

Places of Memory: Walking Tours of Manhattan

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A stroll along Manhattan streets reveals almost nothing except dark faces to connect the Negroes with the history of New York City.

— M.A. Harris, *A Negro History Tour of Manhattan*, 1968

HOME/(PAGE)

Written thirty years ago, the M. A. Harris guidebook of one of the earliest heritage guidebooks for tourists to Manhattan concerning the local history of African Americans. As a site of memory it marks increasing leisure time for a mass African American audience and travel. The notions of travel for African Americans in the decades preceding the book were not particularly pleasant ones. A journey was something to be endured to reach the destination place. Stories of difficult journeys to “reach a better” place are a motif in African American literature. In a sense this guidebook represents Harris’ own efforts at a spiritual journey and transformation from a young man lured by the temptation to drop out of high school to “Negro History Detective,” a scholar who spent his leisure time researching and teaching others about the history of African Americans. Harris constructed a small book that easily fits into one’s hands. It has a map of 1830 on the cover leaf and a map of the time (1968) that is situated just before Part One. It is not immediately clear why the map of 1830 visibly becomes the most important map in the book. However, through an analysis of the sites listed within the book it becomes clear that there is a marked increase in the number of sites related to African Americans listed in the nineteenth century. Notably, each map is only of Lower Manhattan. There are eight parts, each a section of various New York City neighborhoods. Part One is titled “Old New York” and is followed by lists of people and places. Most of the information in the book consists of portraits or photographs of people in connection with a street address. The guide is structured so that one can walk from address to address, story to story on each of the clustered streets.

Spike’s career as the writer and collector of these stories and places or as the “Negro History Detective” as he is often referred to began when tracing his paternal ancestors back to 1761. As a detective and witness to these stories, he places himself and others like him back into a newly constructed, (however invisible) picture of the world. His book in fact works best as a supplement to other guidebooks concerning the history of Manhattan. Ostensibly the purpose for the book is two-fold. The first is to “add a new dimension to sightseeing trips in Manhattan.”¹ He specifically addresses this new dimension in the reading of the city within the closing paragraph of the guide.

History is made by people—the place where history is made is only incidental. Yet who can deny that there is something special about Manhattan? It has lured people to its shores for



Fig. 1. An African American family Strolling Down Fifth Avenue 19th c. ©Collection of the New York Historical Society.

centuries. Now as one strolls about the city, one can be directly and visually aware of the connection between the Negro and the history of New York. What is true of New York is true of most American towns and cities; it is simply impossible to separate the history of America from the history of the Negro in America.²

Harris’ second agenda for the guidebook is for an audience who will confront the painfulness of the past. It is not a guidebook for everyone and it is only a very committed reader, and traveler who would select this guidebook. It is intended as a catalyst for other scholars to continue the work as part of a more expansive project of healing.

If (the guide) should also lead to a more through study of the American Negro, the student is sure to benefit.³

Knowing about this history for Spike is a way to prevent the repetition of the horrors of slavery and injustices suffered by the African Diaspora. Awareness is an act of construction. Reading about this widely untold collection of stories also is seen as a way to actively form a trajectory towards whom one might become or the role one might play. Walking is engaged as a peaceful struggle towards a goal. He writes:

The history of the Negro is one of the world’s all-time great dramas. Each of us plays a part and the end is not yet in sight.

Let this Negro History tour be a giant stride towards a happy ending.⁴

The specifics of the happy ending that Harris writes about of course may be understood in many ways particularly in light of the questions "who else is on the tour? Who else is walking?" These questions go to the core of other theories of remembering the city that transform this text and the very way the physical fabric of the city might be understood.

