Uncommon Places and the Public

The Ship and the Car as Literary Locations

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Abstract *Town squares, public parks, or benches by the road—our imaginations of public places lead us directly to specific locations, conjuring up certain images of places and their relations to politics. Each of these places, however, has its own entanglements with further imaginaries and practices that complicate our understanding of what is (a) public; and each, in a sense hides a large extent of its politics. Calling to unsettle fixed imaginaries of public spheres and to create a deeper understanding of publics, this article reconsiders their discursive and imaginary location in terms of their mobility, their negotiating capacities, and their structural configurations, as shown in cultural texts. Looking at the car in Valeria Luiselli's novel* Lost Children Archive *(2019) or the abolitionist slave ship icon used in Ava DuVernay's* 13^{th} *(2016) and Netflix's* High on the Hog *(Season 1, 2021) as uncommon places that function like public places, this article addresses the usually unrecognized entanglements in places and public relations. These examples are connected to imaginaries of public discourse and to an active re-placing of the public beyond original locations. They help to (re)configure the definition of publics and public deliberation.*

Keywords *Publics; Public Sphere; Imaginaries; Popular Culture; Literature; Space; Place*

Introduction

Town squares, public parks, or benches by the road—our imaginations of public places often lead directly to long lists of specific locations, conjuring up images of place and its relations to politics. The squares in which we convene and converse are among those imagined, along with the Habermasian coffeehouse,

newspapers, and metaphorical salons. Parks invite to linger and play, offering respite from busy city life while affording the ground for protest and rebellion. Benches give pause, and link everyday lives to infrastructures and democracy; they foster remembrance and responsibility. This list is far from conclusive and may not even be fully reasonable. Yet, it reveals the links and networks that connect locations to politics, tie specific spaces to public discourses and sites to lived realities. Similar connections exist in places that do not directly count as such, linking the concept of publics to place and simultaneously removing it from place-based considerations. Each of these places has its own entanglements with further imaginaries, with ideals of histories, memories, and practices that complicate our understanding of what is (a) public; and each hides much of its political relations and workings—as place or as public.[1]

As the question of what a public is, if it exists, and how it is fragmented and contested has long been discussed and inconclusively answered, I suggest using both the imaginaries of public spaces and those of place to take a closer look at the practices and discourses that form what we perceive of as public. The public space, thereby, is a location or sphere where public encounter and deliberation can occur, while place is always already determined by relations, practices, and connections; space is metaphorically speaking an empty room, while a place is the living room that holds family life and memories. My goal is to study public relations—relations to public discourse and practices—in those places that are not immediately imagined as public place, that might not even be recognized as places, yet function in similar ways. If the town square or the park are promptly seen as public places, what can be revealed about publics through a look at a car as a fictional site of political and private engagement in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2021), or a glance at iconic abolitionist representations of a slave ship used in contemporary cultural productions such as Ava DuVernay's *13th* (2016) and the Netflix food series *High on the Hog* (Season 1, 2021)? By looking at these examples, I contend, we can learn about the political, historical, and memorial entanglements of both places and publics, sharpening our definitions of public interaction. If the town square or the park hides as much of their political structure as they reveal, what comes into the picture if we turn to the unexpected site's relations in place?

1 I have chosen to use the parenthesis for the article as the considerations in this paper address both questions of publics as communal and discursive communities (e.g., Warner's "reading publics") and the ascription of something as public (e.g., a public place).

These considerations are based on Jürgen Habermas's theory of a public sphere that envisions a body of public deliberation between individuals, discussing matters of public concern to form an opinion and communal resolution (*Strukturwandel* 97). Staged and imagined as a permanent discussion among (then) private men in semiprivate places—the iconic coffeehouse—this imagined sphere expands with print culture and newspapers (104; "Public Sphere" 1500). It is contested in Nancy Fraser's "subaltern counterpublics" (67) that encompass the growing recognition of diverse positions and lived realities in society and recognize those usually excluded and marginalized from the social hierarchy of the public (60; 64). Fraser's prime example is the feminist counterpublics of the late twentieth century with their conventions, bookstores, and lecture series (67). Mary Gray identifies "boundary publics" among LGBTQI2S+ youths in rural America, which link the concepts of publics further to placed practices. These are imagined discursive places in unofficial drag performances in supermarket aisles (6–7). In *Public Things* (2017), Bonnie Honig connects the idea of publics to objects and infrastructures that form a "holding environment" that gives structure to democratic processes and public considerations (5). A public is similarly imagined in Michael Warner's discursive publics of *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005), realized in the act of addressing an imagined group of people, for example, as "Dear Reader" (7). All these theories—discursive, debated, practiced, and imagined—reveal the relevance of place, as well as the political contestation of entanglements in and of publics.

