



Svetlana Boym argues that the city ‘is an ideal crossroads between longing and estrangement, memory and freedom, nostalgia and modernity.’ To what extent are such intersections between place and memory foregrounded in literary representations of the city?

Isabel Roth

In imagining the city as a ‘crossroads’ of ‘memory and freedom, nostalgia and modernity,’ Svetlana Boym’s words recall Andreas Huyssen’s conception of present-day Berlin as an urban palimpsest, where the city’s spaces hold ‘memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is.’¹ If the city is a palimpsest, its ‘legibility’ relies, for Huyssen, ‘as much on visible markers of built space as on images and memories repressed and ruptured by traumatic events.’² While Boym and Huyssen foreground the link between memory and urban space, the anthropologist Marc Augé argues that the city contains certain ‘non-places’ with no such link to memory, that are impossible to define as ‘relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.’³ Specifically, these are ‘spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure).’⁴ Given their supposed lack of history, why do Iain Sinclair’s *Downriver* (1991) and Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) explore themes of memory in precisely these ‘non-places’? Although Sinclair and Rhys focus on different cities, in different times; both authors look at the interplay of (non-) place and memory across a backdrop of transitory hotel rooms, train carriages, and public parks. The authors’ techniques vary, producing contrasting results, but in both cases the depiction of urban non-places forces out the repressed memories that rest within them, compelling the reader to consider the psychological impact of space.

In *Downriver*, Sinclair depicts a London that is under threat of disappearing due to the forces of late twentieth-century capitalism. The protagonist (who I will differentiate from the author as ‘Sinclair’) penetrates non-places in order to explore the repressed history of London, as well as to look for ‘imagined’ political and social alternatives: ‘a London that is, itself, in its excessive play of memory’s traces, a site of resistance.’⁵ For Michel de Certeau, the city is defined by the way people navigate it, for the ‘intertwined paths’ of the ‘swarming mass’ give ‘shape to spaces’.⁶ Sinclair’s practice of space constitutes a form of psychogeography that ‘both resists the contemporary configurations of urban space, and reveals the history of that space which is deliberately erased or overlaid by late capitalism.’⁷ Defined by Guy Debord in 1955 as ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the

¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.7

² *Ibid*, pp.51-2

³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), pp.77-8

⁴ *Ibid*, p.94

⁵ Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London Volume 2: materiality, memory, spectrality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.161

⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p.97

⁷ Brian Baker, *Iain Sinclair* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.21

geographical environment[...] on the emotions and behaviour of individuals',⁸ Sinclair's updated version of psychogeography is more closely linked to memory: it is a '*psychotic geography*'; 'the belief that something which happens in a place permanently affects that place.'⁹ In order to draw this memory out, 'Sinclair' uses space subversively. For example, he walks in the Rotherhithe Tunnel, breaking the silent 'contract'¹⁰ of a non-place that is intended mainly for cars, not pedestrians, transforming this apparently unremarkable space into an unlikely 'site of resistance'. The tunnel 'drips with warnings: DO NOT STOP. Seal your windows. Hold your breath',¹¹ acting as reminders that 'Sinclair' is violating a 'contract'. The lack of other walkers in the tunnel, along with frightening glimpses of 'mean-faced' drivers, 'locked into sadistic fantasies' (*D*, 63-4), highlights the sense that 'Sinclair' is not supposed to be there. This act of transgression brings the tunnel's repressed memories to the fore. In a passage that blends together the past and the present, 'Sinclair' sees 'Half-naked labourers splashing through the darkness, struggling in the heightened air pressure[...]; falling victim to "caisson disease", as they excavated, inch by sullen inch, the mile and a quarter of clay and gravel' (*D*, 64). In capturing the gritty resonance of the tunnel, the 'disease' and 'sullen' struggle surrounding its construction, Sinclair brings out its past life, emphasising human experiences of labour and construction in what has become a depersonalized non-place. Other such explorations of non-places are scattered throughout *Downriver*, including a visit to a former cemetery that is now a scrap of derelict land next to a train line, where 'The Victorian headstones had been broken up, carried away, incorporated into municipal building projects' (*D*, 110). With its resonance stripped away, this 'memorial site' elected 'to remain anonymous, remembering nothing' (*D*, 110). Yet like the tunnel with its ghostly labourers, here 'The ground was shaken by its agitated past' and 'A seismic disturbance had gashed the earth so the dead walked free' (*D*, 110). Even when the headstones, 'visible markers of built space', are removed, the space retains its memory. It is 'permanently affected' by an 'agitated' resonance, a 'seismic disturbance' that always threatens to 'walk free'. Significantly, in both of these examples memory has been sacrificed to 'building projects', again drawing our attention to Sinclair's political concerns about the destructive effects of late capitalism on the city.

