ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographies

Meaning Falls Apart: Anagrammatical Blackness and Memorialization at the Museum

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Abstract

This paper uses Christina Sharpe's concept of "anagramatical blackness" to explore the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center as an example of what I will term the anagramatical landscape. Sharpe writes that Blackness anagramatically shifts the meaning of people, places, and things. The Freedom Center is a museum located in Cincinnati, Ohio dedicated to telling the story of American slavery as well as other stories of civil and human rights. I examine the Freedom Center as more than a museum, but also as a memorial because of its geographic location along the boundary between the American North and South as well as its situation within the wider American geographic imagination as a site of "National" history telling. Content analysis of TripAdvisor reviews by visitors shows that these people struggle with their preconceived notions about what stories are being told as well as for who they are being told. Using Sharpe's idea that when words come up against Blackness, their meanings shift, I look at the Freedom Center as an anagramatical space that white reviewers fear they may not have access to because of its focus on the story of Black people resisting against white supremacy. It is only when they reposition whiteness within the narrative or, as Sharpe writes, "redact" blackness, and decode the memorial landscape through epistemological whiteness, that this space becomes comprehensible. Through the use of this framework, I take the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center as an example of how geographers might expand upon the idea of the anagramatical landscape to understand opposition to memorial work that centers Black lives.

Keywords

Memorialization, racism, whiteness, Cincinnati, museum

Introduction

> … there is really almost nothing in this museum about the Underground Railroad... There is a great deal about slavery in the United States, but no indication that those who put together this museum are aware that Africans were not the only persons who were brought to this country to labor in terrible, slave-like conditions. Even the limited commentary devoted to the Underground Railroad devalues the contribution of anyone who was not a "Negro." But the most disconcerting characteristic of this museum is its own, apparently unrecognized racism: the focus here is entirely on blacks… None of this can be a pure accident. Substituting one form of discrimination for another is still discrimination. I wish I could recommend this museum, but it really doesn't merit a visit.

The above quote is a visitor's review of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio – a museum that tells the story of chattel slavery in the United States and modern forms around the globe. As we can see from the quote above, it appears that the messages presented at the Freedom Center that explain the long and complex legacies of the enslavement of Africans and the aftermath do not necessarily translate as meaningfully as perhaps intended. White supremacy requires specific contextualizations of memory in order to maintain its spatialized logics of domination (Modlin, Alderman, and Gentry 2011; Bohland 2013; Bruyneel 2014). These presentations of the past and their relationships to the present and future necessarily demand a systematic rationalization of racialized hierarchies that exclude the possibility of alternative racial realities through appeals to a comfortable white status quo. Visitors to the Freedom Center are able to absolve white people of any role in anti-Black racism through a complex form of memorial contortion grounded not only textually but also through a mediation of racialized meanings in and through the Freedom Center's memorial landscape.

In this paper, I will explore how visitors to the Freedom Center make sense of the museum both as a museum that tells a very specific history curated through text, object, and affect and also as a memorial that imparts meaning before visitors ever even set foot inside. I contend that many visitors struggle with their preconceived notions not only about *what* stories are being told but also *for who* they are being told as a result of the particular space these stories are presented in, both physical and representational. As the Freedom Center's website explains, "Our physical location in downtown Cincinnati is just a few steps from the banks of the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated the slave states of the South from the free states of the North" (The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center n.d.). Emboldened by a memorial landscape built with an express vision of hope and progress, visitors find justifications for overlooking present day racism. Unable to grapple with the pasts that implicate them and their ancestors in unspeakable violence, they rewrite the story of white people as benevolent and on the side of justice. This rewriting ends up displacing and decentering the lives of Black people who are principal to the story, undermining Blackness and perpetuating white supremacy through a particular kind of historicization.

Theoretically, I draw from literary scholar Christina Sharpe's (2016) ideas about the anagram in order to provide a novel way of understanding the processes that are occurring at the Freedom Center. Sharpe writes that when words or objects become or reveal themselves as related to Black life, their meaning shifts through the machinations of anti-Blackness. Though the visible structure of the object may remain the same, like the letters of the anagram, its character is fundamentally altered. I argue that a shift takes place at the museum. The Freedom Center tells a story of Black geographic knowledges, history, and resistance. However, these geographies are unintelligible to many visitors. The museum is a space in which Blackness is presented in its complexities, portraying both the devastation of slavery and the resilience of Black life in a particular moment of American history. Yet, as visitors interpret the meaning of the memorial landscape, Blackness is taken out of space in order to recover the integrity of white people in the present day. Sharpe herself asks, "how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its

afterlives, which are unfolding still?... how does one memorialize the everyday? How does one…'come to terms with' (which usually means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity?" (Sharpe 2016, 20). I argue that visitors to the Freedom Center are able to "move past" the legacies of slavery by unseeing Black spatialities and space making practices, replacing a memorial narrative of potentiality with a retrenchment of anti-Black spatial logics in order to recover the supposed benevolence of white people.