It is not, however, the classic Habermasian or Warnerian ideal that I am interested in here, but those moments in which the concept of publics fails; in which it is overtaken by *dissensus,* in Jacques Rancière's terms, that cannot see the other's position as a valid political position (46); in which it encompasses larger pictures and multiple crises, and brings seemingly faraway conflicts close to everyday lives and lived realities. I consider the moments when publics break apart, disintegrate, and form multiple disparate layers of sociopolitical realities. Literature and diagrams, I argue, can work to remind us of the eclectic character of what we consider public spheres, revealing the unseen workings of political debate and public action.

Calling to unsettle fixed imaginaries of public spheres, this article reconsiders their discursive and imaginary location in terms of mobility, negotiating capacities, and structural configurations as shown in cultural texts. By addressing ties and relations that can be recognized in certain uncommon locations, it conceptually approaches political life in Hannah Arendt's "space of

appearance" (199), while thinking through imaginaries of places and publics. At first, the car in Luiselli's novel is seen as a political place that reveals private connections to the US-Mexico border and US-American history. Then, the paper's second part considers the appearance of the abolitionist slave ship diagram in a contemporary documentary series, addressing the current lived realities of Blackness. Fictional car and sketched ship reveal unseen connections in public places and ask us to reconsider our imaginaries of public spheres.

The Place of the Car: Locating the Car and the Border

The reading public created in Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* symbolically listens in on the tape recordings created throughout a family's journey to the American South-West. Not sure whether this trip is a vacation, a relocation to Arizona, or the beginning of the family's end, the protagonists record their thoughts and what they hear, creating a representation of their family life and inner conflicts. In these personal reflections, the novel links questions of migration to their political complexity, its narrative layeredness combining politics with a personal journey across the continent. Intertextually, the book reveals the contents of seven archival boxes in the family's car, and the family—mother and son respectively—records chapters of a (fictional) book about children lost at a border, the "*Elegies for Lost Children*." They contemplate Geronimo and Chief Cochise and the "last people on the entire continent to surrender to the white-eyes" and ponder how novels, poems, and pop culture figure in political and social discourses in society (204).

As we follow along, the space of the car becomes a place in its own right, a meaningful site of political deliberation. As the border regime and the nation's politics and discourses reach inside the vehicle and into the family's minds, borders between public and private, family/familiar and strange/r, and the difference between uninvolved bystander and active participant are negotiated. In its narrative and discursive complexity, the novel addresses many such sites of political engagement: Family history, the "familial narrative" (16), is mingled with the United States' past and historiographic descriptions; the mother seeks to record testimonies of unattended minors in detention centers and immigration courts (20) and the stories of children missing at the border (145); the father seeks to retrace Native American History through echoes and sounds (21); and the children attempt to find missing girls which merge with the *Elegies* and personal journeys (320). Questions of belonging and exclusion are taken up, for

instance, as the mother with her Mexican passport (129; 216) passes as French (219), evading xenophobic hostility (129–30).

While all these topics tie into political publics, there are three themes in the novel related to questions of publics: the negotiation of proximity, the reflection on documentation, and the discussion of migration. As the family travels South, the political and the personal merge, times and distances collapse, and everything concentrates in the place of the car. With their vocation of recording sounds and memories, the question of documentation looms large, negotiating possibilities of documenting. The family's constant preoccupation with missing children brings the border into the car, opening the private place to unreconcilable national debates.

Home and Growing Apart in Proximity

The novel's first part consists of the unnamed woman's thoughts and tape recordings. As she reflects on her family slowly falling apart and her indecision about joining her husband in Arizona, she thinks about their shared past in New York City. In passages called "Family Lexicon" (5), "Family Plot" (6), or "Time" (13), she recounts the happy life that started when they met over work, fell in love, and moved in together, each bringing their own child into the family. She wonders how practices can establish relations to certain places:

> It's never clear what turns a space into a home, and a life-project into a life. One day, our books didn't fit in the bookshelves anymore, and the big empty room in our apartment had become our living room. It had become **a place where we watched movies, read books, assembled puzzles, napped, helped the children with their homework.** (14 emphasis mine)

While the overflowing bookshelves can be read as a foreboding of the imminent separation, it signifies the coziness and comfort of a loving family. Big empty rooms contrast a home, yet hold the potential to be turned into a homely place through the characters' actions and relations.

In similar ways, the car becomes a place filled with familiarity and family traditions, children's games and the adults' thoughts. Its relations within and without, and the unseen connections to outside places, lever it into a mode of familial and political negotiation. Reflected in the adults' thoughts, for instance, are national events, and personal positions toward crises. Seeping into the car, these discourses maintain their links to the outside, rendering the fam-

ily's vehicle a curiously relevant place of public discourse. This is heightened by the book's intertextuality that lists ostensibly eclectic assortments of novels and non-fiction collected in the car's trunk, links newspaper and radio reports to the conversations inside, and engages songs, pop culture, and literature. The discourse and the public established here are epitomized in the car itself, where different forms of information and pre-discursive knowledges meet, rendering it symbolic for publics and the encounters therein.