If walking might be rationalized as a form of constructing a home, and a group walk the building of a collective home, "how does one locate home when every center is someone else's Diaspora?"⁵ Harris' work challenges the historic location of theory in the Greek polis. Theory by this definition is produced by the act of leaving one's home city to witness a religious ceremony in another city. Historically theory began and ended back at the home polis. As an "African," "American" "historian" in 1968 "Spike" occupied many locations at the start of his journey and operated between these various sites to construct a history that marks other historical centers. A Negro History Tour of Manhattan creates the possibilities for multiple cities and multiple locations for home and transforms a static concept of theory.

"Location" here is not a matter of finding a stable "home" or of discovering a common experience. Rather it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, "places," or "histories" that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories like "Woman," "Patriarchy" or "colonization," categories essential to political action as well as to serious comparative knowledge. "Location is thus, concretely a series of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces."⁶

This paper briefly examines the Harris document as a found object and (re) presents it in a manner that reflects issues of subjectivity, erasure and transformation through discussion and illustration of two examples of tours based on the book. The first tour demands physical occupation and movement within the fabric of Manhattan where connection and narrative are dependent upon a walk. The second tour, a website titled *Uncovering: Places of Memory* explores the potential of that media to study the possibilities to travel and tour remotely across spaces and times. As a place the website still under construction, was initiated in 1998-1999 designed by this author and two website constructors.

STROLLING/ TOUR ONE

As tourists rather than travelers we the readers occupy a space, which is entirely planned ahead of the actual event, and are a series of experiences, which are repeatable upon demand. "Tourism presupposes a clear or singular location from which tourists sightsee to link the fragments of a chaotic existence together into a narrated whole (or unified experience)."⁷

The Harris guidebook is interesting in terms of theorizing the history of the city in that it problematizes the location of the tourist and the act of sight seeing.

In spite of one of its stated intentions ("Now as one strolls about the city, one can be directly and visually aware of the connection between the Negro and the History of New York"⁸) the guide is not overly concerned with the connection of visual information from the city to the stories. For example many of the addresses he lists, especially in lower Manhattan, not so much so in Harlem, have no connection with the story.

No tour of New York would be complete without mention of Downing's Oyster House, at 3-7 Broad Street at the corner of Wall Street. The site is now occupied by the Morgan

Guaranty Trust Company building.⁹

He goes on to tell the story of Thomas Downing who specialized in pickled oysters had an underground railroad station and helped put out the fires of 1835 with vinegar from his operations.

The disconnection of narrative and the visual nature of its present location make the actual stroll not so interesting to the tourist seeking a tableau. However, in some cases such as at 44 John Street, which is the site of the oldest Methodist Church in the United States some significant transformations have occurred in the last 30 years. In 1968 Harris writes:

At 44 John Street, between Nassau and William streets, is the John Street Methodist Church. Formed in 1766 on Horse and Cart Lane (Now William Street) it is the oldest Methodist Church in the United States. A picture of its first sexton, Peter Williams, hangs on a wall in the Church basement.¹⁰

Later in the book one learns Peter Williams was an African American man. Today, walking past this site one can see a mural that is a copy of the painting Harris describes complete with the presence of the sexton, Peter Williams. This mural sits in a small pocket park next to the church. Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church at 150 Church Street is another church which was invisible at the time of Harris' writing now has a bronze plaque set into the sidewalk in front of where it used to stand. It is important to note that the churches play one of the largest parts in providing a tourist's tableau. The churches as a group tended to indicate the center of the African American community. They were places which sponsored educational programs in fact were the initiators of the first public schools in New York. The churches kept records of births, deaths marriages and property deeds. As spaces of resistance that are visible and physical places in the city fabric, the churches can be clearly located and serve as markers for the Northward migration of the African and African American community towards Harlem. As keepers of the history, perhaps it is the strong presence of Mother A.M.E. in Harlem that has been the force behind the new plaque at one of its earlier sites on 150 Church Street. Tourists today flock to witness Sunday services at Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Saint Phillips and others still in operation in Harlem.

