"Ask for a Miracle": Memory, Manipulation, and Displacement in the Cooper-Young Neighborhood

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Abstract
Through a combination of walking, archival, and arts-based research methodologies, this paper expands the experiential process of creating a visual representation of the changes that have taken place in the Cooper-Young neighborhood of Memphis, Tennessee. Combined, these (visual) elements highlight the disparities between the dominant and hidden narratives of Cooper-Young's history.

Keywords: arts-based research; walking methodology; archival data; displacement; memory; nostalgia; photography

Searching for (dis)placement and walking (with) (dis)comfort: walking methodology and stumbling on meanings

"We dipped our fingers into the wet cement, and we wrote the truest, simplest things we knew - our names, the date, and these words: We were here."
- Karen Thompson Walker, the age of miracles

"Cooper-Young: Historically Hip"
- Community advertising slogan

When we first explored the Cooper-Young neighborhood, I immediately felt at ease. Even though I had been a Memphis resident for less than a year, Cooper-Young was the one neighborhood I had already claimed as my own, enamored by its heady mix of coffee shops, comic book stores, and various nooks and crannies filled with vintage treasures waiting to be discovered.

With this appealing impression of Cooper-Young ensconced in my mind, I struggled to connect this seemingly thriving neighborhood with the portrait of displacement, frustration, and systematic

oppression in Memphis that writer Preston Lauterbach (2016) tackles year by year and indignity by indignity in his seminal article, "Memphis Burning." Lauterbach begins by describing a fire - not a random tragedy, but a deliberate act of arson, perpetrated against Robert Church, a politician who in the 1920s was one of the most influential African-American men in Memphis. When political and social Memphis heavyweight, Edward "Boss" Crump, destroyed Church's home in a calculated attack, the impact on the perceived social, political, and economic potential of Memphis's African-American residents was still felt in Memphis decades later. As a resident said years after the event, ". . . it wasn't just the house, it was what the house represented" (qtd. in Lauterbach, 2016, The Fire section, para. 10). Lauterbach also notes that in order for Memphis to progress towards greater social economic and social equity in the future, "[t]he future begins with destruction" (Lauterbach, 2016, The Future section, para. 6).

As I became aware of Memphis's history through this article, it made me realize that "destruction" in this case has two very different meanings. The first type of destruction could be described as the process of consciously destroying oppressive and entrenched systems of segregation and racism within the social, political, and economic fabric of Memphis. In stark contrast, the second kind of destruction is ostensibly done in the name of progress and equity, while ultimately shoring up the very systems it seeks to demolish. Through walking and observing more of the built residential environment of Cooper-Young, I slowly became aware that the second aforementioned process of destruction was on display, on each street corner and across many of its front porches. On our initial walk(through)/(with), I only focused on the transitory, commercial side of Cooper-Young. There existed a parallel-but-hidden narrative waiting to be discovered in its boundaries, as I would soon discover.

"Historically Hip"; that slogan, emblazoned across the cheerful banners hanging prominently from the lampposts we walked past on Cooper-Young's business-lined main streets, would eventually feel more disingenuous with each step. During our first walks, the reason for this feeling of insincerity was not immediately clear to our group; though we all lived in the Memphis area, none of us were residents of Cooper-Young itself. Turning down a sidewalk that took us from the commercial main thoroughfare to the quieter residential areas, what had changed that we, as a group, could latch onto? At first glance, not much had changed besides an increase in our collective discomfort level. Walking en masse down narrow residential sidewalks felt markedly different from the same activity performed on the main commercial roads. We, as a group, felt more threatened and off-kilter than ever as we tried to grasp onto observations we could discuss together and eventually connect back to the larger themes of "(dis)placement" and "(dis)placed bodies" as socially, culturally, and economically oppressive states of being (Nordstrom & Plascencia, 2017). The concept of displacement seemed frustratingly nebulous during our initial walks, but as we became more familiar with the different areas of Cooper-Young and their structural disparities, we began wondering whether highlighting a connection from the historical evolution of the neighborhood to its present incarnation, through slogans like "Historically Hip," was in fact accurate.

