

Erasure: Temporality and the Second Generation

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Introduction

The context for the essay "Erasure: Temporality and the Second Generation", takes place on Lottumstraße, a predominately residential street in the Prenzlauer Berg area of former East Berlin, Germany. Lottumstraße is where my mother and grandparents lived prior to 1940. This essay does not discuss how a place is known through the collective memories of its inhabitants or even the recollection of one, but highlights the manner, through narrative, in which the transfer of trace elements of remembrance, from witness to second-generation, becomes contemporaneously present in the second generation's perception of the everyday.

In the experience of the first generation Shoah survivor, recollection of family, friends, and events long passed are haltingly brought forth or imparted in quick precision bursts as vibrant as they are melancholy. The moment of recollection is an act of rupture, tearing away the perception of the present moment within the space and time of re-calling past events. I refer to this moment as erasure. Erasure, as opposed to forgetting which is a protracted process, is a seemingly aggressive and repetitive action that allows for trace evidence of the original event to be revealed in broken, fragmentary or luminiferous textures. Erasure may be considered the aggressive recalling of the process of forgetting, thus never allowing forgetting and its trace images to passively retreat into oblivion.¹ Through

¹ Paul Ricouer's *History, Memory, and Forgetting* (The University of Chicago Press, 2006) elaborates on forgetting and the trace vis-a-vis the work of Bergsons' *Matter and Memory* considering the trace in the "vocabulary of inscription, which inheres in the polysemy of the

successive acts of erasure, shards of evidence are left intact constructing layered evidentiary marks to be read as a changing narrative over time.

My mother left Berlin for the Port of Hoboken, New Jersey, in 1953. My mother's stories of life in Berlin situate themselves before and during World War Two, and shortly after the Allied division of Berlin in 1945. Berlin's changes reflected after the construction of the Wall in 1963 and before the Wall's dismantling in 1989 are not part of my mother's conscious re-collection except for one event, and one that I share with her. It is the only recollection in my Mother's recounting of her experience as a survivor that I, too, recount, within a shared time and place, however, with different perceptual understanding. For her, divided Berlin of the Cold War era, is "a gray canvass" upon which "nothing, there was nothing" exists.² On that gray canvass, she and I share a story. In 1966, my mother and I sat in Checkpoint Charlie, the American sector's little white painted hut in the middle of Friedrichstraße, preparing to cross over to the East Sector to visit an aunt who survived the War years, stayed in Berlin, and awoke one morning to find herself on the eastside of the concrete 'fence' looking west. As my mother and I began to walk through the door of Checkpoint Charlie facing the East Sector, the guard officer stops us. "You can go Madam, but if your daughter leaves she will not be able to return" he says. Evidently, in her nervousness, my Mother did not sign all the papers that would have allowed both of us to return to the West at the end of the day. In that moment, and the moment of recollecting the event, I share with my Mother the same nervous anxiety and fear palpable then as it is now. Like my mother's forever "gray canvass" characterization of East Berlin, my memory of East

notion of the trace: inscription, in the psychical sense of the term, is nothing other than the self-survival of the mnemonic image contemporaneous with the original experience". (pp.440)

² My Mother and I have shared this story many times. Each time we talk about it the event is recounted with the same imagery and emotional tone.

Berlin is one of a perpetual rainy day punctuated by a nervous hand tightly clasped around my wrist jerking my six-year-old body forward in a rushed rhythm along East Berlin's gray streets. Barely able to keep my feet on the ground, I try to run with the woman at my side who, in a blur, only resembles my mother at that moment. Within the recollected narrative of my Mother's experience, and my perception of contemporary Berlin layered with her stories, that is all which is known of the Cold War's East Berlin.

Portions of the essay "Erasure: Temporality and the Second Generation" was presented to the Moses Mendelssohn Society, Dessau, Germany, November 24, 2006, as an introduction to a film chapter presentation excerpted from my short film "Topo-Narratives 1-4". "TopoNarratives 1-4" is filmed primarily in the Prenzlauer Berg area of the former East Berlin. The excerpted chapter, "Lottumstraße", is filmed in the neighborhood where my mother grew up, and presents the street's fabric³ through the narrative of the second-generation perception of the trauma witness' remembrance and recalling. Lottumstraße, like most Prenzlauer Berg, was the historic home of the working class, bohemian, and Jewish community prior to 1940, continued to be an inviting area for artists during the GDR, and immediately after 1989. Today, in a united Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg is a most desirable area for young professionals. "TopoNarratives 1-4" is filmed through a contemporary lens such that streets, buildings, and graffiti express current conditions juxtaposed against a narrative of the memory of loss and survival, where a fictive narrative generated by the current street