However, much of the *Negro History Tour of Manhattan* is about absence of the visible mark, of the absence of general knowledge of the sites and about absence through the practice of walking. De Certeau writes in the *Practice of Everyday Life* "to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a (place)."¹¹ Walking is also a way to enunciate and is a projective act. Harris' address to the sites gave them new life through the superimposition of his stories into the visible fabric. This act brought and still draws people to these places which are about the dead. The walking, traveling tourist itself suggests the ghosts, whose presence can be sensed in the urban fabric via the guide. These noplaces or nowhere enunciated by the tourist's body is a haunting, and haunted places are the only places people can live in.

MAPPING/TOUR TWO

"What the Map cuts up the story cuts across."¹² Neither map nor story is ever whole on Spike's tours. In Tour One map and story are disconnected. One can read the entire guide and connect stories together editing to create a coherent narrative or make a physical linear walk within a neighborhood, thereby reading a disconnected series of site descriptions. Tour Two, which is via webpage, places the visual emphasis on map over story to connect story. In a sense the map is a panorama scheme, but the structuring possible with the web allows for story to cut across map so that both map and narrative can exist simultaneously whole in the same space. As a beginning the sites were clustered into three eras on the Home page which defined the conditions of African Americans in Manhattan. Each of these eras is indicated by detailed maps of the period with listed site