Despite our unsure first steps in Cooper-Young, our group began the process of walking (through) the neighborhood and walking (with) each other and the changes we encountered on each new street. The very act of turning on the corner to move from a commercial to a residential area was fraught with the possibility of immediate physical displacement; in other words, we collectively realized that the sidewalks were more of a tripping hazard on this new street than they had been on the old one. As broken/cracked concrete and brush piles vied for our balance and attention, we often found more stability by walking on the road itself. This constant shifting from one location to another to remain stable annoyed us all, but I also felt a new type of solidarity with my group members as they navigated their physical movements with much more care than they would have normally. As novel as this process may have been to them, I found their (dis)comfort all too familiar. I am constantly "spacing my space," what Ash and Gallacher (2015) refer to as "sensing the difference in a variety of states" (p. 49), in ways that are not conscious actions for most people: gently kicking a curb or a step before I move upwards on to it, establishing spatial awareness, and making up for the dulled proprioception of the right side of my body.

Clarifying my positionality and its influence on my research methodologies (Qin, 2016) is needed: I am a disabled person/researcher/philosopher. My daily life, the research I undertake, and the methodologies shaping that research are all influenced specifically by how accurately I can feel my physicality in a space and move appropriately/safely in response to that feeling (Han, Waddington, Adams, Anson, & Liu, 2015). My constant hyperawareness of motion and the possibility of (de)stabilization made walking methodology, the first methodology used for our group's evolving explorations, the initial influence on the intertwined methodologies I eventually chose.

Walking methodology requires further contextualization because it is a methodology that embraces evolution of focus and the inevitability of change (Truman & Springgay, 2016). These ongoing processes exemplify what Springgay and Truman refer to as "speculative middles" (Springgay & Truman, 2017). These "middles" impel movement in various forms, from exploring the interior shiftings of encephalitic patients brought into temporary exterior lives (Manning, 2009), to the social-embodiment of movement by pilgrims on the Santiago de Compostela (McPherson, 2016).

At its core, walking methodology follows the same methodological cycle of growth and change as the concurrent methodology I used during our explorations of Cooper-Young: "research-creation," also known as "arts-based research" (Manning, 2016). Arts-based research is defined as ". . . the systematic use of the artistic process [and] the actual making of artistic expressions as a primary way of understanding and examining experience" (Mcniff, 2007, p. 29). This always-liminal process of experience, movement, and creation is aptly described by researcher Erin Manning (2008) as ". . . work[ing] at this in-between of immanence and actuality, where multiplicities converge into affirmations" (p. 24), a process that allows for ambiguity both in knowledge creation and presentation (Cole & Knowles, 2007; Fletcher, Sampson, Steen, Steel, Smith, Kalin, Kurtz, Asher & Christopher, 2008). Manning's description encapsulates the nebulous, uncomfortable, yet hopeful place I found myself in

after three weeks of staring at the sidewalks of Cooper-Young. At that point in our explorations, I decided the information from the surfaces we walked on would be the main focus of both my research and the art that would grow from my observations. They seemed like elements of what are characterized as microhistories,". . . reflection[s] on a single event, place or life [that] might yield insights across scales of space and time" (Walton, Brooks & DeCorse, 2008, p. 3).

As we walked as a group, we looked down, walking from one surface to another as safely as possible before looking up again to scan our surroundings, the houses, and the overall landscape. I have always been drawn to the written word, so while looking down/maintaining balance/moving forward, I would be momentarily arrested by words at my feet: scrawled, scratched, or professionally imprinted in the concrete, clinging on top of, or newly replacing the surfaces that had made up even older layers of these streets. The relative anonymity of these sidewalk messages and the vague promise of community and continuity embodied within the slogan "Historically Hip" solidified the question I wanted to ask of this neighborhood. The question that I had been asking in the back of my mind as I moved through Cooper-Young, nudged toward by broken sidewalks, bustling businesses, and a sense of vitality tempered by next-door neglect, was simply as follows. How do I connect Cooper-Young's past to its present through campaigns like "Historically Hip"? What is the dominant narrative or narratives that are being presented within Cooper-Young as it is now? And, what other narratives may have been subsumed as part of this presentation?

