

Walking Home: Former Fresnans in the Memory Palace

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In 2012 I was living in New York City and thinking about leaving. I had been there for six years, and, as I contemplated moving, I wondered where home was. I increasingly felt like a New Yorker; though I hadn't passed the mythical ten-year marker that confirms such a status, the city felt like home. Certainly, home was no longer Fresno, California, where I had grown up, and which I had left as quickly as possible. My family still lives there, and I visit whenever I have the chance, but when I moved away I had no intention of calling it my home ever again. I tossed aside the badge of nativity, eager to build a life beyond what I considered the confines of my hometown. NYC was the home I had chosen and established, yet still, I had a strong connection to where I was from. I wondered how others who had left felt. Why did they leave? What was their relationship to home? To Fresno? New York? With this in mind I set out to find former Fresnans and ask them how they had created 'home' in their new city.

The resulting project, *Former Fresnans* (2012-Ongoing), built on the work I had been doing with memory palaces. Coincidentally, it was Heather Gardner, herself a former Fresnan, who originally introduced me to the concept. During a visit to New York City, Gardner met me at my home in Astoria, Queens and we walked together to Socrates Sculpture Park. Over a picnic lunch in the park she told me the story of its origin.

The memory palace, or method of loci, is an Ancient Greek technique for remembering. Historians attribute it to Simonides of Ceos, Ancient Greece's first for-profit poet, in a story that is likely apocryphal.¹ At a banquet for Scopas, Simonides recited a poem peppered with praise for Castor and Pollux, two newly appointed gods. Scopas, affronted, refused to pay Simonides in full and referred him to the twin gods to collect the rest of his payment. Shortly after, a messenger hailed Simonides and told him two young men were waiting for him outside. He left the building, but the young men were nowhere to be found. Upon his exit, the banquet hall's roof collapsed and those inside were killed and disfigured beyond recognition. Through the destruction of the banquet hall, Castor and Pollux exacted revenge upon Scopas and his guests for their disrespect. Simonides, the only surviving member of the party, remembered the table and the positions of each reveller, and attached family names to those beyond physical recognition. Through this action, he realised the power of spatial memory, and the memory palace was born.

Memory palaces link symbolic images to specific locations and are based on the strength of human spatial memory. To create a memory palace, one chooses a specific space and imagines vivid symbolic images throughout it. The more absurd the image, the easier it is to recall. To retrieve the memories, one imagines walking through the space and looking at the different images.



Figure 1: Flyer for original Former Fresnan [sic] walk in Fresno, California (2013). (Photo credit: Blake Morris)

For *Former Fresnans*, I asked participants to take me on a walk between two locations they considered home. At the end of our walk we sat down and discussed what we wanted to remember. Together we created a memory image that we imagined somewhere in Fresno's Tower District. The Tower, as it's known colloquially, is the arty area of town where many of us had spent countless days and nights. It was the only place I could think of where everyone might have an association. Fresno is characterised by its suburban sprawl and it was important that the palace was contained to a single neighbourhood, otherwise leading the walks would be too onerous (and unlikely to attract a local crowd not necessarily accustomed to long walks through town).

I knew a few potential walkers already: my best-friend Brett who had biked halfway across the country with me to move to New York; or Robert, who I had known since we performed together at the Fresno Children's Playhouse before we were even teens. Beyond that I knew a number of people from the Fresno arts community who had moved to NYC to pursue a slew of different dreams. I set out to expand my network, reaching out to friends and friends of friends through social media and word of mouth. From this initial push I found fifteen Former Fresnans who had made New York their home (at least temporarily); many I knew previously, but some I had only met in passing and others I was meeting for the first time. The walks varied wildly, from a ten-mile trek over the Triborough bridge with Carla to a ten-minute stroll with Grace through Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighbourhood. As we walked, we shared stories and memories and what we were up to now. What we all had in common was a place we no longer called home: Fresno.

Since starting the project I have walked with twenty-one former Fresnans in New York, London, Oakland and San Francisco, and the resulting Memory Palace brings to life stories both past and present. It highlights what I have termed 'hubs of resonance', locations in the

Tower District that stand out in the memory of this small sample of Former Fresnans. Places such as the area around Roger Rocka's Music Hall and 2nd Space Theatre, where we spent time rehearsing and performing; the Livingstones parking lot where kids would hang out and smoke away from prying parental eyes; or the ever-changing coffee shop, which always served the same social function despite the various names under which it operated. Each walk created a specific image, and every time I return to Fresno I share the memory palace with members of the community. Unlike an object created in response to a walk, a memory palace has to be imagined, and each participant manifests the images differently depending on their individual interpretation. Through this practice I link memory to place, and actively engage participants with the landscape. For those who can imagine it, Fresno's Tower District is transformed.

