narratives are visible in the modern-day heritage landscape” centred on Juffure, “the *Roots* landscape . . . is recreated on a daily basis by local guides who are able to subvert the larger created *heritage-scapes* . . . of UNESCO and the NCAC” (ibid: 234). Bellagamba (2009) paints a similar picture when she argues that the heavily promoted *Roots* narrative fills up the “historical imaginary” of tourists “without leaving room for alternative readings” of this region’s complicated historical relationship with the trans-Atlantic slave trade (ibid: 465).

Yet, in contrast, my participants felt that our Gambian guides were actually quite reticent to directly engage with Haley’s famous narrative. On Kunta Kinteh Island, our guide did not address the recent name change or make any reference to *Roots* beyond an obligatory name-check at the outset of the tour. Likewise, while the interpretive signs had been updated to reflect the new name, the rationale behind the renaming was not provided, and there was nothing that explicitly linked this place to Kinte himself. This clearly puzzled my students, with one noting:

I thought they’d actually mention Kunta Kinte a bit more than they did. I was kind of wondering, since I only read portions of the book, . . . what made this guy so special that he had an island named after him?

Nor did our guides make overt reference to *Roots* during our time in Albreda and Juffure. Notably, we were not directed to the Kinte family compound to pay our respects – a pilgrimage that both Bellagamba (2009) and Gijanto (2011) describe as a standard obligation for tourists visiting Juffure. Meanwhile, the name Kunta Kinte is nowhere mentioned in the Museum of the Slave Trade, which focuses instead on the documented history of slavery in the region. Indeed, the museum contained only a single, small display devoted to Alex Haley, which was rather inconspicuously integrated into a room full of photo-collages featuring prominent African Americans. Overall, then, the *Roots* narrative was strangely downplayed at each of the heritage sites we visited that day, despite the recent renaming of Kunta Kinteh Island and the ongoing cultural relevance of *Roots* in popular culture. Nonetheless, my Readers still found that their perceptions of these heritage sites were strongly imbued with the lingering traces of *Roots*, colouring their experiences on the island, in the villages, and at the museum that day.

The Island

Turning first to the island (Figure 15.2), I was curious how my participants experienced this place as a site of memory highlighting its role in the

Figure 15.2 Ruined fortifications on Kunta Kinteh Island.

Source: Photo by author.

trans-Atlantic slave trade. Based on the responses I received, it was clear that many Non-Readers struggled to make sense of this narrative:

I was kind of feeling confused for most of it and I didn't really understand a lot of it. So, I was getting disappointed and I was getting frustrated because I was like, "oh, I should have known, I should have read, I should have, you know, had this previous knowledge so that it would be more meaningful".

This remark, echoed by other Non-Readers, indicates that the primary source of confusion was a general lack of background knowledge on the history of the slave trade rather than a specific lack of familiarity with *Roots*. Indeed, as one Reader noted, even fellow Readers were confused by their tour of this site:

[E]ven the people who had read *Roots* didn't really seem to have a solid appreciation of what the purpose of the fort was.

This observation was confirmed by several Readers during our group interview and proved reassuring to Non-Readers, who had presumed that the

historical details they had struggled to grasp during the tour had been covered in the book. As a site of memory, then, all of my participants found the island to be strangely disappointing.

But what of its role as a place of the imagination? Did Kunta Kinteh Island resonate more strongly with Readers thanks to the *Roots* connection? Not really. The main point of contention was the fact that this island – recently renamed after the central character in *Roots* – was barely mentioned in the book. The only reference appears early on, as Kunta listens to his father tell the story of the journey he and his brothers had taken years before to spy on the great “toubab” (European) ships at anchor in the River Gambia. “Nearby was an island,” the elder Kinte recalled, “and on the island was a fortress” (Haley, 2014: 75). Curiously, Haley does not mention the island at all during the brief but gripping account of Kunta Kinte’s capture near Juffure and his short journey to the hold of the waiting slave ship, the *Lord Ligonier*. This omission generated considerable confusion for my Readers, who struggled to comprehend why the island had been renamed after a character who had never set foot upon it:

I was trying to find that [Roots] connection constantly . . . trying to draw these specific connections to the places and then was confused why they weren’t talking about Kunta Kinte and . . . why the island was named that.

Another Reader was more cynical, wondering whether the name change was merely a re-branding exercise designed to attract more tourists:

On the one hand, you could consider it the reclaiming of a name that was colonial and, you know, getting rid of James Island, which is obviously an English name, and then taking this [name] Kunta Kinte, which is representative of Gambian people. I understand it from that perspective but I’m inclined to think that it was more of a tourism marketing tool in that they were trying to encourage people to come to the island because of *Roots* rather than to appreciate the history that took place there and to have kind of a solemn experience there.

