

Leaky Walls: History and Imagination in the Transformation of the Missouri Floodplain

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In her essay called *The Site of Memory*, Toni Morrison argues that writers who claim their work is not autobiographical but rather a fictional product do not understand the force of memory or the way it is implicated in imagination.

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what nerves and the skin remembers as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "Flooding."

— Toni Morrison

PART I: FLASH FLOOD

Immediately following the killing of two guards at the US Capitol last July, a story darted across the AP wires that linked the shooter with the fact that he was from Valmeyer, Illinois. Just 25 miles south of St. Louis, Valmeyer was devastated in 1993 when a breach in the Columbia Levee caused the Mississippi River to charge through town, ripping houses off foundations and carrying them downstream. "Tired of fighting the river, and lured by promises of financial aid" Valmeyer was one of three Midwestern towns that voted to relocate to higher ground by participating in a Federal program that has become known as the "buy-out program."

After spending billions of dollars building levees, straightening rivers and rebuilding housing, the federal government has finally begun to shift the paradigm of river management and flood mitigation to a non-structural and sustainable approach. That is, after the great floods of 1993, federal agencies recognized it was time to stop mending levees and residential structures in the floodplains. While no government agency can force people directly off their own property, they can condemn flood-damaged properties, and require that any new construction be made above grade even without financial assistance. As an alternative to repair the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) can also purchase private property at after-flood value and provide financial assistance for old houses to be relocated onto new foundations above the floodplain.

The relocation of Mississippi and Missouri Valley towns ravaged by the

Floods of 1993 are the first-generation beneficiaries of this policy. Of the 140 towns that qualified for the buy-out program, Valmeyer Illinois was one of only three towns that succeeded in moving to

higher ground. The process of relocating out of the floodplain has proven to be extremely difficult and possibly more disruptive and devastating than a lifetime of floods. Then again, not all government agencies, organizations or individuals have lived up to their promises and not everybody actually moved

Russell Weston's parents, for example, decided not to be bought out by FEMA. Instead, they continue to live in their home in what has become the grassy ghost town of Old Valmeyer with a handful of others who pay taxes in spite of receiving no city services. Before it was established that Russell Weston Jr. had a history of uncontrolled schizophrenia, journalists speculated that after four years of wrangling with FEMA, some residents of the bottomland must have had reason to be angry with the federal government. Two days after the Capitol guards were killed, journalists dropped all references to the shooter's hometown — ravaged first by floods and secondly by a poorly managed buy-out program. By the time CNN interviewed Weston's sad parents on their front porch, no one could think of any reason why the federal government might have been the target of their psychotic son's rage.

PART II: THE PATCH

Valmeyer leaped out of the mainstream news because I worked with one of the other two towns that succeeded in moving, *en masse*, to higher ground. After the floods of 1993. I was a member of the design assistance team organized by a coalition between the American Institute of Architects Committee on the Environment under the leadership of its founder, Kansas City architect Bob Birkebile, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) whose staff had been formed in part by the environmental values and enthusiasms of Vice President Al Gore, and the FEMA who had been under advisement for many years about the need to shift floodplain management strategies, in order to seize the opportunity that accompanies disasters, and use it to innovate an environmentally sustainable infrastructure for the new town. Four years after our weekend workshops, the real process in Pattonsburg Missouri is staggering on.

Pattonsburg succeeded in moving upland in 1997 after decades of economic decline. Now situated next to Interstate 35, it sold its Railroad Depot to a Historical Society in Indiana and built its first gas station-cum-convenience store — the "Total" — in view from the highway and town. A dozen houses were carried on flatbed trucks to their new sites where they appear slightly stranded without any surrounding mature landscaping.

If one surveys the new town in relation to its initial design, the built version conveys a slightly surreal disappointment. Instead of building a city hall at the head of Main Street, the lot was auctioned off to the highest bidder, the local undertaker who built a funeral parlor on his site. Rather than transferring any of the material or scale

from Pattonsburg's dignified 19th century Mainstreet, New Mainstreet reads like a retail cluster at the entry to a subdivision, complete with four lanes and a grassy median. Residences are not clustered around Mainstreet, and while I never saw a person walking in the new town unless it was another member of the Design Team, I would suggest that Pattonsburg did indeed reproduce itself; not, however, with many of the formal relationships that made the old town so much like a New Urbanism model.