As compelling as they were, I soon realized these written messages on the sidewalk would not be my main foci, but would instead serve as a collective jumping-off point, inspiring me to discover other narratives about Cooper-Young's past, and which of those narratives remained visible in its present incarnation. These disparate messages of solidarity, declaration, and official record led me to my two other methodological avenues. Figure 1 showcases the messages I chose to combine and my reasoning behind the image's title:

Figure 1. "Kintsugi Sidewalk". Seen together, these messages suggest a broad sense of continuity in their creators' need to speak/create. Seen in isolation, they seem fragile and broken out of any understandable narrative, hence, my attempt to connect them in a digital version of "kinstugi," the Japanese art form of repairing broken ceramics and other valued objects by reconnecting the broken pieces with stabilizing gold.

The Treachery of Images: Archival data and "multiple voices" in photography

From simply walking through Cooper-Young and observing its different environments, I came away from these excursions curious to know more, but more aware than ever of my status as a recent transplant, without the benefit of a collective historical narrative with which to "appraise the present" (Klein, 2013, p. 26). Taking my cue from those who have used archival data to contextualize ethnographic research and vice versa (Brettell, 1998; Dirks, 2002), I decided to explore the available archival data related to Cooper-Young.

In its most common and basic sense, archival data is defined as previously collected data that is being used for new research purposes (Ventresca & Mohr, 2017), and it follows that an archival research methodology is one in which this type of data is systematically collected and analyzed to further the research at hand. Stephen Schensul further defines archival data as ". . . materials collected for bureaucratic, service, or administrative purposes and transformed into data for research purposes" (2012, p. 51). I had what I believed to be a straightforward plan: visit the city library's archives and systematically conduct a search for documents and photographs related to the early history of Cooper-Young, and then compare the visual records and textual descriptions of those locations to what remains today. Because the use of images in research outside of anthropology (Mason, 2005; Rodriguez & Baher, 2006) and education (Marin & Roldan, 2010) is still considered a novel methodological approach,

particularly in an artistic framework, I was especially excited to see what images I would discover in the archives.

I thought I would have dozens of photographs to choose from; but ultimately, there were less than ten photographs in the "Cooper-Young" archival collection, none of which I could locate with accompanying descriptions beyond a brief title. Frustrated by the lack of visual archival data, I had almost decided to explore other methodological paths, when I came across a relatively obscure written narrative of the entire neighborhood. Written in 1977 by Cooper-Young residents and historians Peggy Jemison and Virginia Dunaway (Phillips, 2010), their comprehensive history of the neighborhood covers the early 19th century to the 1970s, touching on the major periods of Cooper-Young's growth. In reading this history, the story of one particular corner of Cooper-Young caught my eye; I quickly realized that the story of the influential African-American community in Cooper-Young, then named "Cedar Grove", seemed to have been subsumed into the neat, nostalgic narrative of present-day Cooper-Young (Jemison & Dunaway, 1977). This disparity would be crucial to the artistic progress of my research. Sociologist Richard Ocejo (2011) describes nostalgia narratives as ". . . an imagined story of the past that deliberately selects certain elements from personal history while excluding others to construct a version that is more favorable than the reality" (p. 287). John Foot (2007) describes the phenomenon of nostalgia and the ways it can distort and overshadow some physical and social changes in favor of others for the sake of clarity and comfort:

Nostalgia is one way of trying to get a grip on the near-totalizing nature of these transformations – it is a tactic, a device and a prism. Of course, nostalgia does not help us with an understanding of the straightforward history of the past, but it does point to the ways in which that past is *understood and narrated through memory*. (p. 450; emphasis added)

