
**An Ethnographic Analysis of Media, Memory and Place in Teju Cole's
*Every Day Is For The Thief***

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Article Received: 08/11/2024

Article Accepted: 15/12/2024

Published Online: 17/12/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.12.99

Abstract:

Memory and Place are two distinct entities that are unrelatedly related. Memory and sense of place have to do with more than 'physical' monuments and structures. In other words, the idea and imagined reality of place coexists with established and factual understandings of a topographical, social, and demographic nature (Tolia-Kelly 2004). So in human life, memories are built upon places and places constitute those memories. Both are intricately interwoven in constructing experiences and transferring traditional values. Change of place transmutes the way of shaping one's memory. It alters a person's unhindered beliefs of tradition and inherited notions of a place. Memories are visual images of one's experience perceived from a personal and autobiographical sense. We never hesitate to daydream or visualize our favourite place, especially for a migrant or a refugee to whom it is their native country that inspires them and which tends to enchant them even though they know the place will never be the same as their past. This article tends to analyse Teju Cole's revisit to his native country after fifteen years and his experimentation with his past self and memories of the present state of Nigeria.

Keywords: Media and Memory, Place, text as a medium, visual images, Autobiography

Introduction:

Memory and Place are two distinct entities that are unrelatedly related. Memory and sense of place have to do with more than 'physical' monuments and structures. In other words, the idea and imagined reality of place coexists with established and factual understandings of a topographical, social, and demographic nature (Tolia-Kelly 2004). So,

in human life, memories are built upon places, and places constitute those memories. Both are intricately interwoven in constructing experiences and transferring traditional values. Change of place transmutes the way of shaping one's memory. It alters a person's unhindered beliefs of tradition and inherited notions of a place. Memories are visual images of one's experience perceived personally and autobiographically. We never hesitate to daydream or visualize our favourite place, especially for a migrant or a refugee to whom it is their native country that inspires them and which tends to enchant them even though they know the place will never be the same as their past. "Far from bringing about the destruction of either memory or selfhood, the achievement of involving the imagination is to keep the memory of place alive. In and through time, memories are reworked, reconstituted, and reconfigured to suit the constantly changing self that exists temporally." (Trigg 2013)

Revisiting Self

Migrant people are living in a similar belief where they experience such loss of inheritances from a particular space and they question their own identity and belongingness. According to Sean Field, 'linguistically, "loss" suggests absence, but this loss of home and community has an ongoing emotional presence' (2008). Such transnational thoughts posit duality in the mind leading to scepticism, disintegrated self and inability to adapt to their present environment. This sense of alienation restrains oneself from socialising with others and hardens to relinquishing their past. These memories torment their state of mind and recurring spatial inferences keep them in a dilemma. This article tends to analyse Teju Cole's revisit to his native country after fifteen years and his experimentation with his past self and memories of the present state of Nigeria. Whereas he fails to understand that "... The experience of place is not a moment frozen in time, but an often socialised, somatic, political effectual encounter with the multiscale dimensions of time and place" (High and Lewis 2007). He tends to find his past self in a different time and spatial situation where he tries to bridge the past with the present using his autobiographical memories. The transgression of Nigeria affects his mental state where he expects an unchanged society which is unrealistic, where he states "Fifteen years is a long time to be away from home. It feels longer still because I left under a cloud." (Cole 2007). Memories are frozen time that records the experience of place; here, personalized memories of Cole express his disillusionment with change; over time, both himself and the country underwent a drastic change that hindered his disillusionment even at his first moment in Nigeria after fifteen years.

I am breathing the air of the city for the first time in a decade and a half, its white smoke and ochre dust which are as familiar as my own breath. But other things, less visible, have changed. I have taken into myself some of the assumptions of life in a Western democracy—certain ideas about legality, for instance, certain expectations of due process—and in that sense, I have returned a stranger. (Cole 2007)

The experience of place and the environment can trigger one's spatial cues and lead them to abandoned memories of the past. Cole tries to correlate his past self with triggered sensory and spatial cues with his present self. Still, the changes in his present self deny the amalgamation and create a question of identity and nonconformity of self in his native country. Where he feels like a stranger who is new to the customs and traditions of his country since he got accustomed to the western ideologies.