Instead of clustering residences for multiple efficiency they were sited — against the recommendations of the design team — by an engineering company with completed disregard for topographic variations or energy conservation. The buildings are spread out suburb like nearly equidistant from one another. After all, most residents had moved into town from farms, and were just about as close to their neighbors as they could bear. In a town of 400 people, everyone needed as much domestic privacy as possible.

Everywhere the eye travels, white domes of the new elementary and high school appear to follow. After a fire provided enough insurance money to replace the schools that were in Old Pattonsburg, the school board invited a firm to design and build these domes. They act as not only the primary meeting place in town, but also the tornado shelters, and a symbol of the tremendous accomplishments of renewal in Pattonsburg.

The only excitement that signals the future as much as the new school is now on permanent display at the *Old Memories Café*. Instead of a photograph of the old town or a visual history of the flood, the images revolve around a movie made in the old town. Last summer United Artists leased Old Pattonsburg for \$45,000 as the set for a film about a Missouri family conflict during the Civil War. *Ride with the Devil* is a \$35 million dollar film directed by Ang Lee (who made *Eat Drink Man Woman*, and *The Ice Storm*).

Many residents of the area worked as extras. The properties of the six families who still live in the old town with their satellite dishes and propane tanks were camouflaged during filming. The money spent on making old Mainstreet into a film set made everything about it look attractive, from the wood sidewalks and dirt roads, the painted brick, the colorful signs later auctioned off, to the buff boys with earrings. Especially beautiful was the false work that had to be constructed in order to support the new facades. The structures and mature trees were dismantled and packed up the day filming ended but some traces remain; a date that was sandblasted, posters for men of color to avoid conscription still mark the walls.

PART III: ALTERED STATES

English historian Raphael Samuel wrote that "memory work" which in previous times was performed by territorial belonging, is at the end of the 20th century being performed by places, by landscapes and architecture that stand in for complex webs of social life. I would add that this memory work is being accomplished by cinema, and perhaps even more so by fiction. I'm thinking especially of some of the books that have contributed to Iowa's identity and economy — *Field of Dreams* or *A Thousand Acres* or *The Bridges of Madison County*. The set for *Ride with the Devil* remade Old Pattonsburg, washing it in historical fiction where the relationship between memory and architecture remains uncompromisingly porous, never underestimating the load it must carry or the weight of its mass.

An evocation of the past life of things has preoccupied many contemporary artists. I associate this friction between memory and representation with my two favorite Rachel's: Rachel Rosen and Rachel Whiteread. Both have undoubtedly been conjured many times this weekend. When Rachel Rosen, the leading women android in the film *Blade Runner* tries to convince Decker, the leading man, that she is human, she shows him photographs of her ostensible family. The photographs evoke an emotional intensity that almost confirms Rachel's humanness, a virtual proof that she is human and not a manufactured object. On the other hand Rachel Whiteread's

sculptures are as evocative as Proust's *madeleine*, conjuring something about a past by exposing its interior surface, a ghostly presence of plaster and wax casts of everyday objects and architecture. Her works have been extraordinarily successful in drawing attention to themselves as well as their "absent host." But even before *The House*, and before Whiteread won the Turner Prize, English critic Lynne Cooke wrote: *Whiteread's work shows that when memory and imagination invest in [things] they are able, like Rachel Rosen, to cross over from the realm of the inanimate to that of the living.*

It is Whiteread's cast resin water tower, currently siring on top of a building in New York City, that Inassociate with Pattonsburg. In a strange inversion of hierarchies I enjoy the cast standing near its ordinary "copies." I like searching for it across the rooftops, and the way it makes visible the forever-invisible interior contents of its wooden sisters. The resin appears like memory of shimmering full water tanks. And I wonder how these water towers will appear twenty years from now.

The poet Adrienne Rich said that *nostalgia is amnesia in reverse*. Instead of forgetting the past, one remembers it too much, a kind of forgetting about changes and futures.