The woman's thoughts and the children's presence in the car exemplify connections to publics. Like sponges absorbing their surroundings, public discourses soak up more than verbal information, taking in feelings and hunches, nuances and traces, or playful motions. The children in the car, similarly, absorb information and emotions in the car: turning off the radio to listen to the children in the backseat play, the woman ponders how their games have become "more vivid, more complex, more convincing" (179). In her musings, this is because they have adapted to the parents' somber thoughts and atmosphere in the car, taken in the severity of the political moment, and soaked up the complexity and accumulation of different thoughts, modes, and practices. For her, the children's inquisitiveness is positive. It changes the mood in the car: "Children have a slow, silent way of transforming the atmosphere around them. They are much more porous than adults, and their chaotic inner life leaks out of them constantly, turning everything that is real and solid into a ghostly vision of itself" (179). She thinks her kids are not as easily affected by the nation's mood and gloomy feelings, believes that children and their innocent play offer the opportunity to "modify the world [of] the adults around [them] enough to break the normality of that world, tear the veil down, and allow things to glow with their own, different inner light" (179). She addresses the idealistic trope of a hopeful future inscribed in the presence of children; their innocence and energy capable of creating a different world, and, in turn, the idealized need to do everything possible for a better future for the children.

The passage reflects on the mutual influence between parents and children in the car, even with things not actively spoken about. The woman recognizes how the children's "thoughts are filling our world, inside this car, filling it and blurring all its outline with the same slow persistency of smoke expanding inside a small room" (179). While the adults' responsibility toward the children remains central throughout the book, the car filled with billowing contemplation resounds the requirement for multiple perspectives, the accumulation of positions, thoughts, and knowledges, as well as the impossibility of certainty. This atmosphere in the car symbolizes the idealized concept of public discourse as

constituted in Habermas's private conversations between individuals, constituting a supposedly "rational" authority toward persons and the state ("Public Sphere" 1499). It also shows where the codified theory of publics and counterpublics fails, as many messages and themes are not transmitted via speech and discussion but by other means; "Perhaps we mutually infect each other with our fears, obsessions, and expectations, as easily as we pass around a flu virus" (Luiselli 179). The children, and their supposedly carefree behavior in the car, function as a reminder that there are other possibilities behind what seems to be normal, other perspectives to be taken, and other voices to be considered. They remind us of the centrality of tearing the veil, of trying to make sense of the world beyond our immediate perception, and of acknowledging its (in)tangibility.

Of course, the children are affected by the mood in the car. Fears and expectations have touched the boy, who attentively realizes that something is off. In the familial place of the car, he sees the family falling apart and notes the strangeness of growing apart in close proximity. Negotiating the distance to each other, he muses that "even though […] we were sitting so close together all the time, it felt like we were the opposite of being together" (193). The pensive atmosphere establishes a distance, pushing the family further apart. Thoughts of personal and political crises permeate the car. What is geographically far off, like the border, the lost children, and the topic of migration, becomes too close for the kids in the backseats and the mother in front to bear. It becomes a direct part of their lives, and of the journey itself, collapsing the distance into absolute proximity. This foreshadows the novel's climax in which different narrative strands merge, as the characters from the *Elegies*, the missing girls, and the family's children meet in the desert (319–334).

Matters of Documenting

Repeated references to documentation and archives address the hesitancy to define meanings. The lists of books, the soundscapes, and the family's open-ended discussions amplify this lack of closure. Indirectly, the son is aware of the dilemma of trying to save the moment and condensing perception into a single document. He wants to make the memory of the trip accessible to his younger sister:

> I could document everything, even the little things, however I could. Because I understood […] that it was our last trip together as a family.

> I also knew that you wouldn't remember this trip, because you're only five years old, and […] children don't start building memories of things until after they turn six. (210)

He feels obligated to record their story and knows that documentation hinges on different modes, making it impossible to save everything. Yet, in his childish mind, memory is definite: Once his sister turns six, he believes, she will suddenly be able to form memories. As if they were removed from personal perception and feelings, these memories originate in the family's general interest in keeping the moment alive through traces. It is once again the parents' thoughts and fears that infuse the children's minds as they start obsessing over lost children, the family's disintegration, and the possibility of archiving. For the son, recording the trip is an attempt to keep the family alive, to save the connection to his sister, even if she might no longer be part of his immediate life. With the girls lost at the border with their families' phone numbers sewn into their dresses (18), this ideal of safeguarding family ties becomes more complicated, as such ties are forcibly severed in the US border regime.

