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## Place, Memory, and Archive: An Interview with Karen Till

Interviewers: Emily Kaufman and Christine Woodward

DISCLOSURE EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

*Dr. Karen Till is Professor of Cultural Geography at Maynooth University, director of the Space & Place Research Collaborative (Ireland), and founding co-Convener of the Mapping Spectral Traces international network of artists, practitioners, and scholars. Till's 2005 book, The New Berlin: Memory, Politics, Place, explores German memory and modernity, showing how places and spaces exemplify the contradictions and tensions of social memory and national identity. Her current book in progress, Wounded Cities, is based upon geo-ethnographic research in Berlin, Bogotá, Cape Town, Dublin, Minneapolis, and Roanoke. It highlights the significance of place-based memory work and ethical forms of care at multiple scales that may contribute to creating more socially just futures.*

**Emily Kaufman (EK):** We have had debates in class about the proper use of *archives* or *the archive*. We're wondering: how do you define *the archive* or *archives* and if you prefer one over the other?

**Karen Till (Till):** That's a very difficult question. I think that *the archive* would be defined by an institutional history that also has a history associated with nation-building projects tied to histories of colonialism and getting rid of local forms of knowledge production and circulation and transmission. I think a lot of people have done some interesting work about problematizing the Western colonial version of the archive, including Derrida's [(1995)] *Archive Fever*, which I've drawn from quite a bit in my own work, where you have archons, the policers or masters of what's collectible and how it's organized, of very specific histories. Some of my work in Germany refers to the National Socialist project of genocide and mass murder, which was to create an archive of Jewish history and kill the Jewish population in Europe. Also, Achille Mbembe's work about the spaces of death and silence in the colonial archive ['The Power of the Archive and Its Limits' (2002)]. So, there are some extreme

moments of violence [associated with the archive]. Depending on which project I'm looking at, I may turn to those different kinds of nationalist colonial histories.

I also draw heavily from Diana Taylor's work on *The Archive and The Repertoire* [(2003)]. She was saying that within the history of Latin American Studies and performance studies, which also has a Western colonial history, these other kinds of embodied knowledges—gestures, family traditions, and forms of connections of families over generations to land—that are not necessarily collected, could be another form of the archive: the repertoire. To have a real conversation where you're trying to undo colonial histories and trying to imagine a more collaborative future, where you're respecting local knowledge systems and forms of communication, you must look at that kind of tension between the two [the archive and the repertoire]. Some people have interpreted her work as saying these are in opposition, but I think she's saying they're potentially in creative tension. When you begin looking at Taylor's work and the part of Derrida's work where he not only deconstructs, but reconstructs—he will also look at the possibilities of the archive [in *Archive Fever*—then, this embodiment part that we bring in from Taylor's discussion means that...we're all living archives with our body memories. Or it [the archive] can be at different scales for different functions.

So, I would ask instead, "What's productive about putting a boundary around *archive*? What's your goal in doing that?" Then you can look to different practices and literatures that will help you make that boundary drawing productive.

**EK:** You mentioned digitizing to increase access, which brings us to another question: Where do you see archives intersecting with social justice?

**Till:** I'm currently researching and thinking about the artistic practice of dance and theatre companies [ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre] who produced *These Rooms* [2016]. I think that their work is trying to encourage a broader range of publics to bear witness or become secondary witnesses to citizens' experiences of war as it comes into the home, which is seen as a safe space. There's this idea that even if people study urban warfare or state violence in cities, then only the city becomes this architectonic entity, when in fact it's a dynamic entity, and the split between the home and the public gets a bit tricky. Perhaps this is where Rich Schein's work on landscape as archive [*Landscape and Race in the United States* (2012)] becomes quite important, because there are possibilities of artists collaborating now with people who are archivists, with local history experts, and some cultural and historical geographers that have a multi-scaled way of thinking about different articulations of memory or knowing. You can do some conceptual mappings to pursue spatial justice. This is where I'm a geographer, of course. The discussion of spatial justice is really where it's at.

There's a potential of the archive to work at multiple scales and multiple localities to help spatial justice projects. Eyal Weizman's group on Forensic Architecture [based at Goldsmiths, University of London] are trying to create what we would call geo-visualizations of places of past violence, wherein regimes didn't document but erased histories. What we have are people's personal testimonies. Another example in Argentina is a group called 'Memoria Abierta' [*Memoria Abierta* (2005)] who has worked with people's families and survivors of different forms of disappearance, in [the Dirty] War, to recreate the minute geographic details of all the places of detainment, torture, and disappearance. We're talking about thousands of places in the city. Even in a place such as Berlin, which is very well

studied, had close to 5,000 labor camps throughout the city [during the period of National Socialism].