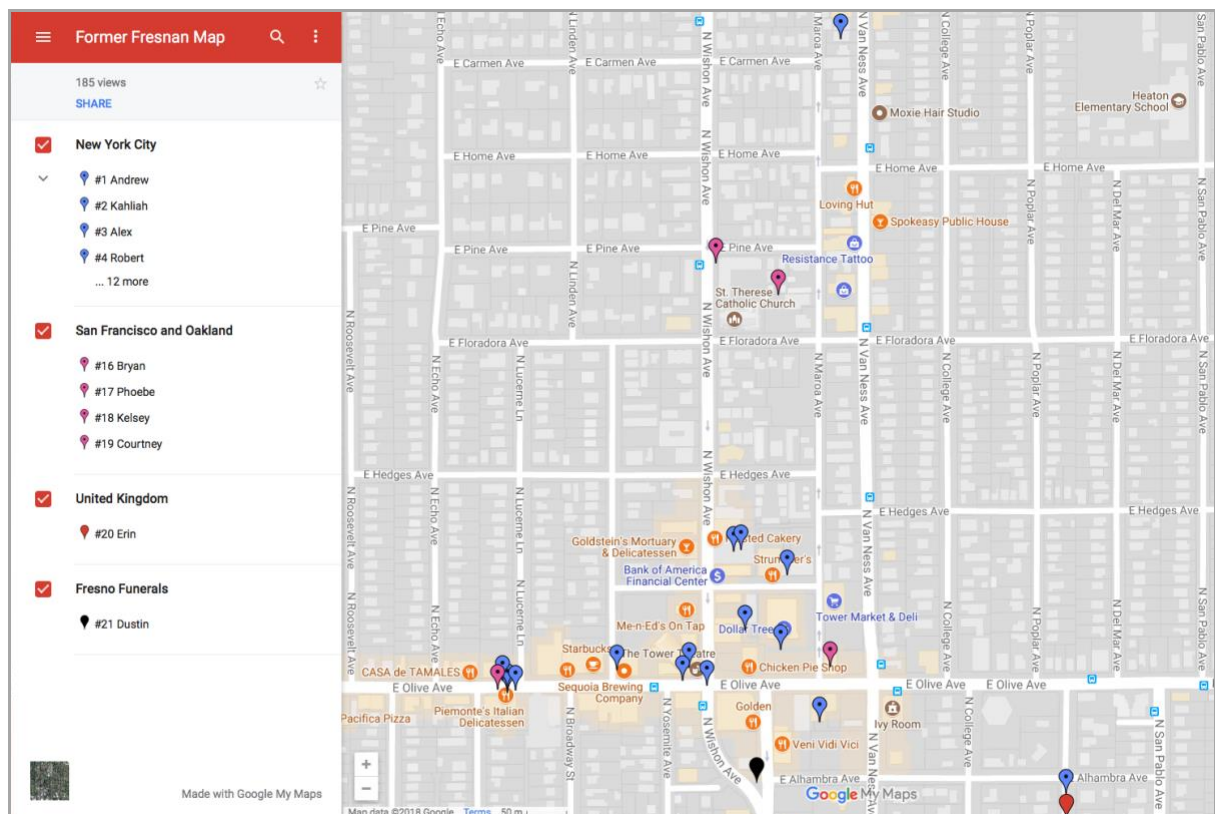


Figure 2: Map of Former Fresnans Memory Palace (Source: Google Maps)

Through Former Fresnans I embraced a dispersed definition of home. Home was New York City, but it was also Fresno. Though everyone I walked with left Fresno for a reason, we all appreciated its role in our formation. Some have even moved back home, adding their perspectives to the tapestry of valley life. In places like Fresno, which are dominated by conservative Christian values, marginal voices often move to cities more welcoming of various lifestyles. As a little queer kid growing up in a homophobic town, I had few role-models. As an adult I left, leaving one less queer voice in the community. Many of the Fresnans with whom I walked could tell similar stories: one less Black Lives Matter activist; one less advocate for the homeless; one less journalist speaking truth to power; one less writer; performer; singer; dancer; chef. *Former Fresnans* is one way to bring some of these stories back to the Valley, and give voice to those who hold Fresno in their heart, though they no longer inhabit its boundaries.

Selections from the collection are included below, if you're willing to imagine them...



Figure 3: The back entrance to Roger Rocka's 2nd Space Theatre, Fresno, Ca. (Photo credit: Blake Morris)

Image: A single cherry tree blossoms in the back alley. The trunk contains a knothole, similar to the one described in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). If you peer into it and look closely you will see members of Roosevelt School of Performing Arts' class of 2000 on a chessboard.

Walker: Justin Weatherby.

Route: His apartment in midtown Manhattan to the West Village's Cherry Lane Theatre.

Though Justin and I had once been close friends and graduated in the same class, we had not spoken in years. Our most recent encounters had been typified by friction and we were trepidatious about walking together, but we met in Manhattan on a crisp spring morning and went on our way. As we walked we reminisced about high school and what our classmates might be doing; we walked through the village and looked at the chessboards on Thompson St., a favourite pastime of his since moving to the city; he bought me a crepe at one of his favourite eateries. We ended at the Cherry Lane Theatre, where Justin got his first professional New York theatre credit. When we walked together he was embarking on a new adventure: producing Broadway plays. He has since been nominated for a Tony, fulfilling a life-long dream. The walk quickly diffused any tension between us, as we wandered through a city we both loved and discussed the different journeys that had brought us there. Over time our paths had diverged, but they both led back to a formative location: Fresno's Good Company Players, where we had shared the role of Jem in a production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1997). Though its most famous alumna is Audra McDonald, countless Fresnans have had their artistic futures shaped by the work done in GCP's theatres. With this common bond, Justin and I decided to place our image in a location where we had spent much time rehearsing together, the stage entrance to 2nd Space.