This paper will be organized in the following manner: first, I give a brief overview of the museum and its contents. The Freedom Center attempts to cover a large history of slavery, not only the enslavement of Black people in the United States, but also present-day slavery around the world. The museum's attempt to bring the legacies of American slavery into the present allows some visitors to de-racialize slavery and de-spatialize Blackness, negating the effects that this past-present connection may allow. Second, I analyze the Freedom Center as a memorial to certain racial narratives of progress and justice that frame the experiences of certain visitors. While there has been a sizeable amount of work on how Southern memorial spaces have allowed for the proliferation of white supremacy through accounts of Southern heritage (Leib and Webster 2015; Cook 2016; Brasher, Alderman, and Inwood 2017), this paper focuses on the Northern memorial landscape. I show that white supremacy takes on a different, though no less dangerous, form in this context. Considering the Freedom Center as more than a museum allows for a greater understanding of how what is presented inside can be so quickly reconfigured and distorted as it is. Third, using reviews available online through the travel website TripAdvisor, I show the ways visitors are interpreting the experiences they have with the museum and the narratives that they take away when they leave. There are a multitude of ways visitors come to understand the Freedom Center, expressing feelings ranging widely from sadness to happiness, concern to relief. It is in these reviews that we can see how visitors are navigating a form of memorialization that complicates a typical historical narrative that all too often centers white people. Finally, I show how the idea of anagrammatical Blackness is helpful for deciphering the reviewers' slanted readings of what is told. While it is undeniable that the political nature of the memorial landscape helps to promote particular narratives and obscure others, I want to suggest that the contestation occurring at the Freedom Center is unique. Instead of Black history merely being replaced by white history, the character of what is being told is transformed in order to do the work of shoring up white supremacy. This transformation is the result of white supremacist logics that preconfigure Blackness as absent; the anagram, as a modality of anti-Blackness, does the work of unseeing and re-writing Black people from the memorial landscape.

This paper is not about the successes or failures of the Freedom Center. The museum has a clear mission, "to reveal stories of freedom's heroes, from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times," (The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center n.d.) and while its message is at the same time effectively and ineffectively interpreted by visitors, I argue, like many before me (Mitchell 2003; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Dwyer and Alderman 2008), the memorial landscape is fraught and continuously contested. The distorted understandings that some visitors come away with are not necessarily a consequence of *how* the Freedom Center presents its narratives but instead a consequence *what* is being presented and how fits into broader systems of anti-Blackness. There is a broad array of reviews on the museum that both seem to grasp the magnitude and current racial repercussions of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and those, like the review above, that do not. It is exactly the conflicting views that make this a motivating case study. I choose to focus on a certain subgroup of reviews (the methods for selection to be explained below) that display themes that I believe provide an interesting opportunity to build a upon the existing theoretical framework of anagrammatical Blackness in a way that is translatable to other examples.

The National Underground Freedom Center

Opened on August 3, 2004 to much fanfare, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center has become a staple in the Cincinnati, Ohio skyline. Construction was made possible through the raising

of over $100 million in private donations and was begun on June 17, 2002 at an extravagant affair that counted Muhammed Ali, Laura Bush, Angela Basset, and Oprah Winfrey (who has an ongoing presence in the museum, lending narration to exhibit videos) among its attendees (McCauley and Curnutte 2019). Though the Freedom Center's operating history is not as unblemished as its seemingly constant media presence may imply, having almost closed due to multiple budget shortfalls (most recently in 2011), over 124,000 people visited the Freedom Center in 2017 (McCauley and Curnutte 2019).

Inside the stone and copper Freedom Center, constructed in three undulating wave-like "pavilions", there are three permanent exhibits. The first, "From Slavery to Freedom" (Fig. 1), examines slavery from kidnap in Africa to abolition. It does this through multiple rooms constructed to resemble various spaces that slaves may have encountered: from a cool, dark, damp stone cavern meant to represent the cells of West African slave castles, to the sounds of crashing waves and seagulls calling in a coastal exhibit with a sea scene painted on the walls above stacked crates and burlap sacks (Fig. 2), to faux tree canopied cabin scenes with cast metal slaves stirring cauldrons of laundry and carrying sacks of cotton (Fig. 3). Though the visitors are responsible for interpreting through their senses, the curation of the exhibit's atmosphere tells a story itself. At the end of the exhibit, the lighting brightens and hidden speakers in the ceiling play jubilant spirituals as if they are songs from above while the placards on the walls describe the history of emancipation. A mannequin dressed in a Ku Klux Klan robe stands sentry next to the exit as an almost specter of racism that will come to haunt the post-Civil War era.