Huyssen also highlights the ways in which memory in the city has often been 'written over, erased, and forgotten',¹² and outlines how this effacement has created a strong desire for 'narratives of the past'.¹³ Indeed, 'the seduction of the archive and its trove of stories of human achievement and suffering has never been greater.'¹⁴ Reading like a collage of anecdotes from obscure corners of the city's history, *Downriver* seems to be a product of this 'seduction of the archive'. However, while Huyssen sees 'the creation of objects, artworks, memorials, public spaces of commemoration' as one way of 'dealing with historical trauma',¹⁵ for Sinclair, designated 'places of memory' can be artificial. Unlike non-places, they are devoid of resonance, for 'memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable.'¹⁶ Sinclair focuses on the effects of what Augé terms 'supermodernity' on our conception of the past: it does not successfully interweave past and present, but rather 'makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle.'¹⁷ Sinclair's 'textual archiving' is more than 'an act of historical

⁸ Guy Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography' in *A Situationist International Anthology*, rev. ed., ed. Ken Knabb (New York: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2007), p.8

⁹ Iain Sinclair cited in Baker, p.20

¹⁰ Augé, p.101

¹¹ Iain Sinclair, *Downriver* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004 [1991]), p.63. Henceforth, *D*

¹² Huyssen, p.4

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.5

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9

¹⁶ De Certeau, p.108

¹⁷ Augé, p.110

registration': it is an attempt to 'resist the reifying tendency in much conventional urban observation and history, whereby the past has no purpose other than as a museum exhibit.'¹⁸ Sinclair, like Huyssen, highlights 'Our current obsession with colonizing the past', but drily mocks the insincerity of this trend: reproduction maps of East London are 'gaudy fakes to authenticate any cocktail bar' (*D*, 79). As for museums, in one he finds 'Potted histories[...] nailing us to a censored version of the past' (*D*, 184); in another, 'a past that is narcotic, careful to avoid any engagement with present furies' (227). In contrasting museums that do not do justice to the past with unexpectedly resonant non-places, Sinclair proposes a new way of approaching the city, rejecting 'reifying tendencies' and once again transforming it into a 'site of resistance'.

While 'Sinclair' is drawn to the non-place because of the tantalising opportunity to resurrect its suppressed resonance, for the protagonist of Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, it is the non-place's very lack of resonance and identity that is appealing. Sasha Jansen's attraction to the streets, hotel rooms and lavabos of Paris is frequently seen as an echo of her own unstable sense of identity: Rhys evokes 'an inbetween world, where identities are indecipherable, uncertain, confused'.¹⁹ The fact that Sasha attempts to use these non-places to define herself highlights the instability of her identity. She claims of a non-descript hotel room, for example, 'this is my plane... Quatrième à gauche, and mind you don't trip over the hole in the carpet. That's me.'²⁰ Rhys presents a series of non-places so impersonal that they merge into one 'hotel without a name in the street without a name', with 'Always the same stairs, always the same room' (*GMM*, 120). Also stressing the link between the non-place and a loss of personal identity, Augé explains that 'a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver.'²¹ However, it is not just that Sasha is 'attracted' to non-places because they mirror her unstable sense of identity, in fact she makes a conscious decision to spend time in them. Unlike 'Sinclair' who defies the rules of the Rotherhithe Tunnel, Sasha relishes the 'solitary contractuality'²² between herself and the non-place, gladly following the rules of the Luxembourg Gardens: 'The attendant comes up and sells me a ticket. Now everything is legal[...] I feel safe, clutching it. I can stay here as long as I like' (*GMM*, 46). Here the terms of the 'contract' are clearly defined, allowing Sasha a temporary sense of stability and a brief respite from her confused 'inbetween world': an ideal space in which to 'forget' who she really is. Indeed, Augé suggests that non-places can provide a numbing sense of pleasure that recalls Sinclair's 'narcotic' museums: the user 'tastes for a while— like anyone who is possessed— the passive joys of identity-loss and the more active pleasure of role-playing.'²³ Interestingly, even 'Sinclair', ordinarily captivated by the suppressed resonance of the non-place, occasionally relishes the 'joys' it offers: 'Only in the train could I step out of time and hear its brazen doors bang behind me[...] I could use it as a contemplative retreat' (*D*, 394). More than feeling 'safe' or even 'narcotic', however, when Sasha 'creeps' into one anonymous hotel room, Rhys employs metaphors relating to death, 'The lid of the coffin shut down with a bang' (*GMM*, 37), pointing at the profound psychological impact of space.