Figure 4: The Tower Theatre, the namesake of the Tower District and its primary landmark (Photo Credit: Carleigh Morris)

Image: The hills of Marcus Garvey Park nestled beneath the awnings of the Tower Theatre. Atop the hill sits a large, sparkling, pink C. Green hedgerows from Central Park surround the hill's perimeter.

Walker: Chunyendu Oputa

Route: From her apartment in Harlem to Central Park.

I also attended high school with Chunyendu, and though she was in the class below me we always got on well. Since moving to NYC I often thought I should look her up; life being what it is, however, only fleeting contacts materialised. Until I asked her to walk with me that is. We met at her apartment in Harlem. Chunyendu explained the freedom she felt when she first moved to the neighbourhood; living in the historically African American neighbourhood was eye-opening and highlighted an experience she was not necessarily aware she was lacking. Fresno is a diverse city with a large Hispanic and Latino population, however, Black and African American residents only comprise five percent of the population.² Though the Black and African American population of Harlem has lowered in recent years, it was still sixty-two percent of the population in 2008, when Chunyendu was living there,³ and her experience of being surrounded by other people that looked like her was profound. As we walked through Harlem, up and over the hills of Marcus Garvey Park, and into the quiet, hedge-rowed gardens of Central Park she told me of her new venture: she had quit her job to become a full-time blogger for plus-size fashion. Since walking with me, she has founded CurvyCon and become a successful influencer across social-media platforms. She has advocated for the body-positive movement and created a viral video for BuzzFeed linking Black Lives Matters to her work with body positivity. She goes by Cece, and the sparkling pink C represented her aspirations, with which she has been wildly successful.



Figure 5: An abandoned fountain in Fresno's Tower District, 2018 (Photo Credit: Carleigh Morris)



Figure 6: Memory Palace Memorial for Dustin Morris, 2016 (Source: Lisa Montgomery Morris)

Image: Friends and family circle the fountain holding a giant baseball mitt. Secured firmly inside are my nephews, Mason and Julian, playing video games with a smile.

Walkers: Friends and family of Dustin Morris

Route: From Mason's Frame Shop to the abandoned fountain.

One of the most recent additions to the Former Fresnans collection introduces a new possibility for the project. It was created in 2016 to memorialise my oldest brother Dustin, who committed suicide that year. In response to my personal encounter with an often invisible social problem, I decided to expand the collection to include an image made for mourning. I invited friends and family who attended the memorial services to join me for a walk through the Tower District, where Dustin had lived and worked most of his life. Along the way, we shared stories about my brother, ourselves and our experiences of Fresno. The group ranged from toddlers to pensioners, and captured a wide variety of experiences and emotions. As we walked together to process our unexpected loss, we extended our experience as a community of mourners and worked together to understand and articulate the complex feelings that accompany suicide. The resulting image, in which we all worked together to raise up the children left-behind, reflects this. Perhaps the memory palace can provide opportunities for a new kind of memorial, one in which communities walk together to remember who they've lost and envision a new future.

Postscript



Figure 7: My niece, Carleigh, caught in the mirrored reflection while documenting the memory palace. (Photo credit: Carleigh Morris)

An essential part of this work was a desire to engage my family with the art I was making. At the time my art required their physical presence, and they had not had the chance to participate. *Former Fresnoans* was a chance to make work they could see. Sometimes an art work is about giving your mom and dad a chance to understand what it is you are pursuing.

Equally important has been the work of my niece, Carleigh, who has helped me install every image in the palace. Installation of memory palaces is a curious experience. We would walk to the spots together and I would describe the images to her. She would help me position them precisely (as up until then they only existed in my memory of the space) and worked with me to make sure they were clear—that I was able to articulate them to someone who didn't know where and what they were. It was Carleigh I called when I needed pictures for this article. She is the person who has seen the images the most.

Though the project encompasses more than my family, its engagement with them is essential. After all, they are the reason I go back to Fresno in the first place.

¹ Simonides is generally considered the first Greek poet to accept coins, a relatively recent innovation, as payment for his poems (Bowra, 1961, p.360; Carson, 2009, p.16). Historian George Sarton (1993, p. 228) points out, while 'Simonides was perhaps one of the first to be paid in money' due to the increased circulation of coins, it was previously common to 'barter talent for other goods.' The story of Simonides and the memory palace was first recorded in the Ancient Roman text *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, traditionally attributed to Cicero, though its authorship has recently been disputed. My telling draws from Francis Yates's *Art of Memory* (1966), and Joshua Foer's *Moonwalking with Einstein* (2012).

² Statistics taken from the United States Census Bureau.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fresnocountycalifornia/PST045216>

³ Roberts, S. (2010) 'No Longer Majority Black, Harlem is in Transition', *New York Times*, 5 Jan.