Figure 1. Entrance to the "From Slavery to Freedom" exhibit

A second exhibit, "ESCAPE! Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom," again recounts the history of chattel slavery in the United States, this time focusing on abolitionists and the flight from slavery in a more interactive setting (Fig. 4). The exhibit begins with a short video showing a fictional account of enslaved people escaping from a Southern plantation. Later, guests are invited to push buttons and pull placards to discover information about those who fought for the freedom of enslaved people throughout the United Sates.

Figure 2. Visitors are asked to picture themselves in the story of enslavement in a coastal scene

Figure 3. Fake trees dapple the light from above to give visitors a feeling of being on a plantation

This takes the form of lighted maps showing routes north to freedom and signs explaining the various methods escapees used to avoid re-capture. Again, visitors are encouraged to empathize with enslaved Africans through a small mockup of a house in which they are invited to imagine hiding (Fig. 5).

Figure 4. Main room of the "ESCAPE! Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom" exhibit

The final exhibit explores different forms of slavery in the 21st Century (Fig. 6). It looks at sex trafficking, child labor, among other manifestations of slavery across the globe with a strong focus on the global south. "Invisible: Slavery Today" pulls visitors through a warehouse or cargo yard setting leading them to question how many of the same institutions, in disturbingly "invisible" new expressions, could exist in the present. Though the other parts of the museum are generally focused on the enslavement of Black Africans by white Europeans and Americans, this exhibit takes a much more multi-racial approach, diversifying the narrative of what slavery and the enslaved look like. As I will explain below, this diversification may end up being detrimental to explaining the long-range trajectories of anti-Black racism as they become lost in "color-blind" narratives of universal humanness in visitors' reviews.

Each of these exhibits plays a part in mediating visitors' interpretations of the information presented in the museum. However, there is something more complex happening at the Freedom Center that complicates the text, images, and objects. I want to expand this examination of the museum beyond its walls and towards its position in the United States landscape. At work here is an important interplay between the narratives within the Freedom Center and the narratives about the broader acts of memory occurring there through which the museum becomes a memorial to white, (inter)national racial justice.

Figure 5. In one exhibit, guests are asked to imagine being an enslaved person escaping and hiding

Figure 6. "Invisible: Slavery Today" Exhibit

The complicated nature of this interplay allows for visitors to not see racism in the present and reaffirm white supremacist logics that de-spatialize Blackness as an integral component of the modern United States. It is this de-spatialization that I will take up below.

Methods

I draw on TripAdvisor reviews of the Freedom Center to understand how the discourses presented are read by visitors. TripAdvisor is among the most popular travel websites available with 463 million unique monthly visitors to the site (Tripadvisor n.d.). Travelers use this website in two ways. One is as a means to aggregate travel prices from across the internet. The second is to post reviews about various travel related experiences from museums to hotels to restaurants. I use these reviews as a kind of abbreviated travel blog (Nelson 2015), whereby guests to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center are able to publicly process what they have seen and what they take away (Carter 2015a). While some have chosen to code individual reviews, searching for key words (Carter 2015b), the nature of the project that I am undertaking here requires a contextualization of the messages that reviewers are attempting to get across.

As of mid-April 2021, there were over 1,000 total reviews for the Freedom Center on TripAdvisor with a composite rating of 4.5 out of 5, suggesting that a wide majority of visitors had a positive experience at the museum. Of these reviews, many are concerned with aspects of physical accessibility, legibility of the text in the exhibits, parking around the museum, and discussions of the Freedom Center's gift shop (or lack thereof). Another selection of reviews was either vaguely praising or unfavorable with unelaborated responses. These portions of reviews were discarded either on the grounds of being inessential (the former) or incomplete (the latter) for the project at hand. From the remaining reviews, I employed a form of discourse analysis, reading, selecting, and presenting a collection of reviews that implicitly or explicitly express racialized understandings of space, history, and memorialization.

From these methods, three questions may arise. The first may be, does this selection of a limited number of reviews bias the examination below? I respond to this by acknowledging that the reviews and opinions collected may or may not be representative of the majority of visitors to the Freedom Center. I am using these reviews to understand how processes of racialized memorialization are occurring at the museum and these reviews give insights into the thoughts of people who are experiencing it. I am not interested in suggesting that the built structure or exhibits at the museum necessarily create anti-Black geographies (a further analysis that would undoubtedly uncover interesting results.) Instead, my argument is that by looking at how some visitors interpret the museum we can see the anti-Blackness, characteristic of standard United States regional and national narratives, at work. While there are a number of visitors that are able to draw connections between current anti-racist struggles and the legacies of slavery (self-identified Black reviewers in particular,) the case that I present here is meant to show how broader anti-Blackness is crystalized in the memorial landscape. A second question may be, who are these reviewers, and can we be sure that their race plays into the views they chose to write? In this paper, I am interested in understanding the ways that anti-Blackness functions through the memorial landscape. While some reviewers make their racial position clear in their review by self-identifying, others do the work of anti-Blackness discursively by explaining their experiences and opinions through a distinct set of narrative turns that re-inscribe anti-Black logics. Finally, there is a question of online research ethics, in particular the questions anonymity and informed consent. Where some argue that because these posts and content are accessible to the public users have implicitly agreed to public use, others argue for a more nuanced approach that takes into consideration the intent of content creators and the transferability of this content from online platform to research uses. (see Markham 2012; Williams et al. 2018). In this study, responses have been pulled from a public travel website that has the unique feature of allowing user created content. There are multiple modes for TripAdvisor users to engage with other users, some more private than others (travel forums for example). Reviews of destinations and travel tips are posted under TripAdvisor created destination descriptions and used to generate aggregate ratings. Williams et al. (2018) find that social media users are agreeable to their content being used for research if they intended for it to be public. Other factors that increased users' agreeability to use their

