

CREATIVE WORK

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# Losing Ground? A Meditation on Being in the (post)Coloniality of Public Space: Part One

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Space:  
Expansive  
Warm  
Collusional  
we live in a bath of joy  
we become separate (d) from joy by  
Crowned and endowed,  
White masculine  
Members'  
Power  
To map  
Power to draw  
Power Remains  
Hidden  
Under Flags  
Under Future  
Under Bright.  
mapped and mined  
with devices,  
Space  
keeps possibility  
inline  
political allotments  
Work  
by design  
and Race  
Class  
Latitude  
wrap us  
Into ghettos,  
bars us  
from futures  
brightly lit  
yet  
dungeon dank  
like cities paved with gold  
but empty of life  
healthy  
Swamps

### **Anecdote number 1**

On an evening, we leave to go somewhere. It is a very intentional walk. Any time one walks in Nassau it must be intentional because Nassau has become one of the most unwalkable and unwalking cities I know. Reckless driving, cratered roads, and even worse sidewalks are notorious for throwing people down, pushing them into traffic, killing them with decay. A Cube and Note generation without license plates, flying in the face of simple laws of the Bahamian roads, scatter the road in treacherous traffic jams; the once cheap cars of the poor, taken over by a lawless crew—suddenly, the road has three or even four lanes, and the badly cared-for-sidewalk comes into conversation with wretchedly driven cars of ill-repute. Never mind the drivers; it is all the cars' fault. The drivers are vex; locked out of life, they have no other escape than anger and implosion. Disaffection and disconnection create anomie. We walk down the road, strewn with fossilised relicked infrastructure of colonial rule and class superiority marking place and spatial (in)justice. Once upon a colonial time, people knew where they could live; class set place and places were mapped in colour and class. Once tree-lined, majestic avenues succumb to popped, hanging wires and deep ditches, stumps decay in the sun. The city has left the people without any warning. We pass folks setting up for an event, yet our neighbours say nothing to us. They all but sheepishly avoid us.

We descend the wealth of the hill into what was once booming downtown Nassau, a hub of life, commerce, and bars. It was also—once upon the 1990s—a place of clubs and restaurants. Today it hardly registers in its derelict neglect where life once thrived. Most of the places, by 5:00 pm, are shuttered and beyond-the-grave dead. No longer is there Marlborough Arms or Distinctive anything. It is simply international chain shops that all peddle the same stuff from one end of the world to the next. Nothing unique or Bahamian. Now they will strip this down further to make it a copy of every other cruise port in the world, where culture is sanitised, and the space is off-limits to those who do not belong. If you work there you can cross into the blissful space of tourism consumption in non-place where nothing is really natural, but everything is collapsed into everything neutral and innocuous. Transnationalism resides in this global world of (multi)ports, luxury brands and eerie suspended animation or arrested development. Much like the golden arches, we feel anaesthetized by its tasteless, spiceless, flatness.

On our return to place before 8:00 pm, cordons block the road. Police stand in front of the barriers, but do not stop us. The street's custodian, we never knew there was one, a young Black woman, Shanquilla, braided and bejewelled, stops us with an American who prides himself in saying that he's not from here so won't say anything except we cannot pass to walk the 50 yards home. His superiority and disregard for the people, feeling empowered over Shanquilla, and Shanquilla's power to block, all because she is insignificant, are interesting together. It is like the power of the Black woman to run interference between her employer and all the other negroes around. Because she is woman. Her little power proves her better than the rest of us. This too does Black men empowered over their brothers in paradise. It is not exclusively the work of men or women, but those in-between who can stop our lives through their existing in the boundaries, buffer zones to prevent us rubbing up too closely to our better masters. We have returned to days of yore, or did we never leave? when space was tightly controlled