Sinclair's idea of using the non-place to 'step out of time' recalls the blurring of past, present and future in *Good Morning, Midnight*. If the city interweaves place and memory, Rhys's novel is a site for the interweaving of form and content. Rhys's use of the present tense for past events indicates that Sasha is living in the past, 'in a mental universe where

¹⁸ Wolfreys, p.163

¹⁹ Helen Carr, *Jean Rhys* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 2008), p.29

²⁰ Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000 [1939]), p.12. Henceforth, *GMM*

²¹ Augé, p.103

²² *Ibid.*, p.94

²³ *Ibid.*, p.103

nothing seems to change, all times are the same.’²⁴ In one example, the present tense creates a sense of immediacy, while the use of the second person pronoun draws the reader in to Sasha’s confused perception of time:

You are walking along a road peacefully. You trip. You fall into blackness. That’s the past—or perhaps the future. And you know that there is no past, no future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly, slowly, but always the same. (*GMM*, 144)

This description of walking in the city recalls a moment in Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913), in which the protagonist literally ‘trips’ over uneven paving stones, leading to an obscure but powerful flash of memory of a past experience. Rhys, however, seems to present a distorted version of this moment. Present, past and future are extremely confused, to the point where memory, or indeed any anchor to a particular time, is obliterated by a never-changing ‘blackness’. Once again, we are in a non-place, the city street, which is more than ‘narcotic’; it becomes a void that seems like a form of death.

However, this is not to say that non-places necessarily offer Sasha an escape from memory. Seeming to agree with Sinclair that ‘something which happens in a place permanently affects that place,’ Sasha takes a contrasting opposite approach to ‘Sinclair’ in her navigation of the city, planning routes that deliberately avoid ‘certain cafés’ and ‘certain streets’ that might dredge up memories, organising a ‘programme’ that does not ‘leave anything to chance— no gaps[...] no “Here this happened, here that happened”’ (*GMM*, 14). However, despite her carefully-planned itineraries and favouring of non-places, Sasha cannot avoid the memories the city holds. She walks around Paris ‘with the shadow of her younger self, perceiving it simultaneously with both past and present eyes.’²⁵ While ‘Sinclair’ sees the ghosts of others, Sasha sees her own: ‘I can see myself coming out of the Métro station at the Rond-Point every morning at half-past eight’ (*GMM*, 15). Furthermore, if hotel rooms are ‘always the same’, then each room Sasha stays in, even if it is not the actual site of a traumatic past event, somehow represents and even becomes it:

This damned room—it’s saturated with the past...It’s all the rooms I’ve ever slept in, all the streets I’ve ever walked in. Now the whole thing moves in an ordered, undulating procession past my eyes. Rooms, streets, streets, rooms...(GMM, 91)

For Sasha the non-place, which is supposed to lack identity and history, paradoxically becomes all the locations of her past, taking on all of the memories that she associates with them.

In *Downriver* Sinclair presents a London that is, like Rhys’s Paris, a place of indistinct time. Time is destabilised in the novel through apparent hallucination sequences, like the vision of long-dead labourers in the Rotherhithe Tunnel. The fact that these often occur unexpectedly in non-places makes them all the more strange. In one example, a train carriage is far from a ‘contemplative retreat’ that allows ‘Sinclair’ to ‘step out of time’. It becomes the location of a strange vision:

[...] the seat across from me began to bleach and fade [...] it crackled like water-resistant skin.[...] Earth ran on to the floor of the carriage like a shower of sand. I saw the outline of a girl emerging from a fault in the upholstery, head hung down, her long red hair covered her face. (*D*, 225)

²⁴ Rachel Bowlby, *Still crazy after all these years: women, writing and psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.35

