

Fragments, Ruins, Artifacts, Torsos

Karen E. Till

He who wishes to approach his own buried past must act like a man who digs. ... [F]acts of the matter are only deposits, layers that deliver only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the true assets hidden within the inner earth: the images which, torn from all former contexts, stand—like ruins or torsos in the collector's gallery—as the treasures in the sober chambers of our belated insights. And, in order to dig successfully, a plan is certainly required. Yet just as indispensable is the spade's careful, probing penetration of the dark earthen realm; and he who only keeps the inventory of his finds, but not also this dark bliss of the finding itself, cheats himself of the best part. The unsuccessful search belongs to it just as fully as the fortunate search. This is why memory must not proceed by way of narrative, much less by way of reports, but must, rather, assay its spade, epically and rhapsodically in the most rigorous sense, in ever new places and, in the old ones, to delve into ever deeper layers.¹

If we are to practice empathetic historical geographies, we must be willing to dig. For Walter Benjamin, the act of digging was a politically radical one intended to undermine the nationalist project of writing history. Benjamin describes how the past is always constructed in the present, thereby challenging the idea that time progresses forward in a linear fashion. Indeed, as Jacques Derrida and others remind us, the past (like death) does not literally exist. What exists is the process of creating traces from the past that are “strained toward the future across a fabled present, figures we inscribe because they can outlast us, beyond the present of their inscription.”² This is true for the practice of historical geography, just as much as it is for other social practices including heritage productions or the construction of memorials.

As the papers and panel discussions on “Practicing Historical Geography” indicated, historical geographers have become increasingly aware of the ways we inscribe time and place, or to use Benjamin's words, the ways we unearth fragments, ruins, artifacts, and torsos, and then exhibit them in our collectors' galleries. We were left with many questions to discuss, to which I would add the following: How do we write about the processes and contexts by which “authors and landscapes produce one another?”³ What past(s) do we create as

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objects of study and why? How do we (and other authors) use space, place, landscape, and region to delimit and define that past? How do we (and other authors) use time (“the past”) to define space, place, and landscape? And—because spatial metaphors have histories and therefore matter⁴—why do we use archaeological and geological metaphors to understand and write about how time and space are mutually constructed?⁵



AM: “When the *Aktives Museum* started in the West [in Berlin] it had a lot to do with the *Geschichtswerkstätten* [history workshop] movement, with the idea “dig where you are”—that means that you should make traces of history visible and work with concrete things...”⁶

In my research and writing about social memory work in Berlin, Germany, I try to explore why and how groups claim, construct, and delimit places and landscapes to construct the past and a sense of social identity. The individuals I study (and sometimes work with) come from different social groups and institutions. They are historians, members of local history workshops, citizen activists, members of the media, museum and memorial experts and employees, artists, educators, tour guides, public relations directors, students, and politicians, among others. They write histories (in academic journals, newspapers, local newsletters, and through art), engage in social activism, establish and work in places of memory, educate the public at large about the past (and past places), study groups who visit places of memory, and so on. These individuals are incredibly self-reflexive about what they do. Moreover, they deal with difficult emotional relationships to a dark national and social past (including guilt, regret, mourning, denial, and responsibility) at the same time that they try to connect to future generations.

AM: “... I think that there are two different processes in your mind that you have to deal with [with respect to the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust]: the crimes and the consequences, and the mourning for the victims—they are two different aspects.”

KT: “Couldn’t you imagine making an exhibition with these two perspectives together? ...”

AM: “I think they should be separated in space. This was one of the reasons why the provisory exhibition at the Topography of Terror had this emotional impact even though it was very abstract—the authentic place, these basements, and the concrete history presented about the basements.”



To practice historical geography, we must also write empathetic geographical histories.⁷ When we write stories about places, the peoples involved in their establishment, and how groups use(d) these places to define their pasts as well as their relationships to that past in the present and future, we become part of those processes we study. We too search for and create artifacts and torsos. Ideally, we could try to work in a collaborative way with the individuals and places we study. Practicing such interpretative and feminist historical geographies is often difficult in practice. As all of the essays in this special issue well describe, there are many institutional and temporal boundaries, silences, and forms of containment that we encounter and produce through our work. For example, despite my ever-changing outsider/insider status in Berlin, my very presence as an American “expert” conducting research in and writing about certain places can be used in both positive and negative ways by others, such as discrediting the memory work of a group, or discrediting the significance of a place. But collaborative work might lead to other possibilities. It might help us learn how to “dig.”

KT: “The *Aktives Museum*—what does it mean?”

AM: “The original idea was to have a building with many documents and other material about the time period 1933-45 (...) but the word active meant to have a building with opportunities for work. For example a school class that is dealing with the history of Jewish persecution in their neighborhood should have the opportunity to make a project. They would get material and a worker who can help them with the technical things like enlarging photos, and after one week they would have an exhibition they could present in their school. This was what we wanted. It would not be a museum you go to, pay entrance fees, walk through an exhibition for an hour and return home. *Aktives Museum* means that you should work out something for yourself. You could do this in a group or as an individual—you could come and read in the library, and return home with photocopies. Or you would have the opportunity to speak to time witnesses, watch films... a much wider spectrum of activities. That was what we imagined because we said that for this topic of National Socialism—at the place of the perpetrators, at the place where the bureaucracy committed crimes, thought them out [at the former Gestapo, Secret Police, and Reich Security Service headquarters]—you cannot create an authoritative museum. You can only respond by encouraging and enabling people to discover their own history ... to learn history by actively working with it [in place].”

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Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Chronik: Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972): 486-487, selection transl. by Gerhard Richter.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989): 59, selection transl. by Cecile Lindsay; compare Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), selection ed. and transl. by Lewis Coser; David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press; London: Macmillan, 1984).
3. Karen Morin and Lawrence Berg, "Emplacing Current Trends in Feminist Historical Geography," *Gender, Place and Culture* 6:4 (1999): 311-330, 313.
4. Geraldine Pratt, "Geographic Metaphors in Feminist Geography," in Susan Hardy Aiken, et al., *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998): 13-30.
5. See, for example, Laura Jean Cameron, "Oral History in the Freud Archives: Incidents, Ethics, and Relations," this issue; Heidi Nast, "Islam, Gender, and Slavery in West Africa Circa 1500: A Spatial Archeology of the Kano Palace, Northern Nigeria," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86 (1996): 44-77; Karen Till, "Place and the Politics of Memory: A Geo-ethnography of Museums and Memorials in Berlin," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Madison: Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1996), see esp. chapter 4, "The Gestapo Terrain: Landscape and Memory," section "Landscape and Location: An Archaeological Approach to Memory," 188-193.
6. Personal interview of informant with author, September 1998, Berlin, Germany. The remaining quotes in this essay come from this interview.
7. Chris Philo, "History, Geography and the 'Still Greater Mystery' of Historical Geography," in D. Gregory, R. Martin, and G. Smith, eds., *Human Geography: Society, Space and Social Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994): 252-281; Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25:4 (Summer 1999): 696-727; James Duncan, "Notes on Emancipatory Collaborative Historical Research," this issue.