³ Paul Ricoeur notes that in the urban space, the fabric of a city is layered by a history of style and form that is read as a narrative describing the cultural story of the city. Ricoeur posits "Whether it be fixed space or space for dwelling, or space to be traversed, constructed space consists in a system of sites for the major interactions of life. Narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription, the one in the endurance of time, the other in the endurance of materials. Each new building is inscribed in urban space like a narrative within the setting of textuality" (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp.150)

condition is layered over the recollected trace found, as evidence, in the particulars of street textures, landscapes, building façades and hallways.

Erasure: Temporality and the Second Generation

In a drawing, an erasure is a purposeful abrasion of an unwanted or errant mark. In the process of erasing, which is a rubbing, mashing, or lifting of lead or graphite from a paper surface, paper fiber erodes away flattening the surface. Through this process, the once visible mark becomes a delineated ghost of itself: indefinable and, yet, perceptibly clear, appearing as a luminous reversal of the once constructed mark. Erasures do not completely eradicate marks on paper. Erasures may leave faint traces of graphite broken and imbedded in the flat paper surface, or splattered dispersing graphite in vast directions blurring definitive boundaries. Graphite traces could be considered a consequence of the lack of execution, or performed as a decisive act. Traces are complex because the original marks exist as both illuminating ghost images, and by virtue of their visibility, as proof of marks once placed.

Traces of the original mark, highlights of the contextual paper hue, the blurring of definitive lines, additive marks that become more pronounced as graphite becomes imbedded in the abraded flattened paper fiber are the clues of erasure. With each mark making and erasure, a continuous temporal condition evolves rupturing not only the intent of the original work, but all meaning that follows. A similar condition can be applied to digital drawings. However digital trace elements are more difficult to maintain, as pixels are not abraded away, but disappear entirely. Whether graphite or pixels, the dynamics of erasure characterized by continuous change, re-interpretation inclusive of trace elements of each

successive mark-making must be consciously kept present; the artist must act with intent to preserve the drawing process if the layered meaning of the drawing's history is to be understood.

Survivors, victims and perpetrators of the Shoah, have decidedly different stories to tell. Survivors of the Shoah may be willing to lay bare their lives to strangers; historians, psychologists, sociologists, and to those of us who have a need to learn if humanity has any limits with regard to our ability to exercise acts of inhumanity. The dead, of course, have no choice. They are, by default, willing participants in the presentation of their lives once lived, and in the manner in which they died. Their stories resonate in repositories with carefully displayed artifacts and archived statistics where visitors, you and I, like all voyeurs, eavesdrop on personal history imprinted upon photographic film and paper, and on moving images of old celluloid preserved digitally in computer data banks. As voyeurs, we, who are strangers to the story, listen awkwardly. Perhaps we hold our bodies slightly at a distance. Perhaps we fear that the more we know the more likely we may be called upon to bear witness to events that seem to be a thousand years away from who we are, and where we are at this moment. Listening that way removes us from any culpability.

As a second-generation child of a Holocaust survivor, I am neither a stranger to, nor a witness to, the events of the Shoah. The second-generation is like the mark placed over the erased original drawing (where complete eradication was not successful), the first trace. We carry that trace as part of our narrative, as part of our perception of the present. The past is always contemporaneous, always immediately contextual. In this scenario, temporality is the abrasive instrument continuously changing and layering the original narrative.