²⁵ Parsons, p.144

The carriage seems to disintegrate inexplicably, its man-made elements invaded by the organic: 'skin', 'earth' and 'sand'. The ghostly apparition of a faceless girl in the upholstery compounds this unsettling vision. Blurring the boundaries between past and present, imaginary and real, Sinclair's novel provides a particularly disorientating reading experience. Again, form and content feed into each other and the novel's fragmented structure, with chapters divided into subsections that often seem unrelated, make it difficult to get a sustained, unified sense of time and place. Reading the novel calls for us to make connections across sections and chapters, mirroring Sinclair's psychogeographic navigation of the city, which is itself based around obscure connections between a multitude of memories and places. However, connections are not always possible and many allusions remain obscure, leading Julian Wolfreys to describe *Downriver* as 'unreadable,'²⁶ citing the reader's likely 'sense of irritation or rage'²⁷ at the text. That said, Wolfreys argues that this very difficulty makes the text a success, as the reading process represents 'an imaginative act of alternative mapping' that 'undoes the very coordinates on which the presumption of knowable, finite topography relies'.²⁸ It is 'the spatial organisation of London' itself that demands a novel of 'fragments, disjunctions, a series of "hits,"'²⁹ hence its lack of obvious organising principles. In its 'imaginative', 'alternative mapping' of the city, the fragmentary structure of *Downriver* helps Sinclair to transform London into a 'site of resistance', for 'What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.'³⁰

Although *Good Morning, Midnight* could hardly be described as 'unreadable', Rhys also employs a number of formal techniques that make for a disorientating reading experience. The text is fragmented, both in terms of its content and its typography. The narrative reads as a disjointed interior monologue, while visually, the text on the page is peppered with frequent ellipses and gaps. Any linear narrative frequently breaks down in the novel, with a number of interpolated flashbacks and a use of the present tense to describe past events, mirroring the way that Sasha's carefully organised itinerary through the city actually prompts memories, failing to allow her an escape from the past. Furthermore, although not as extreme as the hallucination 'Sinclair' experiences in the train carriage, from its very opening Rhys's novel presents us with uncanny moments: the room speaks, "'Quite like old times,'" the room says. "Yes? No?'" (*GMM*, 9). In both novels then, disjointed structure and the blurring of past and present, as well as of the real and the imaginary, reflects the unpredictability and fragmentation of urban experience.

Although Sinclair and Rhys's approaches display certain similarities, they differ in significant ways. 'Sinclair' explores non-places because they are sites teeming with repressed resonance. The author's aims have a political slant, as in these unlikely spaces the 'memories of what was there before' are brought to the surface, allowing the author, and the reader, to imagine 'alternatives to what there is'. Sasha, however, chooses to frequent non-places because they ostensibly offer a space in which she can forget, although ultimately she cannot escape the resonance of the non-place. Both texts correspond to Sinclair's notion of 'psychotic geography', 'the belief that something which happens in a place permanently affects that place.' Yet resonance for Sasha differs to the resonance unearthed by 'Sinclair', as it relates to issues surrounding her own confused identity and indistinct sense of time and place, rather than that of an entire city. For fleeting moments, in entering the non-place the characters experience a sense of respite from the weight of their own identities, and of the past. Ultimately however, the irrepressible link between memory and non-place comes to the

²⁶ Wolfreys, p.162

²⁷ Ibid, p.163

²⁸ Ibid, p.167

²⁹ Baker, p.43

³⁰ De Certeau, p.129

fore in both texts, defying Augé's notion that these spaces 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.' Sinclair's images of ghosts that literally burst through depersonalised spaces offer a warning of the dangers of 'writing over, erasing, and forgetting.' Rhys also highlights the futility of attempting to escape memory, honing in on the inner life of one character. In its sustained emphasis on the effects of the environment 'on the emotions and behaviour' of an individual, Rhys's depiction of Sasha's navigation of the city constitutes a form of psychogeography that is close to the Situationist definition of the term. Through a deft interweaving of form and content, along with unconventional, often uncanny depictions of the non-place, both novels call for the reader to consider the complex links between memory and urban space, as well as the ways in which we construct our own identities and those of the places we inhabit. We cannot avoid certain places in the hope of repressing memories, just as we cannot dismantle graveyards and think that the ghosts will depart. 'Haunted spaces are the only ones people can live in,'³¹ and the novels show us that it is the attempt to repress memory that is more harmful than memory itself.

³¹ Ibid., p.108

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