The book addresses different ways of documenting as each parent has found their version. Making a distinction between being a documentarist (the husband) and a documentarian (the wife), the boy links each to a specific practice: "The difference is […] that a documentarian is like a librarian and a documentarist is like a chemist" (192). One, it seems, works akin to a humanities scholar collecting traces of stories, sound documents, interviews, and narratives to piece together a scientifically valid and convincing story. The other is seen as a recorder of sounds, echoes, and traces that need no further contextualization, supposedly like a scientist using systematic observations and experiments. The family's backstory explains that the couple met while working on a joint research project documenting the more than eight hundred languages spoken in New York City (19). While both practices of collecting sounds were relevant in this soundscape, their new projects veer off in opposite directions. She embarks into "a sound documentary about the children's crisis at the border" (20) and he seeks to create an "inventory of echoes" concerning "the ghosts of Geronimo and the last Apaches," collecting sounds and their absences (21). There is no right or wrong way to document, this implies, just different practices and perspectives, yet all are reflected in one or another nodal point in the car.

Pondering what documents are, the woman considers their role in forming public opinions. Maybe the sheer number of references and documents ob-

scures essential aspects of the thing portrayed. "Suppose," she reflects, thinking about the boy's polaroid camera, "that documenting things—through the lens of a camera, on paper, or with a sound recording device—is really only a way of contributing one more layer, something like soot, to all the things already sedimented in a collective understanding of the world" (55). Soot and sediments soil the grasp of the world. Interestingly, it is not the world that is corrupted—not the thing that an image or a sound recording is taken of—but the image itself, the "collective understanding" and the grasp on the world. This palimpsest of documenting reflects the novel as a whole. Voices mingle, books are carried across the continent, and pictures are taken; all, asking us to realize that the problems addressed are far too large and complex to be made sense of.

Migration as a Personal Topic

Specifically, the topic of migration reaches into the car, as it starts appearing early on, when we get to hear about migrant children lost or detained at the US-Mexico border (17). These lost children complicate the world within the car with their constant presence in the family's thoughts and conversations; the political discourse is infiltrating the otherwise unconnected space of the vehicle that becomes a political place through these connections. Lost are the more "than eighty thousand undocumented children … [that] had been detained at the US southern border in just the previous six or seven months" (19). A friend's daughters were detained in the attempt to reach their mother in New York, lending another personal story to the statistics and numbers which the narrator lists:

> All those children were fleeing circumstances of unspeakable abuse and systematic violence, fleeing countries where gangs had become parasites, had usurped power and taken over the rule of law. They had come to the United States looking for protection, looking for mothers, fathers, or other relatives who had migrated earlier and might take them in. They weren't looking for the American Dream, as the narrative usually goes. The children were merely looking for a way out of their daily nightmare. (19)

They come to claim the protection, care, and safety provided by relatives and the state, not the rags-to-riches myth of "the American Dream" or the prospect of making money fast. This notion of familial protection and safety, mirrored

in the narrator's family itself, preoccupies the woman's thoughts, and occasionally the boy's as well.

The family's history mingles in the car with the family's disintegration and the stories they tell themselves about their time together. The children weave narratives out of the tale of the friend's daughters and political conversations of the parents which they overhear. Almost all, in different ways, revolve around child refugees as "the lost children" (75). Only later does the *Lost Children Archive* turn into a story in which brother and sister, too, are lost in the desert, representing the children in the narrator's statistics and those they meet in the desert, who have phone numbers sewn into the collars of their dresses (334). As elusive as the definition of "lost children" is the articulation of a world too fraught with different layers and perspectives, too weighed down by *dissensusal* perceptions and contradicting sentiments that do not always directly relate to the problem at hand.

In all three instances, the car demonstrates the indelible ties between public and private, discourses and locations, the border and the individual, through a focus on familiar and familial archives, mobility, and proximity and substitution. The problems, memories, and political realities addressed in the novel are too large to be solved by individuals alone. But with its careful consideration of personal stories, documentation, memory and research, the *Lost Children Archive* seems to argue that it is possible to negotiate the individual's position within these intersecting crises. The car in this family's journey becomes a familiar place for personal negotiation and mediation of the migrant crisis reflecting on our understanding of publics. Another example, of a thing becoming a place that troubles our understanding and muddles perception, is the abolitionist icon of the slave ship, *Brooks*, which highlights different relations to public discourses and places.