The scales of what we're talking about is on every street and in every neighborhood; not one but multiple. We're talking about a particular kind of landscape of incarceration and violence that needs to be mapped, quite literally, to help us think about how those systems of violence and injustice happened, and how we need to be aware of what this means, and how democracies fall, and so quickly, and turn into these systems. Weizman's project is really looking at Palestine, but then it started to move out to other parts of the world, and he received grants to create a forensic architecture program. There's a new book called *Forensis[: The Architecture of Public Truth, 2014]*, Anselm Franke and Eyal Weizman] which is a book of case studies from around the world that came out of that project. They're using AutoCAD and other kinds of geospatial geo-visualization technologies, along with archival materials and testimony, to try to recreate or to document these spatial systems of terror.

Additionally, this is now being used as evidence in courts. This is where the idea of recreating a crime scene becomes very complicated and interesting. In Argentina, and other places, you have different people who are trained. For instance, Robert Jan Van Pelt has done a lot of work with Deborah Dwork [*Auschwitz, 1270 to the present (1996)*] on the history of the architecture of Auschwitz and documenting it in terms of literal built environment landscapes to stop the extreme holocaust deniers.

The stakes are very high and I think not only in terms of legal or justice systems, but in terms of asking us as scholars to begin to think about categories and theories differently, as well as other possibilities. It's a collaborative venture. It has to be worked through in a group with a range of different experts with a spatial justice goal. As well, artistic performances and other ways of inviting different kinds of publics to bear witness in a way that's not voyeuristic but asks the audience-participants to take some responsibility for looking [is important]—for not just walking by a landscape that has in the physically built environment evidence of all of this violence, but that creates an understanding of citizenship beyond a set of rights that includes responsibilities at multiple scales.

**Christine Woodward (CW):** In “Mapping Spectral Traces” you talk about caring for place. If you think of the archive as mapping practice, how can that offer alternative historical and spatial imaginaries?

**Till:** In an article I wrote called “Wounded Cities” in *Political Geography* [2012], I talk about what I call a “place-based ethics of care.” It's exactly what you're talking about. It draws from feminist political theorists, such as Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher's book called *Moral Boundaries* [(1993)], as well as other feminist scholars who say that in the history of political theory, care has not been seen as a quality of citizenship, of political action. And they go and look at the gendered reasons for that kind of political knowledge construction. They talk about the ways in which care is a species thing that we do; it's part of being human. Care is done in a way that leads to an intersubjective encounter, meaning that if you are to care for someone and allow yourself to be cared for, you have to recognize histories of injustice. You have to recognize that not everybody is treated the same in your society. It means you have to recognize that it's not just, “I'm connecting to you” (I'm empathetic, I hear your pain)—it means, “I have to take some responsibility for understanding how it's that you may be treated

differently from me, and why, and how did that happen.” It requires looking at larger systems and legacies of injustice, which is quite a bit for a political citizenship discussion.

There are discussions by feminists about global citizenship and different kinds of scales, but often justice and rights are seen as going down two trajectories. I really love Iris Marion Young’s work [*Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990)], where she talks about the problems of distributive justice and talks about care without using that terminology. Her work echoes the conversation we were just having about care and how, again, we have to look at the systemic forms of violence and injustice within societies. And this means [for Young] critically reimagining the Westfalian model of the modern nation state and the idea of citizen rights [*Global Challenges* (2007)]. She tragically passed away much younger than we would have wanted, so, in some of her later work she starts looking at alternative forms of sovereignty. I know this sounds weird, but it means you’re going to be looking at archives and collections and ownership differently. She was looking at the Haudenosaunee, or the Iroquois Confederacy, as an alternative form of collaborative sovereignty, in which it’s not just the rights of the individual but the collective [in *Responsibility for Justice* (2011)]. She also looked at other existing forms of archives that would not normally be considered if you were looking for questions of sovereignty. While that does not sound like mapping, it is multi-scalar and it is about land-justice of a certain kind and different forms of spatial justice, ultimately.

It’s a very important time, because the natural world does not follow political boundaries—it never has. Indigenous peoples have been trying to remind us of that for quite some time. With new technologies, we should be able to take advantage of a range of opportunities and resources whether or not it’s in a state-holding or other form of archives. The past is a resource for us to imagine more just futures.