content for research were anonymization and research conducted with university affiliations. Given that the intent of the reviews is to inform the public about travel destinations through personal narratives, I use anonymized reviews as a means to understand how visitors to the Freedom Center frame their interpretations of the museum for a general audience.

Museum as Memorial

Much has been written on the role of museums in the creation of national and racial narratives (Hanna 2008; Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Lynch and Alberti 2010; Tolia-Kelly 2016), and this is insightful for understanding the Freedom Center as it is, in its most basic form, a museum that tells the history of slavery. However, the Freedom Center ends up being far more than a museum because of its geographic context across scale. Similar to museums like the Lorraine Motel (now the National Civil Rights Museum) (Alderman and Inwood 2015), and plantation museums across the United States South (Modlin 2008; Carter, Butler, and Alderman 2014; Carter 2015b; Alderman, Butler, and Hanna 2016), not only are the stories told mediated by the curators' choices within the building but the physical and representational space itself facilitates visitors' interpretations as well. It is in this way that I want to explore the dual nature of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center as both a museum of slavery and at the same time a memorial to United States national racial justice.

Monuments are the physical manifestation of specific collective memories in time; however, their meanings are multiple. Mitchell writes that monuments "aid in the establishment of memory, by materializing history and linking familiar landscapes, times, and selective memories in an inextricable embrace" (2003, 445). The spatialization of memory is a complex process that works in various ways to produce and reproduce meanings throughout time. More than spaces that tell neutral histories, these monuments and memorial places are dynamic and always disputed, creating new and competing histories and memories mobilized towards political, social, and economic ends (Bohland 2013). Though seemingly stationary, remembrance through physical memorial space is a process that unfurls through time and not in spite of it. Hoelscher and Alderman write, "That social groups today employ various recollections as vehicles for their constitution, or for their dissolution…points to the usability of this freighted phenomenon" (2004, 349). In this way, I believe that the memorial landscape in which the Freedom Center is positioned does the work of reifying ideas of racial progress and justice despite abundant evidence to the contrary.

Almost standing itself as a marker of the first stop on the Underground Railroad, the Freedom Center acts as a kind of gateway signifying the beginning of an abolitionist and just American North. If this symbolism needed any further clarification, in between the Freedom Center and the Ohio River is a representation of a winding river-like path of large stones cemented into the front plaza of the museum (Fig. 7). Furthermore, a flaming torch located on a balcony of the third floor of the building shines across the Ohio River, seemingly representing a beacon of hope to all of those trying to reach 'freedom' from slavery (Fig. 8).

The symbolic location of the Freedom Center and the museum's markers of hope are not lost on visitors, who write reviews such as:

> …this was a sobering stop to consider Cincinnati's important role in the history of the Underground Railroad, as thousands of slaves escaped to freedom by crossing the Ohio River from the southern slave states…
>
> …And it is right on the bank of the Ohio River where escaping slaves struggled across to freedom…
>
> … [My daughter] was very moved by the eternal light of freedom that faces Kentucky - reminding us all how many Americans had to run away and hide to gain their freedom…