for those who mattered over their chattels. A bilious mass rises up in the backs of our throats. Liverishness is on our faces. Our indignation and venom shall not rise up; we have been educated into controlled subsumption; all the venom they provoke in us must be swallowed, we will die from poison, not them our own venom they provoke poisons only us. Our spaces are theirs and they are happy to show us. Once upon a good time, these were white areas, anyhow, and you better remember that. Though many do not. This has become commonplace. The roads are closed, the police enforce road closures, traffic diverted, people stopped, “quietly”, roads taken into gated community spaces, and international consortium zones, now no longer passable by joe public. This is a general happening: space moves into places owned by international big brands, then closed off to local users who do not work behind their gates. The government must know; it signs-off on headed agreements sectioning off acreage, yet no one says anything. The roads, paid for by those residents who inhabit nearby communities and all others who pay into the public system, are ignored. These nicely swept, plant-pot-lined, sliding into well-painted façades of colonial homes are not for local traffic. The roads are not for their use between this time and that. But what time is this time and when is that time? The American prides himself on his power to stop, and smile and say, you can’t pass. But this is/was a public space. The American Smiles at us.

But really, who cares about road closures? Joe Public cares not; they say nothing. Silence admits consent.

We are told to move on. Do not loiter. Do not attempt to pass. The police are there to enforce their muscular and uniformed law given power to deter disobedient citizens, like us, who simply wish to return to where we started, where we are supposed to be. Their colonial cocky, khaki-starched superiority and power, untouchable. We are informed that we must venture 2, 3, 4? miles out of our way to find an alternative route back, yet there was no warning. There was no posting, no neighbourly or public advisory that the roads would be closed, even for local traffic. Tourism means we can do this.

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### **Anecdote number 1.5**

an island far but not that far from here, further down the archipelago, on a morning, we leave our doors unlocked, and walk jauntily, onto the white topped road, already reverberating in reflection, to the beach. This road has been a public thoroughfare for lifetimes. As we approach, we notice new signs: “Private Property” and “No Trespassing” have been erected to block the path. We stop. Further down the road we see a chain-link fence trailing across what was once a “government” road. Here, nearer to home, we are faced with similar confusions over where we can go. Though we often hear things like, *it’s too far, so it doesn’t matter anyway; they can have that part*, we will be cutting out all of our space to give to someone else who cares little for what we need, even though we do not really know what we need, though we do know that we need space to be. Without space to be, space to think, space to play, space to sleep, what are we? Where are we? Bloody hell, well, never mind that beach before gave us space to be: freedom of mind to leap into imagination and simple creatively without the boundaries of buildings

and hard edges is essential for our beings. That beach is only the best beach on the island. I have only been coming here for the last 5 decades. We think of these things as we are moved off our land. The violence of closing gates, security guards, American, Australian, German owners, loosing their dogs on us, is deeply felt. I look at my hands and wonder at the bronze of my skin: what makes it so hard for us to have space? Why is it so easy for someone with a different colour and deeper pockets to kill an entire community by moving them from their home away from home? I kiss my teeth and sputter. My connection to this place is only partially physically located in this space, in the memories created here; these are also spiritual, metaphysical and emotional. These experiences of space and place form interesting parts of my identity much like the coils in my hair and the bronzed skin I walk in. This skin is my only skin; I cannot change it, nor would I want to. But no one else can walk in this skin. Just as no one else can feel the way it feels when I walk through my spaces and meet new resistance to public lands. The beach is now out of bounds; only because I cannot get there. We cannot get there. The Crown says we can go to the beach, but all those paths and openings have been wiped off the map. Even before, people would have to create strategies to cross lands that did not like them. Since then, the lands of dislike have proliferated to erect barriers miles away from the coast. Our boats, small, insignificant, sailing or motorboats were easy to take to and from the water to look to the sea for life. Boats were once cheaper, more easily accessible; in fact, people made their own boats; they had a relationship with the water, the beach, the coast. They could fish and conch without fear of being turned away. Many people had boats to get to and be on the water; this was not luxury sailing.

We all have a boat—but not the kind of boat that goes to beaches and sits idly by as we enjoy the surf; we have working boats that haul in fish and conch. Today, the space we usually pull these boats up with our catch, has been closed off. We have been informed that we will be prosecuted if we cross. Later, someone who has marked time for decades, pulls down the fence because it has been generation land for decades and beyond. They lived and laboured in this place and know the value of open ways to their livelihood; the coast is where they catch fish and dive conch, launch boats and collect whelks. The new man came and locked this off. The new man who came, saw, and liked, so bought and changed, has decided we can no longer use this customary spot for our community. He can close off spaces and keep them for himself, his friends, his visitors.