Why am I writing about erasure? As my mother ages, every phone call, every cup of coffee shared in the kitchen is a special event. Even our arguments are reasons for small celebrations. The inflection in her voice affirms that my mother is very much alive in this moment. My mother, who insists that she did not suffer like her mother, her cousins, her friends, the others; my mother, who insists that she is not a true Holocaust survivor, lived underground Berlin in and amongst the rubble and the washed up bodies that dotted the banks along the River Spree. This, she says, is a far less important experience as she averts her eyes from our once intent kitchen conversation. She dismisses my curiosity. I am at that moment a failed voyeur. And then, in a glance, my mother begins a story. My mother tells her stories in color: the brown shoes she wears while dancing with her cousin on the brick streets of Berlin Mitte, on Lottumstraße; the pink-gray stone of Lottumstraße; the red orange brick of building number 12, the bronze tinted coins that Aunt Truda throws down from the third floor window as she and cousin Marguerite dance in imperfect little circles on the rough brown and red paved road; the yellow paint of the corner bakery door; the green leaves that flutter in the courtyard; the blue sky. Lottumstraße is always a warm summer's day in my mother's stories. In a comfortable breeze, children wear faded white cotton shirts, and soft brown shoes float, dance, and run along Lottumstraße. I listen. And as I listen I borrow my mother's colors: the brown, the red, green, blue. As the hues sharpen, the rupture begins. Images flatten, colors tear as pixilation occurs in the center and around the edges of words and images. Erasures are sudden. I watch the corners of my mother's mouth as she tells me about nightly sirens, streets filled with rubble, her broken soft brown shoes, and cousin Marguerite's smoldering knitted socks, the ones Oma knitted, perhaps the ones in the repository, in the neat little box behind glass labeled 'shoes and socks'. After

a while, the corners of my mother's mouth seem to be unsure of a direction. The lipstick of the morning has all but worn away. She turns to the kitchen sink. And I am disoriented. I awake in a different spot from where I began today among yesterdays. I am a sleepwalker gathering familiar artifacts, knowing, however, that they are not mine.

Today, the façades of Lottumstraße are newly painted in tones of white, soft blues and greens, new red orange brick dot the streetscape, in the morning young professionals leave their newly re-furbished apartments, at night they congregate in newly established cafés while artists count the months left in their cheap rented flats as gentrification overcomes Berlin Mitte. Reconstruction in East Berlin, especially in the Prenzlauer Berg area, means that old building façades are covered daily in fresh new paint, and building form and space is re-organized. The image of the street changes daily. The streets of Berlin are temporal playgrounds for a new generation of city dwellers, and capitalist ventures. Here, temporality is a viscous fog of advertisements regarding the latest fashion wears, current cinematic escape, and daily graffiti that announces Hollywood Icons, old revolutionaries, explicit sexual acts, drugs, and other assorted rebellions. Temporality also invites politicians whose portraits reside on lampposts and building façades and vie for our return gaze and votes. Today, in Berlin, Lottumstraße consists of ever-changing surface conditions and ephemeral moments in which traces of past communities are hard pressed to survive. Any trace or remnant of Berlin Mitte's bohemian and Jewish community is subsumed by monumental repositories that disseminate information neatly and cleanly but belie the truth of the story, the truth that can only resonate in urban textures, not as a cruel past history, but as a foundation for the life of the contemporary street. Today, in its current evolution, Lottumstraße will not notice a black haired girl running out of building number 12, dashing to

the corner of Choriner Straße. The black haired girl waits at the corner; she stands very still while Lottumstraße shifts and changes. For the sleepwalker, the black haired girl, simultaneously real and an illusion, is all that is left of the many stories that was, and still is Lottumstraße.

The Erasure of Urban Form on Lottumstraße

In 2005 I visited Lottumstraße for the first time. For three days I walked from the east side of the street at Schönhauser Allee to its end at Choriner Straße. Apartment buildings stand in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, facing each other on either side the street. Entry doors made of thick wood, splintered and rough on the bottom edge, date back more than eighty years. As each old door lock is replaced with another, the old one is torn off without any regard leaving gaping holes in the doors. I found most of the front doors leading from the street to interior vestibules un-locked. Open a door and you enter into a long wide corridor; a vestibule that leads to another set of doors that opens to a courtyard. The courtyards of Lottumstraße are long and narrow, or short and wide filled with varied types of vegetation. Some are filled with a tall strong tree, wild grasses, flowers, old brick and cobblestone pavers, and worn steel doors that lead to underground cellars. Some courtyards are deeper than the street width of Lottumstraße and reveal another group of apartment buildings set within the courtyard. Most vestibules are badly neglected spaces salvaged from complete destruction by artists and young teenagers living here at the edge of contemporary Berlin society. Finding a world on Lottumstraße where once life itself existed at the edge of any semblance of human normality, these Berliners consciously act out the process of erasure and over-drawing. In one particular apartment building, number