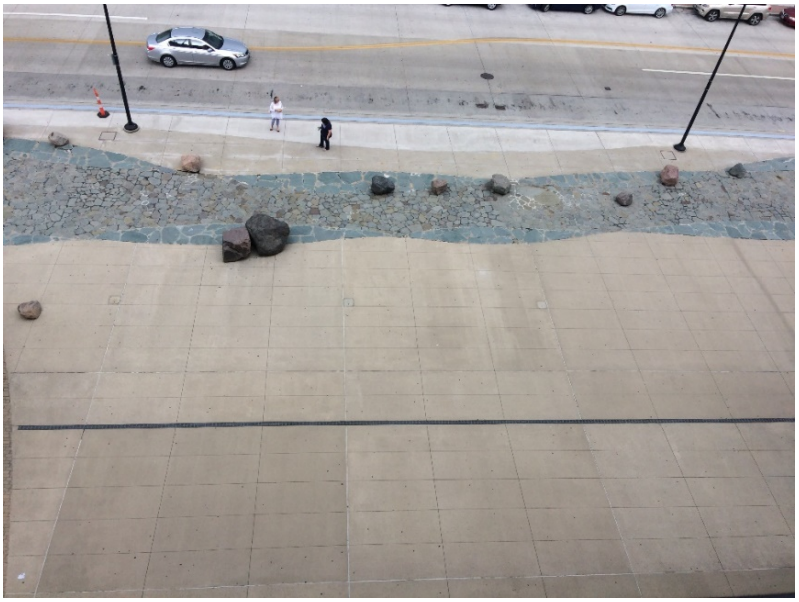

Figure 7. Plaza in front of Freedom Center paved in a way that resembles the Ohio River, a natural boundary between "free" and "slave" states.

Figure 8. Flaming torch on balcony of Freedom Center shines across the Ohio River seemingly a representation of a light to freedom.

> …Located on the bank of the Ohio River, where thousands of slaves escaped once they crossed the river…

The idea that crossing the Ohio River was the final step on the Underground Railroad has been widely discredited (Robertson 1980; Farrow, Lang, and Frank 2006; McKittrick 2007), and is best understood as a historicized heuristic for understanding de jure antebellum geographies. However, what

the above quotes show is that this narrative continues to temper the way visitors understand the magnitude of the Freedom Center. Another visitor explains this by writing,

> …The Freedom Center is an impressive monument to all those who had to fight for freedom…

This visitor's choice to call the museum a monument, again, explains the significance that visitors assign to the Freedom Center. It becomes a crystalized node of U.S. national history and identity. This identity is framed in such a way that obscures the realities of racial injustice that continued far beyond the Ohio River. Taking the Freedom Center as a monument to Northern and National abolition, the narratives contained within and around this building serve to construct a very specific, and contestable, narrative about the history of racism in the United States and its relationship to the present. Most importantly, visitors to the Freedom Center appear to use the museum to reaffirm an uncritical understanding of enslaved persons' journeys to freedom and how the legacies of slavery are (il)legible in the present. To understand how the visitors are experiencing and making sense of this memorial landscape we can again turn to the reviews they have left online. What becomes apparent in a good number of reviews is the absolution of white people by failing to draw connections between slavery and present-day racism. This is not the result of a passive inability to piece the puzzle together but instead a necessary and ongoing process of unknowing and unseeing that serves the primary purpose of upholding white supremacy.

The Construction of Anagrammatical Space

While examining the reviews that visitors to the Freedom Center have left on TripAdvisor for comments on the role of race and racism in the past and present, a number of themes emerged. The first is what I will call historical naturalization, whereby visitors relegate the violent legacies of chattel slavery to the past, precluding acknowledgement in the present. Visitors position the enslavement of Black Africans in the United States as an unfortunate moment in the country's history, effectively excluding the possibility of its effects on the present. A second, related, theme that emerges is a narrative of racial progress. By relegating the legacies of slavery to the past and juxtaposing overt racial violence with more nebulous versions, visitors appeal to common sense understandings of racial progress that, again, minimalize existing forms of racial domination. A third theme is a color-blinding of the role of race in the institution of slavery. When discussions of slavery are brought into the present-day, visitors draw from the museum's exhibit on human trafficking and frame slavery through a kind of multi-cultural discursive move that evens out the racially differentiated outcomes of slavery throughout history. The fourth theme is the recovery of white people as racially just and fair. Visitors initially fear that they will feel unwelcome at the museum, forced to face inconvenient realities of white violence. However, they are able to recover the legacy of white people's role in slavery by centering stories of white abolitionists as the definitive legacy. Reviewers end up rewriting accounts of Black resistance and contestation out of the memorial landscape. This process is yet another example of the de-spatializing of Black people, separating Black geographies from (white) United States geographies. Though these themes are distinct, and it is unlikely visitors are processing what they are experienced linearly, there appears to be a relatively coherent progression in these themes. There is a kind of white supremacist logic to the historicizing, minimizing, rationalizing, and restoring that is happening above. I find theoretical work done by literary scholar Christina Sharpe most helpful for interpreting these themes.