People sit vex, faces built up into multiple creases of anger. The sweat pours down furrowed brow and refuses to drip onto best-dressed, church-clothes chest. The whole community assembled in consternation to hear the revelation of spatial invasion. Their voices become drowned by the din of small group interest in copper coins for million-dollar avenues. In community meetings, the tensions spill into tense drinks of rum in the local spot. People hold spit in their teeth as they clench jaws wanting not to cuss on a Sunday. Then they are removed, told they can no longer congregate; this is no longer their place. The church hall is now off limits, now rezoned by funding for proper programming. The discussion of who owns what is silenced by the new owner's ability to speak louder than anyone else. They, we are told, can do as they wish because there are no laws to stop them. They bought the land and can change it as they wish.

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### **Anecdote 1.5.5**

In the morning in Eastern New Providence, I walk. I walk for health and for brain space to be able to see and hear life. The roads are a mishmash of holes and crater-sized trenches that have been opened and never completely reclosed. They wait for the next rains to eat them out further so that passing becomes even more treacherous. Tourists, walking across this uneven and dangerous terrain, twist ankles and fall; they end up sprawled on the ground on where there was supposed to be a smooth path for easy access between bridges. The unkept margins push into the roads, and traffic pushes into the uneven paths. Then a scooter with a nice tourist man enjoying his holiday descends into a hole and does not reappear. His demise is sealed by the duty of care of government in paradise. Like storm-drain grated covers rotted out by toxic neglect, now topped with plywood to prevent walkers and drivers from dropping into their depths never to ascend to glory, again, the roads are mined with uncare. This is what public space looks like.

Residents tried to mend the situation by placing rocks in cavernous holes in paradise roads. Then workers come, remove those thoughtfully-placed rocks, reopening the hole, and begin to patch; they never finish. Three weeks later, it is still there. Five weeks later, the hole is now a trench and yawns halfway across the wide road, as if it is trying to swallow Nassau whole.

Along with the potholes, the overgrown world of the sidewalk forces some pedestrians to step gingerly by – others get biggity and walk right into traffic, without care. The reckless drivers in their Cubes cuss them as they hurtle along, dodging potholes and almost hitting cars and walkers alike. The lack of care for public verges and sidewalks pushes, forces, makes the public to lean into car space and disrupt the normal order of works. Cars also ride on badly constructed, too-high-to-allow-drivers-to-move-out-of-the-way sidewalks, as emergency vehicles speed through, sirens blaring. These fabulously designed roads and pavements create gathering spots for water; they form pools, form oceans that spread into houses and shops nearby. We won't talk about the wake the speeding cars create that pushes waves of brown water into front rooms. This is the interface of public and private space in the tropics. The duty of care—for roads, for cars, for pedestrians, for all public spaces and Joe public who uses them—and the responsibility of tropical governance is vanished in the space of partnership in mainstream road care. Government will blame the roads on all manner of reckless drivers and bad pedestrians; they are not responsible for any of it.

This is public space.

Eastern Public Library, a shadow of colonial spaces, stands littered with everything and abandoned-looking on Mackey Street. Walls are chopped and patched. In some places, they are not yet patched. The windows remain dirty and cracked, in some places broken, since 2015 or 2016's Hurricane Matthew did little damage to us. Then came Dorian, that missed New Providence, yet flooded much of the eastern and southern public space, now gated off into Blue Island ways and Green-gated golf courses), as if in forgotten space of insignificant learning. Once the home and *safe* space for students to read and learn, now

overlooked because public space is unimportant to a wealthy population. Libraries are no longer needed. They lack the connection to the real world of globalism and virtual connectedness. They also lack books. Their space is locked in a past that was old in the 1970s but remains pointedly intact for most of the public space we transit through in our delight-filled lives.