The Place of the Iconic Ship: Locating the Journey Without Place

With its comparatively clear origin, envisioned to be a beacon of abolition (Finlay 19), the ship—and more specifically the imprint and icon of the ship—have come to reference African American history and what Bryan Stevenson calls the "legacy of slavery" in a Yale-produced podcast. Strikingly, both Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* and the Netflix series *High on the Hog* use the icon to reference lived experiences of Blackness in the United States. One links contemporary systems of criminal justice to slavery, the other insinuates a mem-

ory of the American past connected to foodways and a sense of responsibility toward the future. The placing practices of the ship and the icon become relevant for addressing the American past and present in political, historical, and relational ways, influencing sociopolitical publics and personal interactions in public places. The culturally significant image as icon was created and circulated for the "white cause" to end the slave trade and slavery respectively. It has since been reclaimed by Black artists, as Celeste-Marie Bernier explains in her article on the image as imprint (993), as a memorial trace that impacts lived realities and cultural memories.

Created to provide a visual and affective trace of slavery and the Middle Passage, the image of the *Brooks* schematically shows bodies stowed in the cargo hold of a ship.[2] It is based on simple hand-drawn storing plans carried by slave ship captains and seamen, indicating "the cargo area and the space allotted for the different types of goods to be stowed"; these blueprints, Cheryl Finlay explains in *Committed to Memory* (2018), "were a type of visual shorthand […] used to increase the efficiency of packing ships" (34). The bodies we see are symbolic of the commodification of people and the inhuman treatment onboard the slave ships. While it is, in Western visual culture, largely associated with general anti-slavery efforts, the image of the ship was marshaled toward several distinct abolitionist projects over time: "the regulation of the slave trade, the abolition of the slave trade, African colonization, the suppression of the slave trade, and the abolition of chattel slavery" (29). The iconic representation is thus regularly reduced to single, simple readings and its affective capacity, which, although effectively mobilizing white patrons then as now, reduces the enslaved Black people to silent figures in need of being saved.

The trauma of this decidedly white Western archetype of the ship speaks through the silhouettes of men, women, and children neatly packed as if they were mere cargo. It leaves no room for African American articulations of pain and memory and erases the central components of slavery and the slave trade. Bernier, in her article "The Slave Ship Imprint" (2014), for example, calls out the assumption that such objects can project "the sum total of black experiences during slavery" (994). It is often surmised that the image of the ship is enough to represent the horrors of slavery and the entirety of its systems, usurping the voices of slaves and their descendants. This view is building obstacles to "historicizing, memorializing, and narrativizing" the past and Black experiences

2 Launched at Liverpool in 1781, the ship is deemed an "an example of a slaver at its worst" (Finlay 35).

(997). Addressing this lack of agency in representation, Bernier considers how Black American artists use the image of the *Brooks*. Especially Betye Saar has used the icon in her installations to evoke "the traumatizing realities of the Middle Passage" while focusing on "black transatlantic histories, memories, and narratives" (990–991). The image is used, then, to negotiate a relationship with the past, bringing in Black perspectives through mixed media installations.[3]

One important factor in this negotiation is the ship's relation to its audiences, to us, who see the icon and are forced to consider our own position toward what is seen and the times it symbolizes. Thus, relating once more to the theories of progressive topography, the place of the image demands attention and requires positioning toward the ship and its legacies. The very use of the term "imprint" implies, for Saar and Bernier, an ongoing presence of slavery's legacies, that cannot be ascribed to individual communities but remains a common denominator for Western culture. It implies the necessity to address and restitute discriminations and oppressions entangled in the American past. Quoting Saar, Bernier highlights this all-encompassing address of the imprint: "It would never wear out, because the slave ship imprint is on all of us" (991). With its connection to branding enslaved people as property, the imprint as affective ascription into society's mind and body returns memory and liability to a palpable realm that affects the way we deal with the past. Bernier speaks of a "tenacious hold" (992), in which the history of slavery stubbornly lingers, as a chance to visualize its social, political, and cultural stronghold over the present, using these ties to foster equity and liberation (993). The frequent "reuse and reimagining" of the symbol across the diaspora renders the imprinted icon a vehicle for memorialization and action (991).

The Persistence of Caste in the Nation

The relevance of the slave ship icon in sociopolitical debates in the present is visualized in Ava DuVernay's documentary about the 13th Amendment to the US-American Constitution and its impacts on Black Americans today.[4]

3 Especially Saar and Bernier use the term "imprint" as opposed to "icon" as it incorporates a certain tangibility and affect, imprinting a feeling of responsibility onto the spectator that the icon, which operates mostly in visual terms, does not (991).