In her seminal book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe writes on what it means to live in the aftermaths of American slavery. That is how "all Black people in the wake… are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery" (Sharpe 2016, 8). The book walks through the multitude of forms in which the wake takes hold of or is reformed by and of Black life. In particular, her concept anagrammatical Blackness is most useful for this project. Of anagrammatical Blackness, Sharpe writes,

> I arrive at blackness as, blackness is, anagrammatical. That is, we can see the moments when blackness opens up to the anagrammatical in the literal sense as when 'a word, phrase, or name is formed by rearranging the letters of another.' We can also apprehend this in the metaphorical sense in how regarding blackness, grammatical gender falls away and new meanings proliferate…As meanings of words fall apart, we encounter again and again the difficulty of sticking the signification. This is Black being in the wake. This is the anagrammatical. These are Black lives annotated. (2016, 76–77)

She explains the slipperiness of ascribing the meaning of Blackness in the aftermath of slavery. This is to say, how Blackness intrinsically understood as transient, unknowable, and aspatial through the legacies of the Middle Passage and plantation becomes ontologically ruptured from the (white) category of human. She gives the example of how the word girl no longer means "'girl' but, for example 'prostitute'" when describing a Black girl or how the word boy becomes "'gunman,' 'thug' or 'urban youth'" when describing a Black boy (Sharpe 2016, 77).

At the Freedom Center, visitors shift the meaning of the stories of Black resistance against the violence of slavery; narratives of Black life become unintelligible. This anagrammatical shift is undertaken through four distinct transformations of the memorial landscape: historical naturalization, racial progress narratives, false equivalencies, and white redemption. These themes are interrelated in that they help visitors build a case for revisionist ideas of white benevolence as well as the erasure of Black struggle that has been a cornerstone of U.S. history. Taken as a whole, we may see the logical leaps epistemological whiteness (Mills 1997), the embodied, unexamined, and taken for granted power of racial hierarchy, demands of visitors to make sense of their complicity in ongoing white supremacy. The Freedom Center and the subject of slavery is how I choose to examine this phenomenon though a number of others could be used. In the subsections that follow, I explain how each theme presents itself in the reviews, provide direct examples, and explain how it relates to the process of anagrammatical blackness. What I show is a process of geographical knowledge production. While some theme examples can appear innocuous, I would suggest that this is the point. Reviews mirror uncritical understandings of racism and the United States and by thinking through how the memorial space fails to challenge dominant narratives we might be able to think about other possibilities.

Historical Naturalization

The first way visitors transform the stories told at the Freedom Center is by rhetorically consigning the legacy of slavery to the past through what I will call historical naturalization. Bonilla-Silva (2014) shows the way in which white people explain away racism as expected and explained as natural, a result of personal desires and biological inclinations. At the Freedom Center, it appears that many visitors are comfortable with the idea of chattel slavery in the United States as long as it is understood as a past event. They write reviews such as:

> …The visit is a must-see to understand the whole history of slavery and liberation, on the very ground where the North and South were battling…

> …It is amazing to stand on the balcony and look out at the Ohio River, and realize that the dangerous crossing meant the beginning of the road to freedom. And the shameful history which it represents is a sobering reminder to us all...

> … This is a really terrible time in american history, that no [person] should ever forget, and every child needs to learn about. We need to learn from the past so that we do not repeat it. I would never profess to be an expert on America's slavery past, and its treatment of black and brown people, but this museum and others like it, fill me with woe and sadness…

> …It's very informative & empowering. You've got to learn about the past or be doomed to preheat it in the present…
>
> …The third floor includes an exhibit [that]… reveals a very dark history of humanity's past. Fortunately for all of us here now, we can visit museums like this, re-read our histories, and hope not to repeat such inhumane atrocities…
>
> …Must see and learn about the slave trade that affected our country. The historical evidence helps us to learn about the path that led us to today. The African Americans who have overcome this long history of slavery are true survivors…

The "peculiar institution" of United States chattel slavery is, of course, in the past and I am not challenging documented history. However, what is important for the analysis at hand is that the visitors' experience of the Freedom Center is one that allows them to mourn slavery as an unfortunate moment in history. This periodization, while not incriminating by itself, is the first step toward transforming the memorialization of the violence of the enslavement of Black Africans in the United States toward one that re-entrenches anti-Black national narratives. The foil against which visitors measure the history of slavery is how they understand its legacy in the present. Where many of these reviews express sadness about slavery in the past and vow to "not repeat it" in the present, the relationship between race and enslavement are removed completely or, when they are addressed, visitors employ language that appears to suggest the conditions that led to the enslavement of Black people have been overcome. By creating discreet temporal frames, slavery vs. emancipation in this instance, it is much easier to collapse the structures of white supremacy into the institution of slavery and unsee the former after the end of the latter.