The history-rich public library, dingy and tired, waits to be renewed. Historical site without memory of the past but leaning towards demise. The paint is dirty and peeling. The steps littered with the debris of homelessness, and mental un-ease, better called disease. The Churchill Building, now deceased, or the Rodney Bain Building met similar fates. Debris lines the carpark and rotten food is spread on the ground around. But this is not just this library. The former Victoria Gardens now a graveyard of broken stories and destroyed historical gardens and buildings, waits for the next idea of what it should be. Never mind that it was all bulldozed before the notion of securing historical beauty and space could cross people's present-bound minds.

Public buildings seem to be a place where debris collects and dogs stray sleep. Clothes, shoes, and cardboard gather at entryways to public buildings in the land. Street cleaners pile up debris and food containers, dead animals and whatever else should be cleaned but rests for weeks, if not months, until the next round of cleaners comes by and piles it up again for the dogs, cats, and homeless, unfortunate and demented souls, to unpack and unceremoniously scatter all over the well-maintained public space of the roadside. These folks have been ignored or destroyed by society that sees them only as problems to be avoided, not as people with problems and needs. Left to deal with deep mental trauma as they can, they find themselves at stop signs and traffic lights, jumping in front of moving cars, and displaying their dexterity. However, many roadsides now post signs that say, "Keep Off the Grass", and the idea is that pedestrians, because only poor people walk and bike ride in paradise, and poor people need not have grassed spaces to walk safely away from traffic, can step into the traffic to avoid stepping on pristine, privately kept lawns.

The sum of its parts

The library stays despite the destruction around it. As I walk across what was once an open lot, now closed off by bollards and chains, we read signs that remind us that this is private, even though it is said to be Crown Land. I am always reminded that the Crown owns land always. In English Law, this is really quite clear. In the postcolony we inhabit, this is cluttered by things called free-hold leases that imply that you own the land in full and open possession for ever and ever, amen. In truth, the crown can descend and swoop it up at any time, much as those 100-year leases show in England. At the end of the 100 years, then what?

But this is public space, and this is how it looks.

Here it is not well kept, though it is not as poorly maintained as some neighbourhoods where dust collects for weeks, if not months, at a time in wait of pickup. The people, neighbourhood dwellers, should remove their waste and take it to the dump. Yet, these

good-bad people earn around \$210 a month and disposal requires money, transport, and access to transport. In the months since the last dump truck collected and the five weeks since the last garbage men passed through, things have become ratty and dog infested. But we jest, those dwellers are responsible for their nastiness, their mess; the unsanitariness of their roads and walkways is their fault. They must take their wages and pay to get the rubbish trucked away. No plan to use their taxes to keep things nice in the postcolony.

The method to this madness

This is a meditation born out of life and work in the tropics; it grapples with the complexities of a “vanished” colonially organizational system to understand how we live in places; and then it is compelled to respond to alarming structural violence and efforts at dispossession. It responds to much field research, and to living, working, and being in spaces that have become increasingly private, off-limits to less-transnational people as the globalization wave swamps less wealthy societies with wealthy investors who change land and socio-scapes. The primary information has been collected over years of public-space research and Bahamian attitudes to it. Public space in the postcolony is a somewhat tenuous concept because old laws continue to dominate new realities. The colonial writings of L. D. Powles and others of his ilk, who were good to the enslaved Africans, show how controlled space is in the colony and later in the postcolony.

What I have done is collected laws, plans, reports, school achievement data, photographic documentation, as well as stories of spaces left to rot in the forget of the present. Dowdeswell Street, Kemp Road, Dunmore Lane, Mackey Street, are spaces of public neglect and impossible possibility. These were all places where government once maintained public spaces with due care and attention. Today, this has ceased. But public spaces, streets, beaches were always set aside by colonial design and the political organization of space.