Ethnographic analysis

The house, of course, is unchanged. It is smaller only in memory. Memory and the intervening years, many of which I have spent in cramped English flats and American apartments, limitations I have endured like a prince in exile. (Cole 2007) Cole projects the house as an unchanged entity which carries his past memories regardless of his personal transformation. He projects the everlasting connection of memory, place and time through his revisit to his Nigerian house. His comparison of places shows how he was distressed in an alien land, where his memories are entreating his past socialized place as a much anticipated and admiring place regardless of the decaying social condition in Nigeria that he has witnessed through his own eyes. The place is an everlasting entity which coheres with time, apart from the timely wither it constitutes and represents a cohesion of memories and emotions. Unlike the physical place, mental space is a transforming notion that functions differently regarding a personal memory. Even though he has experienced better social and cultural conditions in America because of his personalized affiliation to his home and his home country he has compared himself to a prince in exile.

“The view used to amaze me when I visited this house in the past, and while I was away, my thoughts would periodically wander over to it.” (Cole 2007) Anxiety for a lost past, or a lost place or person in a lost past, can result in nostalgia, a form of place-based remembering, linked to (re)producing and maintaining a sense of identity. (Nardi et al 2020) Cole narrates his experience in such a mental state where he revisited his country to bind his emotions but he travels with a nostalgia which has been described as ‘historical emotion,’ and even as a ‘symptom of our age’ (Boym 2001). According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is best understood as a ‘longing for a lost time and lost home’ (Nardi et al 2020), where Cole yearns for his past and the place he had lived in. In some cases, nostalgia can therefore be construed as a defence mechanism against historical upheavals, individual or societal trauma, and societal change. (Nardi et al 2020). Here Cole uses it as a defence mechanism against the changes in his country. The changes have abducted the similarities of his memories, where he runs behind an unrealistic past and nostalgia at a different time.

At times, Nostalgia can take on a dizzying, uncanny effect when coupled with the fraught feeling of relief rather than longing after someplace that is gone, rotting, or destroyed (Navaro-Yashin 2009). In understanding the spatial relation to memory it becomes mandatory to know that the human mind always longs for past unrealistic events, even

though it knows perceiving the same effect is impossible. It is the harsh reality of memory that constitutes the downfall in many historical events where the ruined and withered places are standing as a result of such misdeeds. This sense of nostalgia is a historic emotion which is transcribed as a symptom of countries like Nigeria.

Sometimes after the experience of physical loss, for example, place attachment can be 'activated retrospectively' (Low 1992). Loss is a common factor that unites emotion and helps us to empathize with others on the grounds of personal memory. Cole empathizes with a woman who has lost her husband in a robbery and states that the memory of the man she loves is forever tied to the degradation of that one night. (Cole 2007) the memories of loss haunt oneself forever, where it vandalizes an individual and infiltrates one's mind and disdains the place. And I consider myself, consider my own loss, too. Father's memory has already become so insubstantial... (Cole 2007) even though the memory of loss is insubstantial, it is closely associated with the place and the attachment of the place triggers one to remember his past that connects them socially and makes them feel or associate them with the natives. Remembering is a psychological cue that relates and structures memories to interlink places that can activate introspection of one's past. The home, mementos, childhood trinkets, murals and graffiti, and even burial places fix the presence of the past in everyday materiality and familial, social relations. (Cole 2007)

Remembering does not happen in a political vacuum, but occurs within wider structures of power and inequality (Nardi et al 2020). Most impressive and influential memories are structured in hard times only; it makes human experiences much more vivid and clear that will be stored in human memory for a longer time and revived with clarity. Not all memories are cherished and their markers, albeit visible, may cease to make sense if the frame of reference by which they are viewed changes. (Nardi et al 2020) Nigeria is experiencing such a hard time where its economic constraints are leading the country into a transgressive path. Cole expresses his distress by distinguishing his past memories from the present. He relates the spatial difference of the west with the current Nigerian state and regrets its downfall in moralistic and friendly social life. People are becoming transgressive and money minded. A society that thrives upon mischiefs and crimes for the materialistic cause influences the writer to record it as narration.