There exists a parallel in the animal world. Field studies of African elephants have begun to explain some of the reasons they are thought to have a superior long-term memory. Within what remains of their habitat, the elephants' survival depends on being able to find watering holes. They will journey across dry savannas in search of oases they once visited as toddlers. Because they trust their memory, they also die in search of these watering holes because in the duration of time, many wells will have dried up or have been destroyed. Too much memory can be as dysfunctional as too little memory. This, too, is the meaning of nostalgia.

PART IV: THE LEAKY WALL

I read the relations between old and new Pattonsburg as a critique of nostalgia because the relations between the old and the new places keep shifting, referring backwards and forwards. Critiquing nostalgia opposes the fixity of a home place, or a singular true home. It opposes the fixative that prevents blurring (movement) and it opposes the fixative that prevents disappearing (charcoal). Pattonsburg has been on the move since its conception as a town in the early 1800s. Its founder left before finishing his survey and the first land holders moved the settlement twice. Once because of their desire to be on the railroad line, and the second time because they had been deceived by the Railroads that later brought considerable prosperity to this town and the region. And yet, when Pattonsburg succeeded in moving out of the flood plain in 1997, it was after 60 years of economic decline and population loss.

When I first arrived in Pattonsburg, my task was to get to know the local culture and introduce it to the architects, the wetland engineers and the rest of the Design Assistance Team who would gather the next day. Instead of following my colleagues to the bar, I headed for the beauty parlor, the *Do Drop In*, at the other end of Main Street. With less than 400 people still residing in the town, the beauty parlor was alive with older women. A few were considering their options. Should they settle for the government buy-out of their houses and then move sooner rather than later to senior housing? They just didn't have the heart to watch their old homes knocked off their foundation and lifted onto flatbed trucks for the move to higher ground, wondering whether they would be able to sell them later. Margaret Lambert, the owner of the beauty salon, kept saying there wouldn't be much to the "new" town without the old houses and buildings.

Margaret's inclination toward the past was evident all over the beauty parlor. Mounted collections of antique hair fashioning equipment hung above the dryers. Running the full width toward the back of the narrow salon was a plastic, accordion-style room divider, separating and connecting the salon with the Genealogical and Historical Society next door. As president of the not-for-profit Tree

Climbers organization, she wanted to keep her eye on both places at once. Since Margaret died two years ago I still argue with her husband Tom about what to do with the records and books of photographs, and issues of the *Pattonburg Call* going back to the 1880s. He tells me that she wanted the archives to stay together and only to go to a Public Library and of course, Pattonburg has none. As of now, the archive remains in a trailer on the Lambert's farm. I always stop by the double frontage in old Pattonburg and ask Tom to tell stories about that building. I take my colleagues and friends into that ruined space and we look for the traces what I miss most, and what I still remember vividly. is that permeable wall between the beauty parlor and the Historical Society. That permeable zigzag line constructed a tentative division and simultaneous joint between oral and written traditions. It marked the interface between the love of appearances and the love of fact. That textile wall stood guard between the homosocial conviviality of the beauty salon and the conservative backbone of the family history buffs, preventing their eyes from seeing, yet keeping each party in calling distance, on both sides of this leaky wall.

NOTES

- ¹ Toni Morrison, *The Site of Memory*. In Ferguson, Russell, (Ed.) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1990).
- ² Associated Press, *Ames Tribune* (August 3, 1998).
- ³ Federal Interagency Floodplain Management Task Force. *Floodplain Management in the United States: An Assessment Report Vol. #1 Summary*. (Prepared by the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center, University of Colorado at Boulder, 1992).
- ⁴ Waters of Opportunity: The Relocation and Redevelopment of Pattonburg Missouri. Unpublished final report for the United States Department of Energy and FEMA by BNIM Architects, Kansas City, MO (1997).
- ⁵ Raphael Samuel, *Theaters of Memory: Past and present in contemporary culture* (London: Verso, 1994).
- ⁶ Lynne Cooke, *The Site of Memory*. In *DoubleTake: Collective Memory and Current Art* (The South Bank Center UK: Parkett, 1994).