4 In the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020, Netflix made the film available free of charge.

Its opening sequence starts with a white animation on a black background, interspersed with interviews and sound clips that describe the system of mass incarceration in America. The string of images begins with a chalky world map that is erased and replaced with a silhouette of the US, which is then overlayed with prison bars gliding in from the top (*13th*, 00:00:12-00:00:33). After initial descriptions and interviews with leading Black Studies scholars in different academic fields, the animation starts anew. Sliding onto the empty black background are the chalk-drawn Roman numerals XIII that grow, tip to the side, and become the backdrop for a bulletin board reading "Abolition of Slavery." This image then blurs and shifts backwards, as the words "Emancipation" and "Freedom" take its place before morphing into a circle of birds flying out of the image (00:01:50-00:02:04). When the last bird turns into a star of the flag and the remainder of the banner comes into the picture, the phrase "To ALL Americans" is superimposed, matching the spoken record of the soundtrack (00:02:04-00:02:10). As the words fade and the flag comes center stage, a magnification of the white stripes reveals the black figures of the slave ship icon in reversed color. Zooming in until the width of the section mimics that of the iconic diagram, the flag briefly turns into the imprint itself before both are overlaid and replaced with the text of the 13th Amendment: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, **except as a punishment** for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (00:02:11-00:02:20). The sequence ends with photographs of Black men in prison uniforms and working hats, representing the disproportionately high number of working Black inmates in the US (00:02:22—00:02:42).

The sequence's argument is as simple as it is insistent: with its contemporary criminal justice system, the US indirectly continues hierarchies of slavery, perpetuating a system—as Michelle Alexander explains in *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and the documentary—which maintains forms of inequity based on an American caste system that was merely redesigned, and not eliminated after the end of slavery (2). "Quite belatedly," Alexander notes, "I came to see that mass incarceration in the United States had, in fact, emerged as **a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control**" (4, emphasis mine). Tracing this system of racial hierarchies from slavery to mass incarceration, via segregation, Alexander links this caste system to an officially unrecognized devaluation of Black lives within society and within the system of criminal justice that incarcerates high numbers of Black men, partially stripping them of rights to political and social participation (94). Disproportion-

ate numbers do not emerge from higher criminality or purported cultures of poverty setting Black people on track to criminality. Rather the rhetoric of the "War on Drugs" that started with Ronald Reagan in 1982 used racialized tropes from the beginning (4), criminalizing actions arguably more common in Black communities (53).

As the film discusses these systems of control, it uses the *Brooks* icon as an imprint that reveals its entanglements without having to resort to direct images. The situation's abstraction is mirrored by the sign that speaks across times and spaces, opening room for the discussion of generally unseen topics. Hidden in plain sight, the experiences of Blackness within these systems of control remain a curiously unrecognized plight in everyday reflections. It is as if Rancière's discussion of *Dissensus* found a prime example within these debates: With the general inability to recognize the Other as valid and the Other's position as a legitimate political position, the *dissensus* within society does not always see conversation as fruitful debate or antagonism as antagonism (46). The ship, with its distinctive uses and its reconfigurations, epitomizes these references in its open-ended signification and its attribution of systemic practices over time.

Alexander's study, while boldly declaring the persistence of racial caste systems, directly asks for recognition and debate. As she likens the system to an optical illusion, "in which the embedded image is impossible to see until its outline is identified," she calls out an organization "lurk[ing] invisibly within the maze of rationalizations we have developed for persistent racial inequality" (12). Quite frankly, it is in these rationalizations and justifications that public debate and public consensus are held up, circling in unconscious evasions of the central topics at hand. Without looking deeper and recognizing the problem as structural and perceptual, there will be no changes to Black experiences and racialized structures. *The New Jim Crow*, and the film *13th*, directly call for a new "public consensus" (18) that is aware of these conditions and seeks "a conversation that fosters a critical consciousness, a key prerequisite to effective social action" (15). The existing consensus, the book argues, needs to be "completely overturned" to affect meaningful change (18). This ties to the ideals of discussion that define traditional modes of public deliberation, however, attending to a different layer of debate entangled and addressed in place, hidden underneath layers of soot—to use Luiselli's image—that encumbers facts and lived realities with bulks of information.

The reference to the flag becoming the ship becoming the Amendment is a reminder of these realities that exist at the same time and in the same place. It

reveals *dissensus* in public debate and points toward the (in)visibly coded spaces that, according to Elijah Anderson in "The White Space" (2014), white people traverse effortlessly and Black people need to navigate with care and constant assertions of belonging (19). Reading the ship's imprint as a place of negotiation that offers room to discuss the legacy that slavery and its creation—and cloaking—of racial hierarchies has in the present, allows recognizing discrimination and envisioning possible changes to the public consensus. Slavery and the labor of enslaved people are as woven into the prosperity of the nation as the iconic figures are in the flag of the film's animation. While the image becomes a place of its own in these discussions, it also influences the public view of other places, revealing ties and entanglements that remain unseen or otherwise unacknowledged.