The air in the strange, familiar environment of this city is dense with story, and it draws me into thinking of life as stories. The narratives fly at me from all directions. (Cole 2007) Autobiographical remembering is embedded in affective, interpersonal, sociocultural, and historical contexts - Improvised selves are created in present contexts to serve psychosocial, cultural, and historical purposes - the construction of coherent personal narratives that give meaning and purpose to our everyday lives. (Barclay 1995) The social changes perceived by individuals are inducing the people to react accordingly, Cole perceives this defence mechanism of the people as a new ritual that differs from his memorial

past. He senses these changes as the necessary account of registering as stories to pass on to the next generation. There is a disconnection between the wealth of stories available here and the rarity of creative refuge (Cole 2007). And yet, and yet. The place exerts an elemental pull on me. There is no end to fascinations. (Cole 2007) Even though the place poses many stories, society works as a barrier that stops creativity. He doesn't see any further future for creativity in his country where the society corrupts his own people. I claim that autobiographical experiences that cannot be reconstructed and shared through spoken or written language, music, movement (e.g., dance), art, literature, or science precipitate feelings of existential stress because articulated deep motivations cannot be related intimately to others. (Barclay 1995) Since his society is not in a compatible state where people don't care for the literary, social and cultural values. Money-minded policemen, a pastor who owns BMWs, and corrupt and misleading people are examples of the Nigerian society that he recreates through his own memory.

No sense emerges of the combat between art and messy reality. (Cole 2007) A country full of moralistic chaos and degradation of social self can never be a prosperous environment that helps to construct meaningful memories.

...losing or lacking the generative abilities to improvise selves through the functional reconstruction of autobiographical memories results in the subjective experience of alienation from others and society. In addition, one comes to a sense of self fragmentation. Under such circumstances it becomes increasingly difficult to ground oneself in the past, to make sense out of present experiences or imagine possible adaptive futures. (Barclay 1995)

Memory as an embodiment of self

Memories are not just personal embodiment of self but also carry a sense of personal history. What, I wonder, are the social consequences of living in a country that has no use for history? (Cole 2007) the respect and honour that we have for our history is not something arbitrary, but it is a symbol of our cultural heritage and ancestral practices. The account of such history is closely entwined with the significance of place and memory, where all sort of art forms, including our everyday activity, becomes a part of that region's collective and social memory. He discerns a sense of negligence in preserving such artifacts and monuments of his country, which shows a disregard for preserving such rich history and collective memories of Nigeria.

Conclusion

He propagates for a rewilded self, creating a shared culture and intergenerational communities. So what people in one part of the world think of as uniquely theirs takes its

rightful place as a part of universal culture. Art can do that. Literature, music, visual arts, theater, film. (Cole 2007) Art has the unique nature of creating such a shared culture where memories and values of that one region can be transported to a universal culture. The place provides a background for the person, a tradition that the person has inherited and which shapes the person, even if only through rejection of traditions of the place. It is, then, something (someplace) upon which subjectivity and community are founded. (Donoho 2014) So in most of the migrant cases including Teju Cole himself experience such cultural rejection and change of identity because of his migration to America. He finds his subjectivity and his own self there and so he integrates himself with a new community. Here memories and place have an unbreakable bond in creating his socio-cultural identity and social values. The place is a concept that contributes to the construction of one's memory; in a globalized environment, it should not be a contributing factor nor a constrain that restricts the creation of an organized community with the amalgamation of numerous smaller communities together as an evolved society and shares the social values by celebrating its cultural differences. Cole recreates Nigerian society through his experience of revisiting his country, where his memories distinguish the traditional and socio-cultural practices of the present from the past. He envisages the causes of such social transgression and he employs his Western ideals and influences to enhance his society by adopting a social model that breaks up the spatial bounds and paves the way for an improved social structure through his memory.

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