18 Lottumstraße, I climb the stairs leading to the second and third floor. The light in the hallway is soft and inviting. The deep stained wood banister wobbles, the doors to the apartment surprisingly low in height, the hallway painted in shades of white and yellow, bicycles lean against walls. Graffiti greets me along the edge of apartment doors, on the walls, on the ceiling, on crumbling brick and cement. Graffiti is the calling card of life within the apartments. Graffiti greets me throughout my journey on Lottumstraße; along street edges, spray painted on façades, at the edge of the sidewalk, high up near the neo-classical dentils and parapets of these once tenement buildings. Graffiti marks Lottumstraße with political slogans, stencils of anonymous faces, movie icons, social revolutionaries; graffiti inside and outside distills a contemporary story over the breadth of Lottumstraße's history. Lottumstraße is not oblivious to my journey. Doors beckon me, vestibules welcome me; courtyards open their secrets to me, graffiti informs me.

In the summer of 2006, I returned to Lottumstraße. Construction noise is the background beat of Berlin, and it is no different on Lottumstraße. Buildings are skinned in scaffolding and steel mesh. This time, front doors are locked. Doors that are open are only open because construction is taking place in the interior courtyards. Lottumstraße is exploding from inside to outside. The once private and inviting courtyards are imploding from the weight. The important distance between the public façade and the private courtyards, the vestibule corridor that allows one to formally enter this private world, is disappearing. The crassness of exterior life has moved inward. And those inside, caught in the ever-narrowing space between the formality of their public visage and private needs, are bolting their doors. Perhaps unwittingly, contemporary developers are extending the consequence of James Hobrecht's urban plan for 19th century Berlin that resulted in over

crowded tenements, the “Mietkaserne”, especially in the Prenzlauer Berg area. In the early 21st century, the consequence of compact buildings in tight urban quarters may not be poor, unhealthy living, but the desire among inhabitants for anonymity of which the common outcome is a lack of community connectedness. Resisting this tendency, graffiti artists continue to layer their collective story on re-constructions and new constructions. Amidst the temporal ephemera, graffiti is the current substantive trace of contemporary Lottumstraße.

Amidst the cacophony of spray painted color, political slogans, sexualized imagery, and stenciled silhouettes of soldiers and Hollywood stars, my mother dances on the street at the corner of Lottum and Choriner Straße. I stop and hear coins whooshing through the air; I look up and follow the sound. Coins hit and bounce off the red brick of Lottumstraße. A bicycle rider goes by, a construction worker walks toward number 12. My mother tells me that once, instead of getting bread at the corner bakery, she went in the wrong direction and ended up along the steep hillside of Choriner Straße. Lost, she stood still for a long time on Choriner Straße, then ran all the way to Schönhauser Allee, turned the corner and ran back on Lottumstraße to number 12. If you are lost on Choriner Straße, whom do you ask for directions? The kindly looking woman who is walking toward me with a cloth sack of fresh vegetables? The man who has just adjusted his worn gray cap? The soldier that catches my awkward glance?

In the postmemory incantations of the second and third generation, the children and grandchildren of the survivors and perpetrators,⁴ texts and images of our parents’ story are

⁴ Postmemory a term coined by historian Marianne Hirsch refers to the temporal space of recollection through “representation, projection, and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible, rather than the visible” of the second-generation, the children of holocaust survivors. Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs

interwoven through our lives. Forgetting is not an option for my parent survivor, because the desire to forget is jarred into remembrance by everyday occurrences. Seeing a small child playing on a swing functions on two levels: in the delight of the moment, and in deep memory that is emotionally charged made explicit by the loss of possibility, of innocence, of a life once lived. Unlike erasure, the process of forgetting dislodges an event, object, or person, from one's consciousness.⁵ Erasure requires a physical act to alter a previous condition. It is an aggressive act. Erasures have the opportunity to subvert the process of forgetting, as the distancing of past events and current experience are lodged simultaneously in the present. Erasures that leave traces reside not in deep consciousness but in the visceral textures of the conscious perception of the everyday.