**EK:** We tend to have more of a spatial focus than other disciplines, so some phrases stood out to us. You talk about the ‘multiple space-times of memory.’ I was wondering if you could say more about that.

**Till:** If we look within memory studies and the politics of deciding who has the right to narrate a certain kind of past and represent it, some institutional forms, like monuments, memorials, and street names, inscribe the past *onto* a particular location and territory, creating a kind of spatial boundary. You’re controlling space to control the narrative of time. Simultaneously, if you do the same with controlling the moment of remembering and the form of it, you’re going to remember a certain nation or a group or kind of spatial entity.

These are politics that happen all the time. I work in cities and I do a lot of urban geography work, even though I’m a cultural geographer, and they [planners and government officials] think about land use maps and land use planning maps [as ‘reality’]. They do *create* these boundaries. Areas become privatized in very bizarre ways. But when you get it translated into the planning speak, it’s a ‘construction site’ and it needs to be fenced off to do certain things.

Due to the history of National Socialism in Germany, there’s an advanced state of conversation about memory and memory politics. It’s a very complicated situation but the geographies of that reality are everywhere. Some of the memorials that didn’t get selected [for the central Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin] created those multiple space-

times. They're fascinating. Remember, [in the 1980s and 1990s,] the Kohl administration tried to deny the generation born after 1945 of any responsibility for what had happened. That's precisely what a lot of people, a lot of protest actions, a lot of younger generations, did not want. [They didn't want to draw a line under the past.] The other metaphor that I use, which has been obviously affected by a current bigger international project, is this idea of an open wound. [In the debates about what became the central Holocaust Memorial,] People didn't want to have the construction site fenced, to keep the conversations open—needing to return to it as a more appropriate form of democracy and critical memory work. When you're walking around the city [of Berlin], you can see these material remnants or objects. Particularly in that city, given all the history of construction, reconstruction, memory planning, and different kinds of urban imaginaries, a construction site is a place to think about [the politics of memory].

**CW:** The title of your talk is “Archiving Bodies with Place.” Could you give us a preview and discuss what you mean by that title?

**Till:** Absolutely. What I find interesting about this particular artistic production [*These Rooms*] is how closely these artists work with archivists. They [ANU Productions and CoisCéim Dance Theatre] cannot do their work without them [archivists]. They also work with local histories in interesting ways and they try to re-inhabit and communicate different stories of women and civilians and underrepresented people who don't always get documented in the archive. But histories have now become widely available because of digitization.

The artists chose to interrogate the memory of 1916 as a heroic moment in the formation of the Irish free state. The Irish state was not formed as a result of the 1916 Easter Rising. There was the War of Independence and the Civil War—a series of brutal wars [after the Rising]. What's remembered [today]? There was the Proclamation, and usually it's the men who are remembered, who were then martyred [executed by the British] because of the Proclamation and the Rebellion. If you look at the “heroes,” this is problematic because none of the important women, including Cumann na mBan [a female Irish Republican paramilitary organization] and the women's armies, are mentioned. These [other histories] are now made available through all sorts of resources.

So, because of the wars after 1916, you have different nationalist groups collecting testimony witnesses about the Rising. Shortly after 1916, an early version of what is now the political party Sinn Féin, collected testimonial witness by 38 women to the murder of 15 civilian men in a part of north Dublin not far from where the Proclamation was declared. During the Rising, there was intense warfare in which British soldiers raided homes, some of which were not held by the Irish Volunteers or the Irish Free Army or the other people involved in the Rising. They [British soldiers] killed those 15 men and a young boy who just turned 16 [in a building on North King Street]; and then 1 person dies later. They buried two people in a cellar basement whose bodies were later uncovered. There was a military investigation, which provides us with military histories that weren't made available before. The military [at the time] realized that if this [information] was released [to the Irish people] there would be another Rising because it was just so brutal. It was murder. I mean, you cannot read it any other way.

That's the story that inspired *These Rooms*, which was performed geographically near

the places where this happened. The artists are bringing these archival testimonies of 38 women to life in a way that also requires you as the audience member to make some choices and become part of the performance. They're moving the archive through their research, through their embodied performance, and some very rich installation work goes with it.

In this particular performance, you get to decide where to go, whereas before they [ANU Productions] kind of moved you [the audience] through different parts of the city or the street. The artists are working at multiple scales: they're working across and through space-time because it's not a recreation. They're always moving back and forth [between times], and in this performance, it's between 1916, 1966, and 2016.