Given the amount of confusion and mistrust the *Roots* connection generated for my Readers, it is clear that Haley’s account fundamentally complicated what for them was an already problematic heritage narrative on Kunta Kinteh Island.

The villages

Further confusion arose when we crossed to the river’s north bank to tour the adjacent villages of Albreda and Juffure. Despite the presence of several UNESCO heritage sites scattered around these villages, our tour guide offered only a perfunctory overview of the region’s rich heritage from the central vantage point of the Albreda town square. This

underwhelming interpretation was consistent with Gijanto's (2011) recent field observations, suggesting that the full commemorative significance of these sites of memory is no longer being effectively conveyed to visitors. Gijanto feels that such omissions are the result of Gambian tour guides privileging the *Roots* narrative instead but, again, this was not our experience.

We next left Albreda and entered Juffure proper – a place name that meant relatively little to Non-Readers but was full of significance for Readers, given that Haley had devoted 200 pages to Kunta Kinte's childhood home. In the book, Haley characterizes Juffure as a “small dusty village of round mud huts,” situated some distance “inland” and at least three days' journey upriver “from the nearest place on the Kamby Bolongo [the River Gambia] where slaves were sold” (Haley, 2014: 1, 5, 72). Haley's Juffure was thus an isolated village, set back in the bush and well removed from the main slave-trading hub of James Island – an island, recall, that is fully visible from present-day Juffure. One of my Readers picked up on this locational discrepancy right away:

I was curious about whether Juffure, the town that we visited, was indeed the same Juffure that existed in the book? Because, in the book, it was described as being . . . a little bit of a journey away from the river.

Another perplexed Reader wondered whether this Juffure was once known by another name or was simply the continuation of the neighbouring village of Albreda:

I question whether or not it even is the same Juffure or [whether] they just renamed some village Juffure so that people could go to Juffure because they were there for *Roots* tourism.

Thus, the locational discrepancy between Haley's village and the current village, coupled with the latter's all-too-convenient proximity to Kunta Kinteh Island and its undifferentiated continuity with Albreda, led some Readers to question the authenticity of the Juffure we visited that day.

In fact, Juffure had been moved to its current location long ago, well before Haley made his breakthrough research trip in 1967. Our group thus visited the same Juffure where Haley had met several living members of the Kinte clan and first heard the story of Kunta Kinte. It remains unclear precisely when this relocation occurred but, in truth, it matters little, since the original Juffure existed only a kilometre east, and slightly inland, of the village's current location. Moreover, records show that the British had established a trading house at Juffure by 1727 (Gijanto, 2011). Thus, by the time of Kunta Kinte's putative birth in 1750, the real Juffure was a sizeable settlement and pivotal trading centre, well integrated into Britain's triangular trade network, rather than the remote and idyllic village depicted in *Roots* – a misrepresentation noted by a number of critics (Delmont,

2016; Gamble, 2000; Wright, 2011). Haley acknowledged the discrepancy but rationalized his decision as necessary myth-building: “I know Juffure was a British trading post and my portrait of the village bears no resemblance to the way it was. But . . . I, we, need a place called Eden. My people need a Plymouth Rock” (Young, 1977, cited in Delmont, 2016: 189).

Unaware of Haley’s mythopoetic aspirations, my Readers had considerable difficulty reconciling the real Juffure with the bucolic village that had been embroidered across those early chapters of *Roots*:

[The] Juffure in my mind is still the Juffure from the book and the Juffure in The Gambia . . . they’re different things.

In contrast, several of them indicated that our earlier visit to an ethnographic museum outside the coastal village of Tanji had spontaneously stimulated a number of *Roots*-related imaginings, thanks to its collection of hand-crafted cultural artefacts and its life-sized facsimile of a traditional Gambian compound. As one remarked:

I didn’t feel immersed in the book when I was there in Juffure. I didn’t feel like I was immersed in “*Roots*-land” when I was on James Island because . . . *Roots* didn’t take place on James Island, you know what I mean? And I didn’t feel like I was in Kunta Kinte – . . . like I was looking at his hut or anything like that. Maybe, if anything, it was in the Tanji Museum, where it was this historical representation of what the huts would have looked like back then. . . . I felt, again, a little bit more of a connection to the book when I was there than I actually did when I was in Juffure or James Island.

The Tanji Village Museum thus proved to be a powerful place of the imagination for several Readers, whereas the actual village of Juffure left them bewildered and suspicious; another indication that the *Roots* narrative seems to complicate the heritage narratives associated with this place.