Memory and Responsibility

The use of the ship in the series *High on the Hog* adds another practice of placing to the debate that, while working in similar ways, addresses different parts of public discourse and responsibility. Based on the eponymous book by Jessica B. Harris, the series traces African American food cultures in the US. It looks at specific locations, discerning the place of soul food in contemporary society. Many typical American dishes have their origins in the cuisine of Black Americans, and each has a deeper cultural significance. History, origin, and belonging are fused into the foods eaten daily, connecting to stories of hardship and resilience. Cultural memory comes in as these foods, seen as cultural practice, link nutritional intake with commemorative care and emotional healing. Tracing American foods back to its African origins is both an acclamation of African American presence and an emotional link to ancestors who are often devalued and forgotten. This connection to memory and its social and political implications are introduced through the *Brooks* imprint which is briefly shown during episode one to introduce an artwork that employs it.

This artwork is discussed by Finlay who starts her study of the abolitionist slave ship engraving with a description of Romuald Hazoumé's installation *La Bouche du Roi*, the Mouth of the King. She carefully describes the components of the work of art, the "plastic petroleum canisters made to resemble masks, with the sprout serving as a mouth and the handle as the nose," the wooden figures and masks of "Yoruba religious and cultural beliefs," and the references to trade goods that were exchanged for human beings (1). Interestingly, she goes on to note that the "darkened exhibition space creates an ominous yet

somber mood for the viewer, providing a **place of reflection and commemoration**" (2 emphasis mine). The room of the artwork engaging "the slave ship icon" (Finlay 5) is rendered a politically and memorially relevant place in its connection to the past, the relations it reveals, and the sentiments it conjures. As the room becomes a place, the icon, too, shifts into a topographic realm, linking its relevance to sociopolitical and commemorative functions and visualizing relations across times and spaces. Viewers are connected to the people behind the icon's figures, as abstract and entangled as the connection might be, linking the exhibition space—like the artwork and the icon itself—to the pressing responsibility to reflect and commemorate. Thereby, it is not the artwork *per se* that influences the atmosphere, but the immanent consequence of the ship: As a place of abduction, oppression, commodification, and death; a symbol for slavery, a trigger for remembrance, and an imprint of cultural trauma. In this sense, the icon has turned into, what Finlay terms "a powerful visual tool for the abolitionist cause" (27). This ostensibly inclusive reminder materializes in the documentary series.

Following the origin of African American cuisine all the way to Benin, *High on the Hog*'s first episode "Our Roots" starts with a stroll through Dantokpa Market, one of the largest open-air markets in West Africa, located in Cotonou, Benin. Host Stephen Satterfield and culinary historian Jessica Harris tour places that are relevant to Benin's food culture, visit restaurants and try various dishes, eventually coming back to times and traditions dating from before the slave trade. Host and scholar reflect on the diasporic ideal of returning to an elusive home. Satterfield narrates, for instance, how strange it was "to come home to a place I had never been, fragments of a lost memory were everywhere, and the sounds and smells and tastes" (00:04:15-00:04:39). As return and loss are a constant reference point in the episode, Satterfield longs to "go home" (to Africa) and feels in place here, while constantly having to negotiate his belonging at home in the US; he mourns the forgotten knowledge and culture of pre-slave trade communities, the things lost with the journey on the ship.

While the ghost of slavery is a constant presence in the episode, the series starts with celebrating contemporary foodways and chefs who keep traditional African dishes alive. We follow the pair through markets and restaurants, listen to their explanations of American foods that have their origin in Africa, and witness their exclamations that the rice brought across the Atlantic by the enslaved "built the wealth of our nation, our now [US-American] nation, before it even was a nation" (00:10:58-00:11:12). Food and sustenance are closely tied

to traditions, history, and home, as well as to the wealth and prosperity that the system of slavery and the physical strength of the enslaved brought to the continent. Lake villages like Ganvié, founded as a refuge from slave traders, are as much part of the story as is the insistence that African people participated in the slave trade too: Abomey Historian Gabin Djimasse explains in the episode that Africans "accepted to supply the Europeans with the manpower they demanded" (0:24:40-00:25:40). We similarly witness Satterfield walking along the road of the four-day journey toward the port of Ouidah, where people were loaded into slavers like the *Brooks*. An overhead shot of the straight red dirt road in the green forest then shifts to images of Benin's capital Porto Novo and Hazoumé's studio.