How we see

I look at the difference between Big Pond and Baha Mar Boulevard as they promise local communities access to public space for recreation and health, mental space to be free from worries, and green spaces to see a glimmer of hope in ugly realities. In the former, built on a toxic waste dump and polluted, the paths through mangroves are poorly if at all maintained. Impressions of our space versus space reserved for those who are not us, is really revealing. The “our” space threatens its users with violence as those who survived enslavement and indenture, colonialism and postcolonial hatred and public floggings try to find solace in rape and robbery. As we explore Big Pond, we are warned to go no further. This is regular. People have made their homes in there and try to live hidden from the cruelty and violence of the postcolony. They have escaped poverty into mangroved worlds, but they remain exposed to the violence of the police state and of deep anti-poverty, anti-working-class paradise discourse. 50 years into being free from colonialism, but not free from the vestiges of the Crown and its hold on all aspects of economics and politics space is as mined with violence and failure as during colonial days. This we must

begin to see as the coloniality of power and space. Our space is deeply colonial and we see it in this way. We have been taught to look at what we are and see others as something other than us. *So our space may be rape-and-violence filled, yet the space we see as better, more beautiful and engaging is as well. It is more violent; its trappings just hide things differently.*

As we traverse Baha Mar, the roads are clean and pristine, and not for us. There is an invisible line between the Big Pond reality, where *those people* live, and the world where real people come to stay and play. Violence shall not come into this space, shall not contaminate this paradise. It must stay over there where *those people* are. Those people live in utter fear of violence and robbery, even though, according to statistics, violent crime has fallen across the country. But they still fear it, because they, the victims, are constantly blamed for their suffering, the poor for their poverty, the Blacks for their Blackness, and the Haitians for their Haitianness. On Baha Mar Boulevard, though, we can escape the peevisness and misery and the coloniality of violence sewn into the cloth of social oppression.

I have intentionally written this meditation on public space as if it were a farce because it has become farcical when we talk about beach access and do not see the unreality of such a concept. Most dwellers of traditional and non-traditional Black spaces, like Pinewood, Yellow Elder, Millennium Gardens, Golden Gates, Kemp Road, Nassau Village, Elizabeth Estates and the newer low-cost developments that promise to move populations out of poverty into possibility, are kept in deeper violence and further away from jobs. Those spaces become prisons of promise. These public spaces are dirty, under-served and poorly serviced. Black waters escape sewage ways and run into homes. The inhabitants are blamed for this irregularity that happens regularly, should it rain. Gunshots are music punctuating the night skies and sounds of sirens and shot spotters arriving under-silent cover fill daydreams. The nights are worse.

The grottness of most public space creates a closed in and crumbling world of denied *self-love and self-reflection* that meets hardened metallic hatred on the road. Life is too mean to feel or think. Just quick and over-flowing bursts of the anger-soaked bile and venom we have been swallowing for lifetimes. These two worlds hold fast to each other. Yet their divide is historical and structural. The geography of colonialism still rests firmly on our spatial design and (in)justice. It closes over our windpipes like a boot on our necks, as we protest for the right to feed ourselves through our sweat and daily labours.



The spaces we live  
The spaces we see  
These spaces  
Places  
Locations  
We cannot imagine  
The floggings  
Hangings  
Public  
Executions  
Tarring  
Feathering  
Quartering  
Indentured  
Bodies  
Hanged  
Salted  
And blamed

with us  
Remain in  
Tact  
Feel like  
Home  
As  
We  
Brave  
The seas  
Of  
Dorian-swept shores  
To land in a place  
Where we can  
Free  
Ourselves  
The violence  
Of history  
In skin  
shells  
Castles  
No longer  
Of this body

Such are the ramblings of an-academic in a paradise designed for others, by others, peopled by us; this space is violently loved by and deeply mournful of the Crown's departure. On a sunny day, though, the Crown rests heavily on our shores and sips piña coladas on now-unpublic beaches, as the cruise ships send their workers to labour in sanitised colonial worlds. Public space is the violence of Parliament Square versus Rawson Square; the invisible toxicity hidden in imperialism's stare as Victoria continues to sit imperious over Butler and yet we say nothing.

Nothing can capture the spatial justice of the Crown's continued home away from home in our bosom, the folds of our intimate places, the softness of our souls, and the coolness of our lies. If we ever look, we may see, but as we cannot look: walls, gates, and fences impede our views, we will never see. The subterfuge is blinding. The gaslighting is deadly. We are losing the ground where once we stood.