The museum

Our final stop was the Museum of the Slave Trade in Juffure (Figure 15.3), a site which seemed to resonate with all of my participants in meaningful ways. For Non-Readers, the museum provided the all-important context that they found lacking at other sites:

When we went to the museum itself, that’s when I got hit with it most. . . . Like, “oh yeah, this, this really happened. This is real”.

Another Non-Reader found the museum powerful because it provided a local frame of reference for understanding the slave trade:

Figure 15.3 The Museum of the Slave Trade, Juffure.

Source: Photo by author.

I really enjoy learning from the Gambian perspective. . . . So, seeing it from this side definitely gave me a whole new perspective. . . . So, I definitely benefitted from going to the museum.

Thus, while several students found the museum's evident state of disrepair troubling, many considered our visit to this site of memory to be their most meaningful experience that day.

The museum proved to be even more evocative for Readers, with several noting that the challenging history interpreted there felt much more poignant thanks to the emotional potency of the *Roots* story:

At least for me, the whole journey he [Kunta Kinte] went through really took the museum to, like, an awful but really important place. Because the museum gave me the facts about what happened and the book gave me the feelings.

This was especially true for the exhibit addressing the horrors of the Middle Passage. Haley's visceral account of Kunta Kinte's time aboard the *Lord Ligonier* provides some of the book's most challenging material, making

these particular displays much more emotionally charged for Readers. Thus, while a strong familiarity with *Roots* had complicated their impressions of Kunta Kinteh Island and the village-scape of Juffure, my Readers found that knowing the story effectively complemented the narratives presented at the Museum of the Slave Trade.

Conclusion

While the *Roots* narrative featured less prominently than expected at these Gambian heritage sites, its pervasive influence nonetheless marked these destinations as both sites of memory and places of the imagination. As places of the imagination, however, these sites offered a rather superficial and geographically distorted set of linkages to *Roots*, which failed to transport my Readers to the Edenic African landscapes so richly depicted by Alex Haley. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that my participants found that the *Roots* story frequently complicated rather than complemented the UNESCO-endorsed heritage narratives at these sites, heightening their sense of dissonance and transforming these sites into strange spaces of mediated memory.

Yet, as Reijnders (2011: 19) asserts, places of the imagination “offer the opportunity . . . to construct a symbolic distinction between ‘imagination’ and ‘reality’” in ways that allow visitors to downplay and even delight in any dissonance that may arise. For some visitors, then, it is precisely the challenge of unravelling the intertwined threads binding “the realistic and the phantasmagorical” (Jansson, 2002) that makes these strange spaces appealing. However, while this playful engagement with dissonance may be common at many places of the imagination, it is perhaps less likely to arise at those combined sites of memory/places of the imagination that – like these Gambian heritage sites – are directly associated with past suffering, tragedy, and death. At many such “darker tourism” destinations (Miles, 2002), the grim realities of the historical record almost require an attitude of solemn contemplation from visitors, which may limit the more playful engagements that Reijnders has documented in other media tourism contexts. Indeed, if my Readers are any indication, media tourists who visit sites associated with a dark past may very well expect that the popularized accounts of this past hew closely to the documented historical narrative in both detail and tone. Under these circumstances, any perceived gap that opens between the documented and the imagined past at these heritage sites can render such spaces of mediated memory uncomfortably or even unacceptably strange.

In the case of these Gambian sites, this troubling sense of dissonance is heightened by the fact that Haley marketed *Roots* as a work of “faction” rather than fiction, leading Readers to expect considerably more congruency between the heritage-scape and their imagined land of *Roots*. Ironically, then, the less familiar a visitor is with the details of *Roots*, the more complementary its associations with these sites may seem. Yet, if Gambian officials were prepared to honestly and overtly reframe *Roots* as evocative fiction rather than erroneous faction, taking care to differentiate fact from

myth when engaging Haley's narrative, the historical resonance of these sites could be enriched while still acknowledging the ongoing cultural significance of *Roots* in shaping our perceptions of this region and its history. Such an approach would seem more capable of harnessing the emotional power of the Kunta Kinte story to make the vast and multifaceted enterprise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade even more relatable and poignant to visitors.

Notes

- 1 Gambians habitually include or remove the letter "h" at the end of names and places otherwise ending in the letter "e". For the sake of consistency, I have adopted Haley's spelling of "Kunta Kinte" and "Juffure," while also employing UNESCO's designation "Kunta Kinteh Island" when discussing this specific heritage site. Note also that The Gambia is one of only two countries (along with The Bahamas) that officially uses a definite article in its name (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019).
- 2 For convenience, I will refer to *lieux de mémoire* as "sites of memory" and *lieux d'imagination* as "places of the imagination" for the remainder of the chapter.

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