It was only with the 1916 Centenary that people started to find out about some of these histories. The archival documents are being released and there have been many collections that have helped people to work through these kinds of very extreme, traumatic, urban war experiences. Those collections have become the basis for a lot of performances last year. The artists are doing research and communicating it spatially in a way that's going to reach more people and stay with them than any book I can write. Even if you cannot handle that kind of artistic work, it'll stay with you for some time after the performance is over. And they're asking you to make choices. You cannot just sit there and watch the performance and say, "Oh, that was entertaining." You have to physically move when they [the performers] ask you questions. You have to respond somehow.

The artists are moving the archive through bodies and through these places, because the body is always emplaced. And the artists are trying to communicate the archival testimonies of these women, who were separated from the men and their sons while the soldiers were breaking down doors and going through walls. They're hearing and imagining things and are trying to find people.

When the performance was still in development, I interviewed the artistic team, in February [2016], and they did performances in October/November [later that year]. This is all very recent and they're making a film and then they also have a non-professional dance project. (They invited 38 women [from the public] to work with dancers and interpret the archival materials themselves. Then, they did a kind of non-professional dance project as part of it.) The artists worked collaboratively, so [for *These Rooms*,] the directors were having the dancers and performance artists in the project go through all the [archival] materials and try to create the movements. They created some workshop areas [in the National Museum of Ireland] that they had used for a previous performance.

I like studying and working with artists who are asking similar questions and have similar political agendas. They even do research in similar ways [as I do]. Yet, their final outcome is very different and I think I have much to learn from them.

**EK:** It brings up interesting questions about what art is and what it can do. You made the differentiation between the output of your research and the work of these performance artists. I've been wondering about the difference between activism and art in memory work. It seems that artists and activists usually go together, or complement each other, but that they diverged in the outcome. Not to draw boundaries around the researcher-artist-activist, but what do you think each aspect brings out in memory work?

**Till:** Part of the problem are the categories; and we don't have language for some of those

explorations. I think it's important to let people self-identify and they may choose, for various reasons, to use certain labels. Artists don't earn much money. I don't know why people think they're privileged because they're living well below what graduate students earn. I mean, these are important people. For the artists who may self-identify as artists, they just have to do what they do. They cannot live without doing their creative practice. If you talk to an artist and they're passionate about what they do, that's the most common thing that you'll hear from them. An activist wanting to create change will have a much more strategic end goal while an artist goes on a journey of exploration without knowing what the outcome will be. I think that's something important to learn from artists and it's undervalued, too. Part of the frustration of artists that apply to grants like we do is that they have to use the neoliberal, managerial scientific form where they must justify their art for the spending of state, private, or foundation money. But if you do talk to an artist, they're very clear about the larger structure of a project. For *These Rooms*, it was those testimonies. I think that many artists, not only the community-based artists but ecologically-based artists as well, are clearly activists.

**EK:** How do you see yourself in terms of artistic and activist place-based memory practice? I'm wondering what your threshold of involvement has been like?

**Till:** Everybody is not going to be an activist and maybe not everybody wants to change the world. I think there's a range of possibilities for scholars to do their work. At the same time, we're very privileged. My salary is being paid by the state. The public are the very people I personally feel that I have an ethical responsibility towards. I believe in trying to break down the barriers between academic and other forms of expert knowledge, and to do so, I try to also think about collaborations. I try to do as much public engagement and service learning as I can.

I feel privileged to work with amazing people, including artists, activists, practitioners and community leaders, and they have been incredibly generous to me. Through their support, I've begun to curate exhibitions and other projects that I think enhances the research I do.

I also know that as a geographer and a civil servant, I should always be doing local research. This is difficult because I've lived in many countries and you don't always get to choose where you live. You go where there might be the possibility of getting a job. But even if you're not from that place or community, you can be doing work locally. You don't necessarily have to write about that work in your publications or research, but if you can, I don't think that's such a terrible thing.

Also, in the U.S., the histories of forced removals of indigenous peoples, African Americans and working-class communities through urban renewal and other projects has benefitted public universities. Public universities are also developers in most countries and turns its back on local communities. My responsibility as a civil servant is to acknowledge how and where my institution has done damage and acted unjustly to other peoples, and to try to open our doors and create welcoming environments for our neighbors and a range of knowledge producers to work together to create a better future.