Racial Progress and Present Justice

When visitors to the Freedom Center make the leap from the past into the present, it is often through the idea of progress. Reviews that take up this second theme make the first connections between slavery and racism. They write things such as:

> …We all need to know the facts. We all need to think about how humanity failed so many by not recognizing that all human beings own the right to freedom…
>
> …While it is heavy with the ills of our past, it also pays credence to the uplifting stories of those that stood on the right side of history…
>
> …Looking for the history of prejudice then justice?...
>
> …It puts the past in a new light great look into the past and the suffrage of people and what they had to endure…
>
> …And the shameful history which it represents is a sobering reminder to us all…
>
> …My only fear with the museum is political correctness of adding in exhibits that really are not dealing with any kind of slavery in the world but deal with a push of a political agenda or something that is being politicized and attaches buzz words to it in order to cause it to be relevant to the museum…

Here, though not naming racism explicitly, visitors address it through words like "justice" and temporal markers of injustice through words like "failed" and "shameful history." The idea of racial progress forms examinations of race and racism into a linear timeline that suggest we are always moving toward a more racially just future (Seamster and Ray 2018). This theorization is not only reductive of a complex and non-linear reality but even precludes more productive examinations of ongoing material practices of racism but also those in resistance to it (Ray and Seamster 2016). I argue that these visitors are appealing to a sense of racial progress. Though they do not discuss racism in the present explicitly,

visitors seem to signal that the current situation is better than what it once may have been. Again, it is undeniable that the end of chattel slavery is good. However, as explained in the former section, the always ongoing use of slavery in the U.S. as the forever racial zeitgeist in the white imagination performs an anagrammatical shift; absent of pre-1865 slavery, the structures of white supremacy become unknowable as racialized processes. If chattel slavery remains the primary reference point for racial progress, less obvious forms become further invisible. This is especially apparent in the review that laments the push of a political agenda at the Freedom Center. By making a distinction between what is and is not allowed to be politicized, they are explaining what topics are allowable for action. Where racism is not a pressing problem and should be de-politicized, slavery remains a problem that should be addressed. Below, I argue that there is a specific reason why the issue of slavery is allowed to remain politicized.

The Universal Slave and False Equivalencies

The third theme that arises out of TripAdvisor reviews on the Freedom Center attempt to locate the legacies of United States chattel slavery in the present day; however, they do this by appealing to a universal slave figure, one that is global and deracialized. Visitors use the exhibit that covers contemporary forms of slavery across the world to make this connection. While the exhibit discusses differential vulnerability for enslavement in the present through geographic, ethnic, and gendered lenses, it appears that visitors use these complex categories of risk to identify with the enslaved rather than enslaver. While in U.S. history this was divided along the white/Black racial barrier, making the figure of the enslaved less concretely defined means that the racialized realities in the present are easier to consciously misunderstand. They write reviews such as:

> ...I learned about slaves of all walks of life-women, children, black, white, mixed and slave trafficking in all parts of the world…
>
> …This museum has done an outstanding job of explaining slavery not only for the black history of slavery but the on going trafficking and child labor slavery all around the world…
>
> …A great museum to help understand the slave culture of early America and how the United States finally ended slavery. This is more than just an explanation of the Underground Railway. Plus it talks about institutions in the world that still foster what amounts to slavery today!...
>
> …We did not realize that they had a 2016 exhibit of modern day enslavement of various ethnicities…

These visitors' interpretations open up the category of slave to a non-racialized, universal figure. The highly racialized nature of enslavement through history is obscured because it affects "various ethnicities." Widening the category of slave allows for the absolution of white people as the cause of violence and exploitation because they themselves can now claim the history of enslavement as their own. Slave, once the ultimate marker of non-humanness, the prime marker of Blackness, has been transformed. The memorial anagram has been enacted. The Freedom Center, a memorial to white anti-Black violence and Black resistance, is no longer a memorial to Black life despite white supremacy but universal (white) life above Blackness. It is in the final theme that we see this transformation completed.

White Redemption

Anti-Black violence having been relegated to the past, minimized through narratives of progress, and obscured through color-blinding racialized power differentials of enslavement, no longer poses a threat to white subjectivities of justice. Visitors are, at first, afraid of not belonging in the memorial landscape of the Freedom Center, and are able to relocate and re-center their own (white) stories by

rewriting the narratives that are told. They show this transformation by first explaining how they found their concerns about the museum being a Black space unfounded:

> …This place was not just for blacks, it is for everyone…
>
> …Historical without being hateful, educational without being preachy…

They then re-write themselves into the narrative of enslavement in the United States on the side of those enslaved rather than those carrying out the violence:

> …Great exhibitions and very balanced points of view which humanised [sic] not only the poor slaves but the free folk at the time also. I particularly loved the way that conflicted folk who owned slaves but knew it was horrible wrote and left [history]…
>
> …You'll leave knowing that there were courageous, even heroic figures both black and white who contributed to the successful escapes of a number of slaves from their inhumane bondage…
>
> …This place was not just for blacks, it is for everyone, because @ some time or another we all have been and are still slaves…
>
> …[The exhibits] lead the viewer through these years, leaving them with a greater understanding of both the past and how we are today - a nation of multiple races…

It seems that the visitors above are struggling with a story of slavery that the Freedom Center tells that frames white people as oppressors and enslavers, and centers the Black fight for freedom. These reviews move through a progression of redeeming at least some white slave owners as "conflicted" to then framing "all" people as at "some time" slaves to a triumphalist story of multicultural unity. They attempt to color-blind narratives and recover white reputation by reading speculative morals into the hearts of enslavers and trying to pull connections from the past into the present but are unable to without absolving white people through statements of racial progress. Of note is that throughout the large number of reviews on a museum concerning the institution of slavery, nearly every time white people are discussed explicitly it is to address their benevolence. This may be an unconscious move that visitors perform to comfort and reassure themselves. I would suggest that it is the logical conclusion of whiteness that demands an unseeing and unknowing of the ongoing power of racial hierarchization.