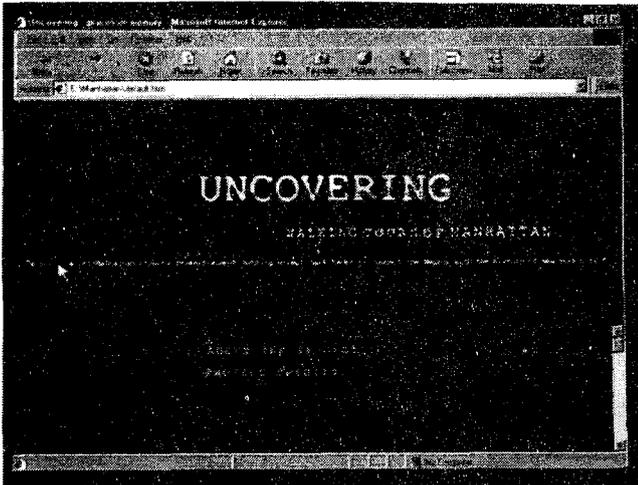


Fig. 2. Home/page, Places of Memory Website

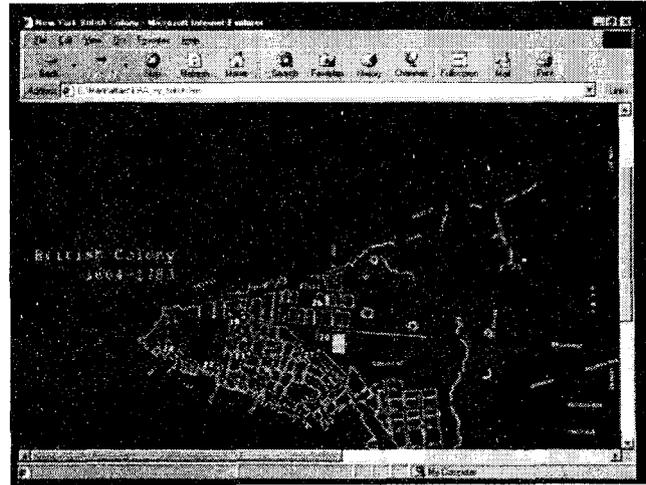


Fig. 4. Era Map Detail, Places of Memory Website

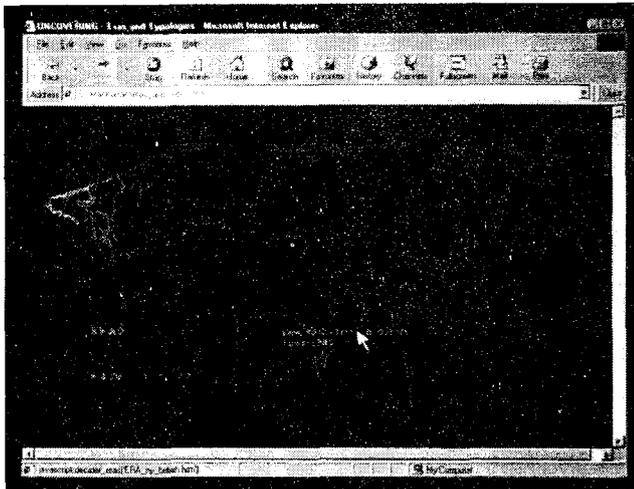


Fig. 3. Era Map, Places of Memory Website

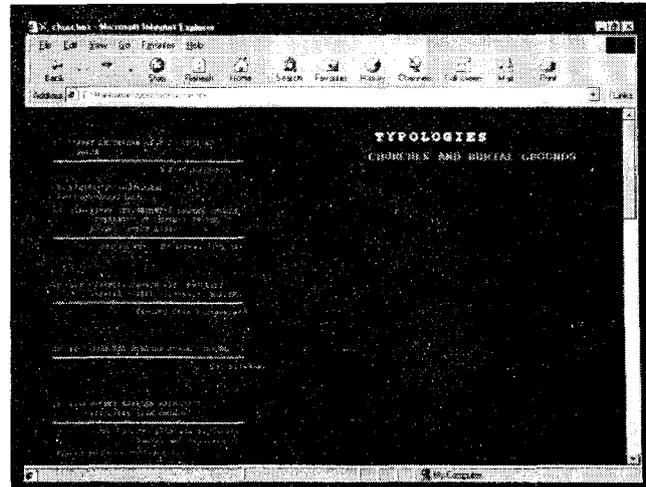


Fig. 5. Site Typologies, Places of Memory Website.

location, and site story. Many sites have come from Harris' guide-book as well as research at the Schomburg, the New York Public Library and the New York Historical Society. It is of course by definition always incomplete. It is the intention that site stories be researched and written by multiple authors and inserted into the site windows. Within this window is space for an image of the site or images which are relevant to the text. Within this space is a hot spot titled "Monuments." This is space for an architectural marker, memorial or monument for that particular site. Returning to the homepage one can access a discussion room or sites through the site typology list. This list includes pages, which allow for the grouping of Churches and Burial Sites, Farms, Schools, Businesses, Literary Places, Entertainment Places, Districts, and Underground Railroad Stops. Within each of the locations, stories of individuals cut across. Perhaps places for families or individuals ought to be included in these pages. A section that includes other specifically relevant websites and readings will also be created.

Within the website, the collapse of space entitles stories to be connected and for storytelling to have its place. As a space the *Uncovering Places of Memory* website allows for the possibility for other ways of constructing a historical document containing multiple points and perspectives. As a memorial in relationship to the physical and real Manhattan the website is able to mark one's physical absence, but project presence of place through the diverse and multivoiced narrative contributions to the site. "Walking" here is to construct stories. As there is no guide only a structural

coordination of stories and contributions to the site, the tourist must become traveler and explorer. Walking here is an enunciation of style and an act of making home.

NOTES

- ¹ M.A. Harris, *A Negro History Tour of Manhattan* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Corp., 1968), pp. xii.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. xii.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. xii.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. xii.
- ⁵ James Clifford, "Notes on Theory and Travel" *Traveling Theories: Traveling Theorist's Inscriptions* Vol. 5, (California: Center for Cultural Studies, 1989), pp. 179.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 177.
- ⁷ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), pp. 13.
- ⁸ M.A. Harris, *A Negro History Tour of Manhattan* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Corp., 1968), pp. 110.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 110.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- ¹¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Translated by Steven Randall, (Los Angeles, CA: Univ. California Press, 1984), pp. 103.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 129.