A nostalgia-based advertising campaign like the one in place in Cooper-Young is ostensibly designed to connect a place's past and present through the built environment in which residents live their lives. Like Foot, though, I felt that a campaign appealing in large part to emotions and overall aesthetics would not be able to capture the full picture of Cooper-Young's evolution. Despite this feeling, I was also confused how best to utilize photographs to convey this ongoing process of change within the neighborhood. The medium which was called "a mirror with a memory" by author Oliver Wendell Holmes, that offers to the viewer ". . . an index, a sign of a 'truly existing thing'" (qtd. in Raiford, 2009, p. 11), still seemed lacking when I looked through my initial photographs. How could something so static convey time marching forward, and display what had been remembered about the building versus what had been forgotten; without other elements being added to the photographs?

Just as simple line drawings done in a meeting can serve as influential moments, and metaphors for frustration with administrative office tasks (Tidwell, 2006; Tidwell & Manke, 2009), my breakthrough came when I began to think of these photographs not as literal representations of buildings and locations within Cooper-Young but instead as "visual metaphors" that together illustrate the shifting

priorities over the years in constructing the narrative of the neighborhood. Working within the limited palette of historical images at my disposal, I decided to superimpose these images onto contemporary images of the same location found on Google Maps. With both images blending into one another, I never knew for sure which metaphor(s) would be visible first. In my first attempt at photo manipulation with archival visual data (Figure 2), a very straightforward composite of my photo and the photo taken in 1945 revealed that the street's continuity seemed to be projected from each intact building and curve of the sidewalk:

Figure 2. "Class of '45": A simple historical progression from asphalt to older asphalt, and the loss of a telephone pole, only the year stamped on the archived photograph seemed to mark the passage of 71 years.

However, in the next photo composite (Figure 3), the continuity is primarily provided, not by the structures in the photographs, but by the random placement of two cars more than half a century apart. The building itself has been transformed.

Figure 3. "Drum Matinee": Transformed from a place where the community congregates into a niche commercial entity, this area of Cooper-Young nevertheless maintains a small amount of continuity through continued "affording" of importance and use by residents (O'Toole & Were, 2008).

Up to this point in my process of research and artistic interpretation, I had somehow not found images that showed disparities between one group of Cooper-Young residents and another. That suddenly changed with the next archival image I uncovered, because the building pictured was immediately recognizable to me. Even as a periodic visitor to Cooper-Young, I had noticed a house, much larger than the compact single-family homes around it, that had been painted in bright, contrasting colors by the current owners. During my solo walks to collect more pointed visual data, I recorded this house as an anomaly among so many smaller homes. Not only was this house in wonderful condition, but the area surrounding it, the large tree in its front yard, could have been directly lifted from its black and white counterpart that now stared back at me.

Between these two intertwined photos (Figure 4) and the illuminating words of Jemison and Dunaway (excerpted below), the home's privileged past and present became clear:

Figure 4. "The House That Harris Built"

The largest house in the neighborhood, and one of the most interesting architecturally is the Captain Harris House at 2106 Young adjacent to Peabody School. The house faced Cooper when it was built by real estate developer, Frank Trimble, who lived there in 1898. Captain Harris moved to Memphis from Ripley, Mississippi, and in 1900 purchased the roomy, Victorian "Queen Anne" style house with its turret and cupola *that would house four generations of his family.* (Jemison et al., 1977, Cooper Young: Black Residents section, para. 2; emphases added)