I arrived back in Berlin, for the third time, in the spring of 2007 for a week of travel with colleagues and students. I eagerly brought my traveling companions to Lottumstraße. Feeling fairly certain of my route through this area of Prenzlauer Berg, I walked quite confidently pointing to building façades under re-construction, telling bits and pieces of my mother's stories. Her voice and tone in my head. "There," I pointed, conscious that the voice coming out of my mouth did not sound like what I heard in my head, "on the corner was the baker, and a candy shop right across the street. You enter from the street, step down into a garden apartment- the front door opens to the street, the backdoor to the courtyard. For a penny you could get those sweet sugary pearls that melt quickly in your mouth." What

and the work of Postmemory", p. 9, "The Yale Journal of Criticism", Volume 14, number 1, 2001(5-37)

⁵ As forgetting and memory are inextricably connected, Ricoeur states "In the matter of definitive forgetting, indicating an effacement of traces, it is experienced as a threat: it is against this forgetting that we conduct the work of memory (*oeuvre de mémoire*) in order to slow its course, even hold it at bay." (*History, Memory, and Forgetting* The University of Chicago Press, 2006, p.426)

flavors? - orange and cherry- the words leave my mouth but I am not really sure what I am tasting. In that very public moment, I had betrayed my mother's request for privacy making voyeurs of all of us. We walked up to apartment building number 12. The main vestibule door was open. I lead the way in. A few steps into the vestibule I see the newest construction to the courtyard of number 12: a two-meter high freshly stained wood and iron fence. Number 12 Lottumstraße was actually the address of a factory building within the courtyard. My mother's family lived above the factory. Two years ago I walked through the vestibule, into the courtyard, and up to and around the red brick of the factory building number 12. I filmed the brick surface, dirt, grass. I captured anything and everything. Footage, I noted then, to construct a plan for a story. Now, I stare at the wooden fence blocking the way to the real number 12 Lottumstraße. I look up at the top of the fence. I can see the fourth floor row of windows of number 12: the red brick factory. My mother, veiled behind glass, looks straight at me. My anger at the fence betrays both of us. My mother cannot hide as she slowly recedes. She slips away and I find a rock and beat that fence down. I imagine. Fitful, incensed, the fence cracks, wood splinters everywhere. My own history is not to be denied.

Diaspora: The endless clock

Endless is the experience of communities uprooted from the comfort of a known geography. Endless is the sound of hurried children, women, men, their feet sliding across stone surfaces, or polished wood floors, or cold cement strewn with markings of those that passed earlier. Markings left behind are confusing signs if you are trying to isolate a place of origin. All destinations are available to the forever wanderer because all places are starting points.

Vestiges of the wanderer's journey, textures that can be seen, touched and heard, are proof of the conditions that enable the wanderer's circumstances. Conditions that are a harsh reminder of the construct of societies: those that have and those that have not. In a world made grand and hopeful by a child dancing on a brick paved street, licking on a fresh baked bread roll, and desiring penny candy so sweet your lips pucker like a bird and out come strange sounds that make you laugh and save enough candy to fill out the day, and maybe if you are clever enough you can hold that sweetness for a week, everyday life finds its expression in the beauty of personal moments, in family and community rituals, in creative marks left in the landscape. To be sure, there was nothing romantic about Berlin's tenement life, nor is there anything romantic about contemporary urban conditions where poverty is emboldened by war, by ethnic or religious or economic divisions. In the case of Lottumstraße, renovation and rebuilding means a literal whitewash of building façades in the fashion of the Mietkaserne's neo-baroque style, or new construction emulating proportion and abstracting style with cheap materials as courtyard infill construction swallows whole wild and cultivated gardens. Lottumstraße is falling into fanciful pastiche and consumer gluttony. The current re-vision of Lottumstraße is a rewriting of the social history of the street. And that may be its warning to future re-built urban areas. Just as the bohemian culture that resided on Lottumstraße was silently removed, soon contemporary struggling artists and young independent workers will be gone. Graffiti announcements will vanish. The life of the courtyard will implode and then explode outward eradicating the boundary between personal needs and public life on Lottumstraße. Without traces of Lottumstraße's story, the street may repeat its past follies. The consequence of diaspora, of violently extricating people from home, from familiar geography, is evident in the perceptions and

actions of each successive generation. Pretense that the past was opulent or quaint and can be gloriously re-captured by re-construction is akin to forgetting the fullness of life once lived, in its glory and beauty, harshness and brutality. Instead, purposeful construction of new building form and materiality could be considered akin to the act of erasure- in the process of destructing and building erasure allows the original mark, or construct, in it's trace form to be evident, illuminating layers of the fullness of the story. Traces are the content of history's narrative that cannot be denied. Traces subvert our ability to be voyeurs, to be merely observers. By virtue of our personal and collective interventions in the place and space of community, we are mark makers. As mark makers, we are responsible for the interpretation of our future narratives, just as we are the result of past histories and their interpretations.

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