As Satterfield describes how the gas canisters used in Hazoumé's art connect the "struggles of modern life" to the "ancient past" (00:39:28-00:39:42), we first see a wall of identical gas containers stacked on top of each other. After a quick reference to contemporary Benin's dependence on petrol and Hazoumé's other works, a pamphlet with the slave ship imprint fills the screen. As Satterfield speaks about drawing a link between past and present, the image fades and *La Bouche du Roi* takes the imprint's place. It covers exactly the silhouette of the imprint (00:39:14-00:39:33). Following a communal dinner in which Hazoumé introduces the pair to pre-slavery dishes that, as he argues, have provided the necessary provisions for the enslaved's strength, Harris and Satterfield come to Ouidah, the place of the memorial *Door of No Return*. Harris calmly yet insistently explains the history of the place, the deaths and the horrors experienced here, and the unfathomable courage mustered by those about to be enslaved. Satterfield's voice breaks as he reflects upon the horrors of the place and commemorates the unbelievable strength and pain resonating in this place. He finally breaks down, weighed by the implication of the place and the personal resolution "to bring them [ancestors and their memory] home with" him (00:50:40-00:56:20).

The use of the imprint here, while brief and directly related to the artist's rendition and his studio, allows for the Black perspectives that Bernier calls for. It is the central anchor that connects past and present and the two continents. Visualized in the series is not only the horror and the white perspective that rendered the enslaved victims of unspeakable horrors but also the entanglement of Black people in the trade itself without alleviating white responsibility. The perseverance and courage of Black people are shown, as well as their impact on the US nation, its prosperity and food cultures. The ship, then, is the

imprint that weighs Satterfield down and connects viewers and contemporary societies alike to American histories.

The slave ship icon becomes a relational place that links a responsibility for the present to the affective commemoration of the past. As there is arguably no direct place connected to the Middle Passage, the ship's icon and the traces of food carried along for the journey become such places of reckoning in the series. They become places like the "bench by the road" that novelist Toni Morrison proposes as an anchor of memory and liability, circumventing the lack of memorial sites for slavery in the US-American public sphere:

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. […] There's no small bench by the road. […]. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to. (Morrison "Bench")

Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) came into being as a place for remembrance, that practices what she has elsewhere called "literary archeology" ("Site" 92). In combining available information with informed assumptions, Morrison can reconstruct past worlds from detectable remains, creating a place for African American voices, for the unseen and unrecognized dimensions of the past (92). Where slave narratives and icons systematically left out the horrors of slavery to keep white abolitionists on their page, she argues, her novels—like the representation of the ship in the series—offer room to observe the experiences of Black people, the atrocities endured, and the resistance mustered (91).

When Satterfield walks toward *The Door of No Return* at the end of the episode, announcing the journey of food culture the series will pursue, he commemorates the beginning of the Middle Passage as a place of hardship and resilience. The series' use of the ship's icon, like the memorial, connects the journey and the commemoration of slavery to a specific location at sea, defined by the confines of the ship. Through the conversation between Harris and Satterfield—where she describes the refusal to eat and the merging of foodways as forms of resistance and he chooses to center on "the story of our resilience" (00:54:18-00:54:28)—the imprint is coded as a memorial site for Black experiences and memories, the way Morrison's site of memory is. It renders the memory and legacy of slavery tangible in contemporary discourses in ways that public debate and public spaces do not. It works as a reminder that structures of the past are continuously affecting the present and that

attending to the memory of slave trade, middle passage, and slavery remains necessary for contemporary politics and publics.

Conclusion

As uncommon as it might seem to consider these literary and iconic spaces as public places, they function like the relational places of public debate. Highlighting the links to socio-political concerns, they reflect processes of coming to terms and reason. They do, however, reveal moments in which publics exceed discourse and deliberation as they negotiate proximity and distance, personal and political involvement, and grasp the disparate layers of debate and perception.

The car in Luiselli's novel, while functioning as a place of public deliberation, reminds readers that discourse and documents, while necessary, are too fragmented to represent individual views, as even those are disjointed within themselves. The presence of the family's children in the narrative reflects affective dimensions within public spheres that cannot be rationally explained, giving voice to political topics and global crises mingling in the car. It functions as a reminder that the public deliberation we imagine does not always take place in public but is entwined in the private and the personal and, most of all, not always fully seen.

While these readings of the fictional car reveal theoretical considerations about publics, treating the image of the slave ship similarly touches upon more direct fields of application. Black studies' continuing reference to the (in)visibility of racialized crises in contemporary society shows that these are part of the publics of contemporary US American society and need to be addressed as such. Like the boy's attempt to save the present for future reference, the iconic ship is seen as a symbol of this past as well as its relation to the present. The intangibility of complete documentation is brought up through the reminder that representations of Blackness fall short of giving voice to those presented. The icon's inclusion in the two documentaries, however, treats it like a political place that articulates its political structures on the one hand and commemorates Black hardship and resilience on the other, along with the responsibility that implies. These uncommon places cannot be subsumed under the common imaginations of publics. Yet, the fictional car and the iconic ship still are public places that hold significant positions for publics just like the town squares, public parks, or benches by the road.

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