Although Jemison and Dunaway's eloquent description of this house does not require further explanation, it should be noted that there is a remarkably consistent narrative, carefully recorded for posterity, between their description of the property, the archival photograph, and the present physical condition of the house. The same cannot be said for two structures that play an equally important role in the memories that Jemison and Dunaway recorded about the African American residents of Cooper-Young. The fledgling African-American community within Cooper-Young was still known as "Cedar Grove" when Mary and John Moore made their home at 2040 Saulsbury Street, ". . . one of the first houses on the street" (Jemison et al., 1977, Cooper Young: Black Residents section, para. 2). Although Jemison and Dunaway describe them as being among the "pioneer group" of African-American families in Cooper-Young, their house had not been visually recorded for posterity in the city's archives; the commitment to continuity had only extended so far. The same was true of one of Cedar Grove's important churches: Mount Bethel Missionary Baptist Church. For both of these buildings, their current states do not seem to be connected to their influential pasts in any way. After combining relevant passages from Jemison and Dunaway with current Google Maps images of these influential locations, I was shocked at the stark contrast to the harmonious connection between past and present embodied by the Captain Harris house (Figure 5):
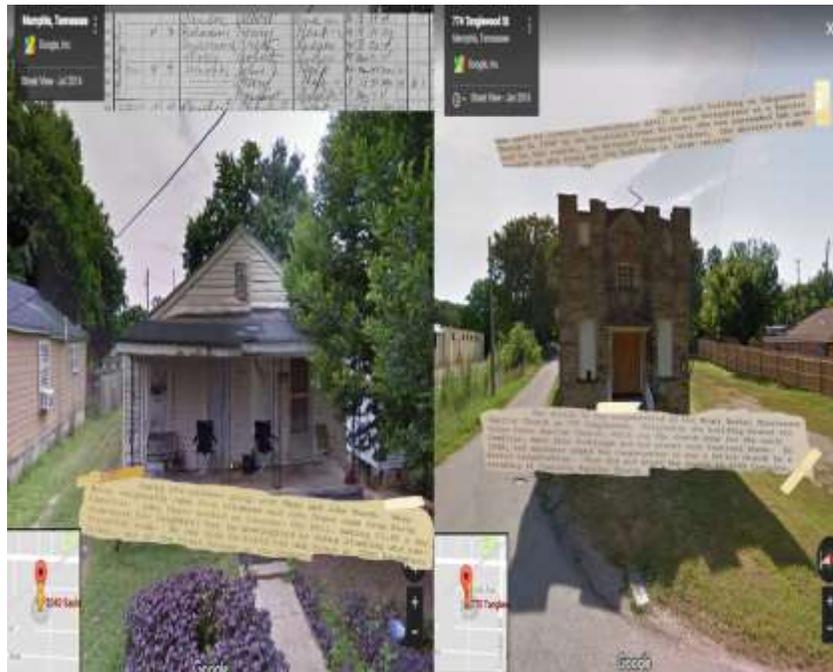
Figure 5. "Cedar Grove Diptych": By superimposing Jemison and Dunaway's descriptions onto these images, the priorities of preserving life histories, lived experiences, and the locations in which they played out are made clear.

As I tried to present a more equitable narrative within these finished pieces, I knew, as I walked (through) research-creation and (with) the voices I had discovered along the way, that my processes would not be able to capture the full picture of a neighborhood whose narratives continually evolve, like any other place people call home. But with my last composite piece (Figure 6), I hoped to encourage interested viewers to take a closer look at the daily lives unfolding within Cooper-Young and how those lives are often (dis)placed by economic and gentrifying trends.

Figure 6. "Patchwork Prices": An empty lot, decorated with columns from one "shotgun" Cooper-Young house, a porch from another, and a door from a third: which architectural element transforms a $60,000 house into a home selling for more than twice as much?

"It can change as we go along": Recognizing debt in research, looking for what's next

Finishing the last touches on my artistic offerings about Cooper-Young, its places, and the people that live(d) in them, I was struck by doubts: did my pieces say enough, combine enough elements to make an impact, perhaps spark further questions? At their core, the pieces simply acknowledge the existence of disparities, past and present, within Cooper-Young, reminding those that see them about what has been forgotten in a push towards nostalgic remembrance. I am, in the end, still an outsider looking into Cooper-Young's evolving stories of community and (dis)placements. Nevertheless, I was often reminded during my explorations of a quote from fellow researcher Tim Ingold, who said that fieldwork and observation should not only be a research method but a promise, ". . . an acknowledgement of our debt to the world for what we are and what we know." (qtd. in Macdougall, 2016). I hope that if these images bring even some awareness of the larger narratives at play in Cooper-Young, I can say I have begun to acknowledge that debt.

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