Anagrammatical Space

The Freedom Center is an example of what I want to call an anagrammtaical space or a space that is understood, if not explicitly, implicitly as a Black space and because of this it is unknowable to white visitors. The museum's "signification," as Sharpe calls it, is changed from the history of white violence and Black resistance towards one that frames white people as having meant well or transformed through time. This revision serves a specific political purpose that works to uphold white supremacy. I believe that this anagrammatical move is the performance of what has been called "epistemological whiteness" (Mills 1997) or the continual need for white people to distance themselves from their ancestral legacies of racist violence and to exempt themselves from ongoing racial wrongdoings in the present. They must repeatedly move to make racism illegible in their lives through "the continued encounter with European exhibitionary grammars and articulations" (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2020, 3). If racism exists at all, it exists elsewhere, in another time, in another place. This restructuring of the white episteme is dependent upon an anti-Black understanding of space, one that renders Black life aspatial (Bledsoe and Wright 2018; Hawthorne 2019).

Anti-Blackness at the Freedom Center is not merely a consequence of the exhibits inside, but also through the visitors' grounding previously-held conceptions through the monumentality of the physical and memorial space that the museum occupies. There is a fissure in the visitors' reviews that complicates

many visitors' ability to draw connections between the legacies of slavery and white supremacy in the present. Visitors are afraid that the specters of slavery will undermine their comfortable unknowing of present racism, both through a tenuous dance of forcing racism into the past and deracializing the present. They are unable to see what theorist and poet Brand calls "past/place" in the "present/place," or, more specifically that the "present/place" has never escaped the past (Brand 1994). Temporality is simplified and turned linear where reality is instead "a sense of cyclical time in which all that has happened in the past and all that will happen in the future is interrelated" (Commander 2017, 38). For this reason, the racist legacies of slavery remain in the past(/place), immobilized, uncomplicated, and stagnant. It is an unending practice of redaction and annotation, one in which Black life is unwritten and rendered contingent upon the qualifying force of whiteness (Sharpe 2016). The memorial landscape of which the *National* Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a part, is used to undo Black spatialities that the museum is trying to present. This is part of the always unraveling processes of spatial annotation and redaction. Where visitors are compelled to confront the multitude of Black spatialities of life in violence and life despite violence that the Freedom Center displays and materially represents, the anagram becomes a way to reject that "slavery undeniably became the total environment" (Sharpe 2016, 104). The anagram requalifies this memorial space, no longer Black space. Blackness is "redacted, made invisible to the present and future, subtended by plantation logics, detached optics, and brutal architectures" (Sharpe 2016, 114) through an always reworked white memorial landscape that is continually recovered through space. The anagrammatical move reconstructs the anti-Black memorial landscape. This is not to say that Blackness disappears from the narrative. In fact, I argue, that it is *through* the complexities of anti/Blackness presented at the Freedom Center that visitors are able to re-center white people. By dismantling the stories of Blackness against and in spite of white supremacy and reforming them, visitors are able to perform a rhetorical-memorial move that rehabilitates and protects the benevolence of white people.

Conclusion

I present here a novel way of understanding the memorial landscape through what I am calling anagrammatical space. Different from some explanations that show that Black lives and experiences are completely erased from the narratives told, I think the Freedom Center provides us with an example of something different. Visitors do not try to wipe Black stories away, instead they are entangled in a process of memory work that seeks to transform the significance of Black people in white memorial space. While the Freedom Center offers a history that centers Black resistance in light of white violence, a segment of visitors performs a form of anagrammaticism where they must scramble the meanings that the museum present so that they might become legible to white people. A Black sense of place, "the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter" (McKittrick 2011, 949), is redacted, annotated, forced into a supporting role in redeeming white people. Black spatialities, fundamental to the story of emancipation, are undone. The question now is how might the (white) memorial landscape be undone? How might the centrality of Blackness and Black space be recovered? Sharpe turns to the very concepts used to explain the obscuring of Blackness. She writes, "Black annotation and redaction meet the Black anagrammatical and the failure of words and conceptus to hold in and on Black flesh" (2016, 122), "I am imagining that the work of Black annotation and Black redaction is to enact the movement to that inevitable – a counter to abandonment, another effort to try to look, to really see" (2016, 117)

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